

Vote Intention in November: Evidence from an Early September Survey

September 20, 2020

Author: Charles Stewart III

The results of a survey conducted of registered voters in seven battleground states by the Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections Project suggest that although the U.S. will see historic levels of mail voting in November, the levels are below what similar studies showed just a couple of months ago. While the results cannot directly address the issue of causality, the pattern of results unsurprisingly suggests that the partisan differences that have emerged over mail balloting explain the reduced ardor over voting by mail.

Less than half the respondents from six of the seven states studied (Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) report they are likely to vote by mail in November. This is significantly less than what was reported last July by the COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences across States. That report found that well over half of likely voters intended to vote by mail in each of these states except North Carolina.

One pattern in the survey responses indicates that we should avoid relying too heavily on this study to predict the actual use of mail ballots in the coming election. Respondents were asked whether they voted in the primary and, if they did, what mode they used to cast their ballots. In many cases, the self-reported survey statistics are at odds with election records from the states. This suggests caution in relying solely on public opinion evidence to predict demand for mail balloting in the presidential elections, at least this far out from the election.

Respondents to the survey also expressed different levels of concern over voting by mail versus voting in person. When asked about whether they were worried about various aspects of voting in person (travelling to the polls, waiting in line, etc.) and voting by mail (getting the ballot in time, having the ballot rejected), respondents tended to express greater levels of concern for voting by mail than voting in person. Again, not surprisingly, Democrats and Republicans expressed different patterns of concern that reflect partisan divisions that have opened up over the issue.

A majority of respondents expressed confidence that if they were to vote by mail, it would be counted and secret. However, they expressed much greater confidence in the counting and secrecy of in-person ballots. Despite worries over voting among the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents from these seven states expressed levels of confidence that their votes in November will be counted as cast that are greater than 2016.

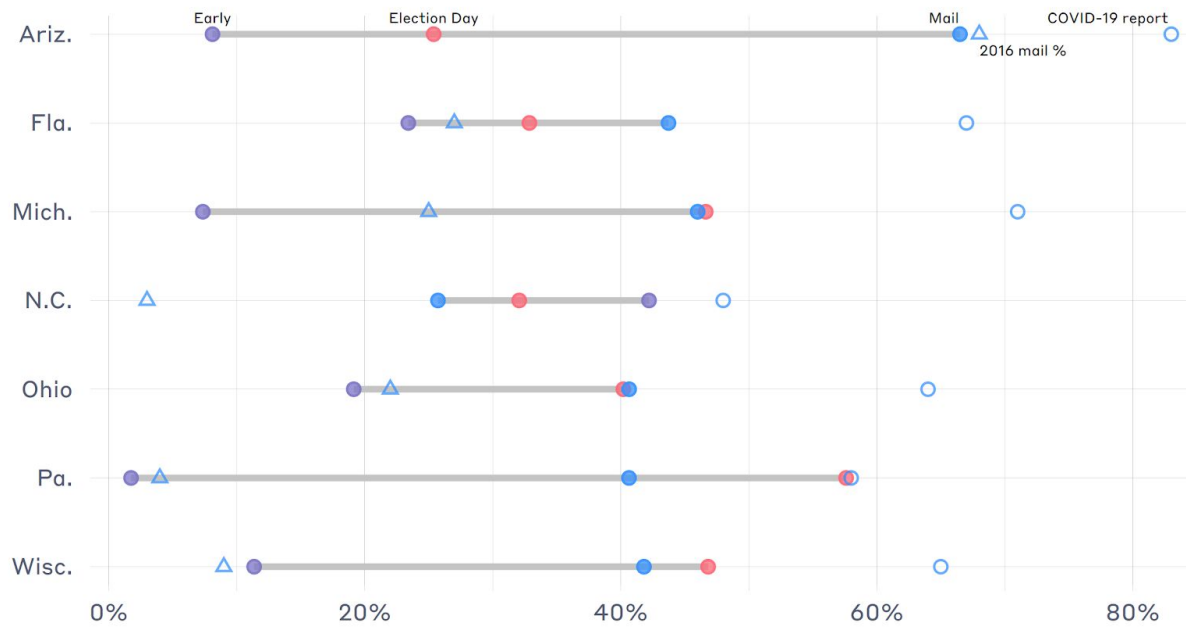
These results are based on a survey conducted by YouGov from September 3 to September 11, 2020 among 3,500 registered voters—500 in each—in Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Top-line statistics for all questions on the survey may be viewed at [this link](#).

I. Vote intention

Between 24.2 percent (North Carolina) and 65.3 percent (Arizona) of respondents to the survey stated they intended to vote by mail in the upcoming general election. The relative percentages of voters intending to vote by mail across the states are highly correlated with the fraction of voters who cast ballots by mail in 2016, only at a much higher level. They are also correlated with the COVID-19 Consortium report from July, although this time, at a lower level.¹

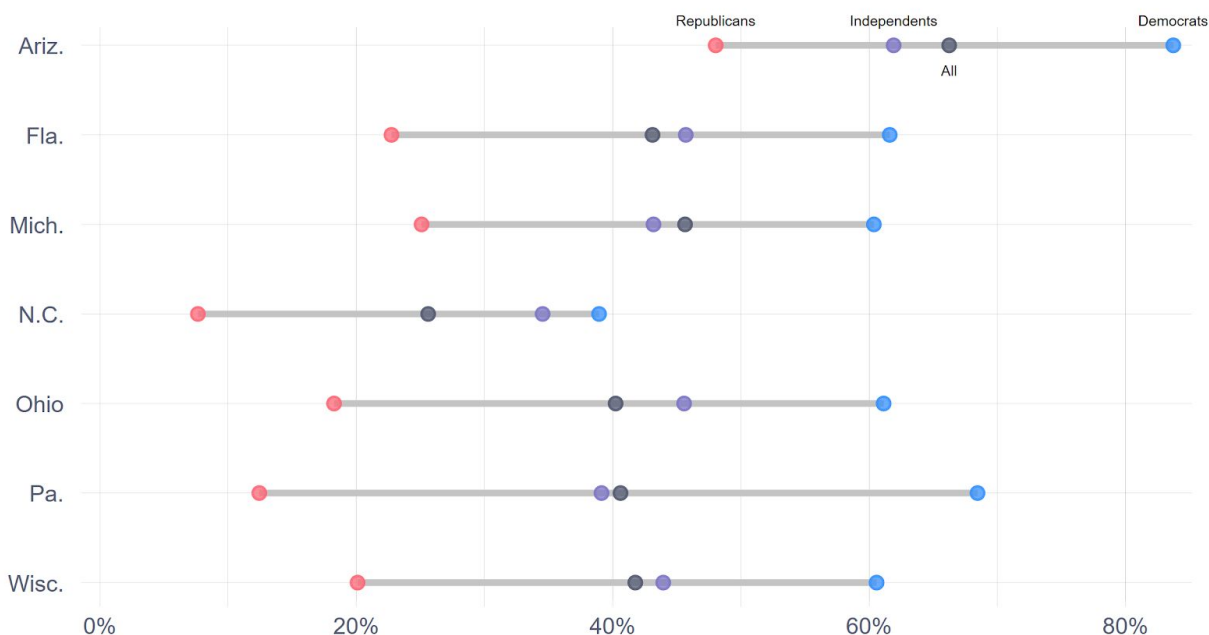
¹ Although the COVID-19 Consortium report did not break out voter intent by party, I thank David Lazer for making these results available to me. With the caveat noted that the party breakdowns by state can be based on a small number of respondents, the following pattern is true for all states: the decline in the intent to vote by mail from July to the present is greater among Republicans than among Democrats, although substantial declines can be seen among both parties. The party differential is greater in some states (e.g., Arizona and Pennsylvania) than in others (e.g., North Carolina and Wisconsin). Because the primary interest in this report is the overall level of demand for mail and in-person voting, to assist in planning, a major reason to be aware of partisan differences in the survey results is that partisans may be systematically over- or under-reporting their actual intention to vote by mail, and they may not be doing so symmetrically.

Vote-mode Intention of Likely Voters



The differences in vote intentions across party identification are also substantial, and quite different from 2016. According to data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Democrats and Republicans voted by mail at nearly identical rates in all seven states. The largest difference was 5.6 points separating Michigan Democrats and Republicans in 2016. In the latest survey, the *smallest* difference is 31.3 points, separating North Carolina partisans. The largest difference separating partisans is 56.0 points in Pennsylvania.

Anticipated Mail Ballot Usage by Party



Graph source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab / Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections Project

Respondents were asked whether they voted in either the state’s presidential primary or a later state primary (if the two were held separately). Those reporting they had voted in the primary were then asked what vote mode they used. In this case, the differences range significantly. For instance, 4.7 percent of North Carolina Democrats reported voting by mail compared to 4.1 percent of Republicans. At the other extreme, 69.0 percent of Pennsylvania Democrats reported voting by mail, compared to 24.4 percent of Republicans, for a 44.6 point difference.

Inconsistencies in reporting vote mode from the primary

However, some of these retrospective reports are at odds with the administrative records from the states that have been studied by the Healthy Elections Project. For instance,

- In Florida, 46 percent of voters in the presidential primary voted by mail, compared to 50 percent in the survey. Although these two percentages are fairly close, the partisan breakdowns are not. Fifty-eight percent of Florida Democrats and 38.0 percent of Republicans reported in the survey that they voted by mail. In contrast, [according to data from the Florida voter file](#), 40 percent of registered Democrats in Florida actually voted by mail compared to 55 percent [sic] of Republicans. In other words, the overall usage statistic based on the current

survey was accurate only because Democratic respondents over-reported their use of mail ballots and Republican under-reported at roughly equal rates.

- In Pennsylvania, 51 percent of primary voters voted by mail. This, too, is very close to the 49.7 percent reported in the survey. However, 69.0 percent of Pennsylvania Democrats reported voting by mail, compared to 63.8 percent indicated by state records; 24.4 percent of Republicans reported in the survey that they voted by mail, compared to the [state report](#) of 33.3 percent. Although these party discrepancies are not as great as in Florida, they are still of the same type--Democrats over-reporting and Republicans under-reporting.
- In Ohio, [85.3 percent of voters cast their primary ballot by mail](#). Only 46.4 percent of respondents to the survey state that they voted by mail. We did not compute mail-ballot usage by party, although with the overall rate so high, the difference in mail-ballot usage could not have been great. In contrast, 54.5 percent of Democrats and 36.3 percent of Republicans reported in the survey that they voted in the primary by mail.
- Although [North Carolina's records](#) confirm that Democrats and Republicans voted by mail at similar rates in the primary, they did so at much lower levels--1.3 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively--than reported in the survey.
- In Wisconsin, 59 percent of primary voters cast ballots by mail. Among survey respondents, 51.0 percent reported voting by mail, 67.7 percent of Democrats and 27.7 percent of Republicans.

Some inconsistencies are bigger than others, but they remind us that responses to surveys such as this are prone to faulty memory and social desirability bias. They also support caution in using surveys such as this to predict how many ballots will be cast by mail in the coming election. For instance, if Florida Republicans are significantly under-reporting their use of mail ballots in the presidential primary while Democrats are over-reporting, it makes one wonder whether they are also mis-reporting their intentions for November.

Because this report is being written as states are beginning to mail out ballots, and the surge of ballot requests is about to begin, the reliability of these survey results will be made known soon enough. For instance, as of September 23, registered Democrats have requested 49.6 percent of mail ballots in North Carolina, Republicans 17.7 percent, and unaffiliated voters 32.3 percent. (Minor party registrants make up the remaining 0.4 percent of requests.) Of those who are registered with one of the two major parties, Democrats dominate requests 73.7% to 26.3%. In the survey, Democrats dominate those saying they plan to vote by mail by 84.8% to 15.2% among Democratic and Republican identifiers.

Because of the small number of respondents from North Carolina who identify with one of the two major parties *and* who report they will vote by mail is only 105, the 95% confidence interval around these latter percentages is 6.9 percentage points. Thus, for North Carolina at least, survey

respondents appear to be slightly more polarized around the use of mail ballots than actual voters, but only slightly so.

A similar analysis can be performed for Florida. As of September 23, registered Democrats have requested 46.3 percent of mail ballots, Republicans 31.6 percent, and unaffiliated voters 20.9 percent. Of those who are registered with one of the two major parties, Democrats dominate requests 59.4% to 40.6%. In contrast, the survey results suggest that Democrats should dominate 72.3 percent to 27.7 percent between the two parties.

There are many reasons why the party divisions of mail ballot requests might not match reported voter intentions in the survey. The first is that the voter intention question may be victim of a type of social desirability bias, such that some Democratic and Republican respondents feel compelled to align their answer to the perceived “correct” partisan answer, given what they are hearing from leaders of their parties. The second is that random variation could be pulling the survey results away from the actual behavior numbers. In this case, though, despite the fact that the number of respondents saying they intend to vote by mail is relatively small (around 125 in each state), the observed request rates are outside the relatively large 95% confidence intervals around the survey statistics. Finally, there is the problem of mapping between party identification as reflected in a survey and party registration. There are many reasons why registration and identification may diverge, especially in the south, where Democratic registration still is persistent in counties where Republicans dominate the election results.

The first reason — the conforming of answers to partisan expectations — makes us especially cautious about using the survey results to anticipate ultimate demand for mail balloting and, by implication, in-person voting as well. This report will be updated in the coming weeks, to reflect both evolving administrative records and evolving survey results.

II. Concerns about voting in person and by mail

Underlying how voters anticipate voting this fall are the worries they have about voting in person and by mail. Ever since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, voters have been encouraged to avoid congregating in groups, and therefore to vote by mail if possible. However, claims by senior members of the Trump administration that voting by mail is fraught for fraud, along with the summer controversy over US Postal Service service standards, has reduced the attractiveness of mail ballots for many voters. At the same time, the pandemic has not disappeared; the prospect of voting among scores, or even hundreds, of strangers cannot be an encouragement to vote in person.

To measure the degree to which voters share concerns about voting by mail and in person, survey respondents were asked about the degree to which they were worried about the following things, if they were to vote in person:

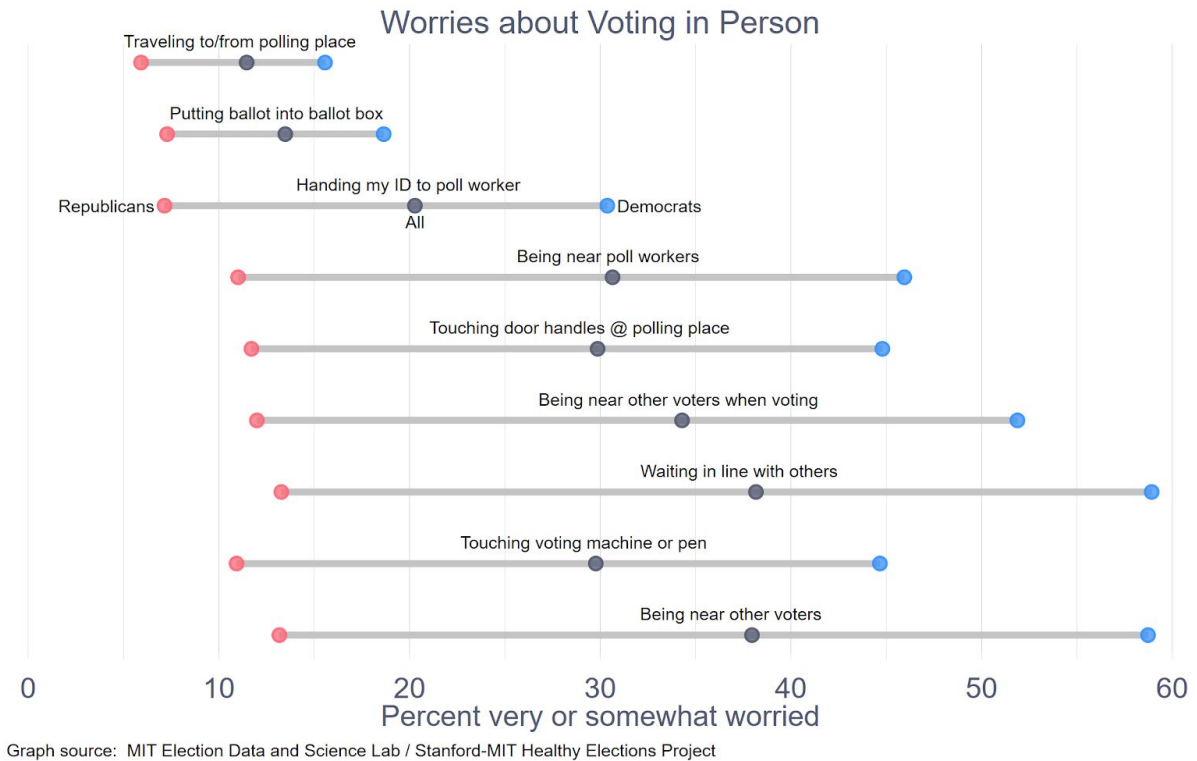
- Traveling to and from the polling place
- Having to put my ballot into a ballot box
- Having to hand my identification to a poll worker
- Being near poll workers
- Having to touch door handles when entering and exiting the polling place
- Being near other voters when filling out my ballot
- Waiting in line with other people
- Having to touch a voting machine or a pen to mark my ballot
- Being near other voters

Respondents were then asked about how worried they would be about the following, if they were to vote by mail:

- Whether I have the postage to mail my ballot back
- How I can vote if I change my mind and decide to vote on Election Day
- How I can vote if I lose or spoil my ballot
- Whether someone else will request a ballot in my name and steal my ballot
- Whether my mail ballot will reach me in time
- Whether someone will intercept my ballot and vote in place of me
- Whether my absentee or mail ballot application will be received and processed
- Whether my completed mail ballot will be returned to election officials in time to be counted
- Whether election officials will decide to count my ballot when it is returned

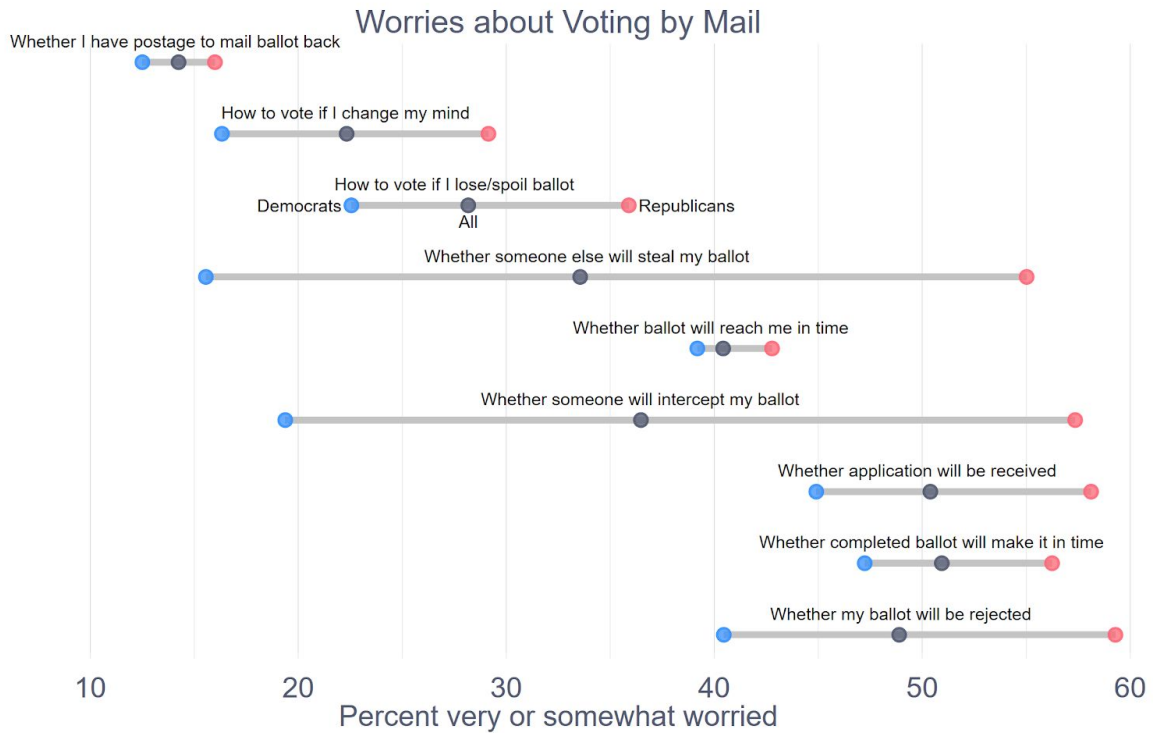
Because respondents did not differ appreciably across states in answers to these questions, we pool all the respondents together.

Starting with in-person voting, respondents were the least worried about the aspects of voting that brought them in contact with only a few others--travelling to the polling place, putting the ballot into the ballot box, and handing an ID to the poll workers--and more worried about the aspects of in-person voting that bring them in close proximity to crowds--being near poll workers, touching things that others had touched, waiting in line, and being with other voters.



However, breaking these worries down by party, we see that anxieties are structured along the same partisan lines that characterize the popular response to the pandemic itself. When it comes to being around others, Republican respondents were almost uniformly unworried, whereas a large number of Democrats were very or somewhat worried. Indeed, Republicans’ lack of worry about in-person voting is virtually constant across the various aspects of the process. It is the response of Democrats that causes a distinction between situations that bring voters in close contact with a large number of other people and those that do not.

In the case of voting by mail, partisan differences also are evident, although they are by far the greatest in anticipating the type of fraud that Attorney General William Barr has been talking about on the talk-show circuit: people stealing ballots or intercepting them and then voting them illegally. As a general matter, respondents were the least worried about mundane matters--having enough postage to send back the ballot, losing a ballot, or changing one’s mind after submitting the ballot--and more worried about the mechanics of navigating the Postal Service and getting the ballot accepted for counting. Considering that the performance of the Postal Service and stories about rejected absentee ballots have been a constant supply for news copy over the past two months, this is far from surprising.



Still, with the exception of two items, respondents seem less polarized--though still polarized to some degree--over mail ballots than they are over voting in person. The exception, of course, is with the items “Whether someone else will request a ballot in my name and steal my ballot” and “Someone will intercept my ballot and vote in place of me.”

III. Trusting the count

Respondents were finally asked a series of questions about their trust of voting by mail and voting in person, as well as their overall trust in whether their vote would be counted as cast. As with the questions about worries related to mail and in-person voting, respondents did not vary much across the states in their answers, with one exception (Arizona), which is addressed below.

Combining all the responses together across the seven states, the majority of respondents agreed that it was either “extremely” or “somewhat” likely that their votes would be counted if they cast their ballots using any of the three voting modes, and that their votes would be kept secret.²

Despite this fact, trust in mail balloting was lower, on both the counting and secrecy items, than trust in Election Day and early voting. Breaking this down by party, we see that this lower level of confidence in mail balloting is attributable entirely to greater distrust among Republicans with voting by mail.

Respondents answering it is “extremely” or “somewhat” likely that their votes would be counted if they cast their ballot using each of these modes.				
	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents/Other
Mail/absentee	69.0%	81.1%	54.7%	69.9%
Election Day	86.7%	85.5%	89.3%	82.9%
Early Voting	82.6%	84.0%	81.2%	81.8%
N	3,500	1,637	1,410	453

Respondents answering it is “extremely” or “somewhat” likely that their votes would be kept secret if they cast their ballot using each of these modes.				
	All	Democrats	Republicans	Independents/Other
Mail/absentee	67.8%	80.4%	53.2%	67.8%
Election Day	85.7%	84.0%	88.6%	83.1%
Early Voting	82.2%	82.5%	82.8%	79.5%
N	3,500	1,637	1,410	453

As noted, Arizona was somewhat of an outlier in opinions about both of these items. For instance, although 69 percent of all respondents said it was likely that their vote would be counted if they voted by mail, this answer was given by 77 percent of Arizona respondents. (Wisconsin was close behind, at 75 percent, followed by Michigan (71%), Ohio (70%), Florida (66%), Pennsylvania (65%), and North Carolina (60%.) Drilling down into partisan differences, 90 percent of Arizona Democrats

² With the exception of mail ballots, most of the “likely” respondents gave the “extremely likely” response. With mail ballots, 34 percent said it was extremely likely and 35 percent said it was somewhat likely that their vote would be counted if they used that mode. For Election Day ballots, the respondents were distributed 71% vs 16%, and for early voting ballots, respondents were distributed 57% vs. 26%.

stated it was likely a mail ballot would be counted in their state, compared to 61 percent for Republicans.

Finally, respondents who reported they were likely to vote in November were asked how confident they were that their vote would be counted as intended. Overall, 88 percent stated they were either very confident (53%) or somewhat confident (35%). By way of comparison, 78 percent of respondents from these states in the MIT module of the pre-election wave of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study stated they were either very confident (38.7%) or somewhat confident (39.2%).

Respondents answering they are “very confident” or “somewhat confident” their vote will be counted as intended.		
	Percent	N
Democrats	89.4%	1,565
Republicans	89.1%	1,375
Independents/Other	83.1%	428
Total	88.4%	3,368

Conclusion

As Election Day approaches, the public and election officials are interested in the question of how many voters will cast their ballots by mail, and how confident they are likely to be in the results. The results from this survey suggest that mail ballot usage will be at historical levels from the past, but at levels below what was anticipated in the summer.

The analysis presented here also suggests using caution in relying on the results of the vote intention question for anticipating the actual number of requested mail ballots for November. Certainly, information from surveys such as this is better than no information at all, if that information points decision makers in the right general direction. The Healthy Elections Project will be fielding this survey twice more before Election Day. Further, states have begun mailing out absentee ballots, and so it will soon be possible to see whether the actual requests are consistent with the evolving survey results.