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Reliance on Voting by Mail Could Reduce Voter Turnout Among Black and Hispanic/Latino Voters in Cuyahoga County

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Focus on Facts

Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs – Cleveland State University

August 2020, No. 1.

"Reliance on Voting by Mail Could Reduce Voter Turnout Among Black and Hispanic/Latino Voters in Cuyahoga County"

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- Those who urge greater reliance on voting by mail (VBM) argue that VBM will help increase voter participation and reduce exposure for populations with greater risk for the COVID-19 disease.¹ Yet an analysis of 2016 voting behavior in Cuyahoga County suggests that VBM could result in suppressing voter turnout among Black and Hispanic voters unless outreach to those populations can increase their confidence in, and preference for, using the postal service to cast their votes in the 2020 general election and beyond. This is a particularly important in the coming election due to the likely risk of exposure to COVID-19 at in-person polling places.
- Data from the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections for 2016 was used to locate the home addresses of voters by census block (using the latest 2010 census block boundaries). Each voter was ascribed the racial and ethnic population percentages of their home census block.² Summing the race and ethnic proportions for all voters by the method of voting across all census blocks provides a method to estimate of the number of 2016 voters in each race/ethnicity category and method of voting in the county.
- These estimates also describe the racial/ethnic demographics of neighborhoods in which voters live and their methods of voting; thus the results can help address which neighborhoods are likely to need additional attention in promoting voting by mail.
- Table 1 provides a breakdown of estimated methods of voting in 2016 by race and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity In Cuyahoga County. It also shows the percentages of voting age population among major racial groups and Hispanics/Latinos.
- Approximately 28% of the voting age population and 25.1% of voters in Cuyahoga County were African American. Hispanics/Latinos were 4.6% of the voting age population and 3.1% of voters in 2016.
- Among all Cuyahoga County voters in the 2016 election, an estimated 31.8% used VBM to vote and 68.2% chose to vote in person, either by voting early or by voting at their local polling place on Election Day.

¹ See "Opposing vote by mail is voter suppression: Opinion", by Penny M. Venetis, NJ.com, June 22, 2020. <https://www.nj.com/opinion/2020/06/opposing-voting-by-mail-is-voter-suppression-opinion.html>.

² Approximately 97% of voter addresses were successfully geocoded (located in a census block).



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- The VBM choice in 2016 varied considerably by race and Hispanic/Latino ancestry.³
 - About one third (33.9%) of Asian voters (2.9% of the population) chose VBM.
 - A similar proportion (34.4%) of White voters chose the VBM option.
 - Proportionally fewer Black voters used the VBM option in 2016. Only 24.7% voted by mail.
 - Proportionally fewer Hispanic/Latino voters used the VBM option in 2016. Only 26.4% voted by mail.
- The disparity among the willingness of voters to choose the VBM option in 2016 suggests that sole reliance on VBM in the upcoming election could discourage voter turnout among Black and Hispanic/Latino voters in the upcoming 2020 election. Vigorous efforts on two fronts may be required to avoid this result.
 - Outreach to Black and Hispanic/Latino voters needs to increase their confidence in choosing the VBM option.
 - Strict adherence to CDC guidelines at all polling places must be assured so that Black and Hispanic/Latino voters, already considered by the CDC as having greater risk of COVID-19 infection⁴, will not face even greater risks by voting in person.
- While a statewide analysis would be more definitive it is likely that similar efforts to both urge voters to vote by mail and to protect the health of voters who vote in person this November are needed.⁵

Table 1: Estimated Race and Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity of 2016 Voters, Vote-in-Person and Vote-by-Mail

	Total Votes	White	Black	American Indian	Asian	Other race groups	Hispanic/Latino
Percent VIP	68.2%	65.6%	75.3%	72.6%	66.1%	68.2%	73.6%
Percent VBM	31.8%	34.4%	24.7%	27.4%	33.9%	31.8%	26.4%
Percent of Votes		67.9%	25.1%	0.2%	2.4%	4.5%	3.1%
Percent of Voting Age Population, ACS 2016		66.0	28.0	0.3	2.9	2.8	4.6

³ Difference among White, Black, and Hispanic/Latino voters are statistically different at the 99% confidence level.

⁴ "COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups", **YOUR HEALTH**, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 25, 2020 [<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>]

⁵ Arguments to improve election safety include "How to Save Elections from a Pandemic", by Eric Cortellessa, **Washington Monthly**, April/May/June 2020. [<https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/april-may-june-2020/how-to-save-elections-from-a-pandemic/>]