

# **The Effects of Elite Cue-Taking: Misrecalling and Misestimating Voting by Mail**

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## **Abstract**

Might elite cue-taking and partisan motivated reasoning affect *how* we vote? Drawing on a large survey of validated Florida voters who regularly vote by mail, we find that Republicans were less likely to correctly recall the method by which they usually cast ballots and more likely to misestimate how they planned on voting in the November 2020 election. Notwithstanding health concerns of COVID-19, we find that retrospective misremembering and prospective misestimation of vote method is primarily driven by support for Trump; the President's supporters were more likely to disavow their own mail-in voting and misestimate their plan to not voting by mail in November. Our analysis of the politicization of mail-in voting has important implications for our understanding of the effects, and limits, of elite cue-taking and partisan motivated reasoning on the electoral process itself, particularly when health concerns are salient.

**Key words:** vote-by-mail, elite cue-taking, partisan motivated reasoning, COVID-19

**Word count:** 5,976

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COVID-19 upended how Americans cast their ballots in 2020. Leveraging President Donald J. Trump's attacks against mail-in voting prior to the 2020 General Election, we analyze the effects of elite cue-taking and partisan motivated reasoning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to the method by which voters cast their ballots.<sup>1</sup> Transforming a rather mundane election administration issue into a partisan maelstrom, the President's animus towards voting by mail disrupted the calculus of millions of voters going into the November 2020 election. We argue that Trump's signaling against mail-in voting swamped partisan motivated reasoning, influencing the method by which Republican Trump supporters said they planned to vote in the general election (but actually did not), as well as shading his supporters' recollection of the method by which they usually cast a ballot. Personal health concerns due to COVID-19 constrained the misrecalling and misestimating one's own vote choice, but they are subsumed by voters' obeisance or opposition to Trump, Republican, Democrat, and independent alike.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on an novel and large representative survey of registered voters in Florida fielded near the apex of Trump's attack on mail-in voting in July 2020, and using election administration records to verify respondents' vote histories, our study reveals how elite cues can affect even partisan motivated reasoning. Specifically, we test using a series of logistic regressions whether Republicans who regularly cast mail-in ballots, and particularly those who said they planned to vote for the President, were less likely to correctly recall the method by which they usually voted, as well as if it affected the method

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<sup>1</sup>In Florida, vote-by-mail (VBM) is synonymous with "absentee voting." See SB 112, available at <https://flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2016/0112/BillText/er/HTML>, last accessed September 5, 2020.

<sup>2</sup>We intentionally use the terms "misremember" and "misrecall," rather than "misreport," when discussing retrospective recall of method of voting, although we know from the administrative record precisely the method by which respondents cast their ballots in previous elections as well as in the 2020 General Election. The same is true regarding our use of the terms "misestimate" and "anticipated" for respondents who usually vote by mail, but who prospectively said they planned to vote in person (only to once again vote by mail).

by which they said they planned on voting in November. Finally, with regard to both retrospective and prospective considerations of vote method, we examine whether or not partisan motivated reasoning was constrained by the threat of COVID-19. Were registered voters who typically cast mail-in ballots and who expressed health concerns less likely to follow the dictates of the President and remember correctly that they usually vote by mail, and say they plan (and actually do) vote by mail in the 2020 November election? Although we offer data only from Florida, we know of no national survey that validates not only respondents' turnout but also past method of voting. While our single-state study may have limited generalizability (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002), our focus on a perennial battleground state with its own share of election controversy (Hasen 2012) allows us to hold constant an array of other conditions to better isolate the impact of elite cue-taking and partisan motivated reasoning on how voters recall and anticipate the method by which they vote.

The politicization of mail-in voting by President Trump has important implications for the legitimacy of the American electoral system and the democratic process. We find evidence that elite cue-taking from Trump helps to explain Republicans' willingness to say they do not vote by mail, even though they do, and similarly, to say they do not plan to vote by mail in the November election, even though they do. To be sure, we find that personal health concerns affect how voters think retrospectively and prospectively about *how* they vote, but health concerns are subsumed by elite cue-taking from the President. Yet, as our placebo tests show, we find that Republicans who habitually vote in person were no more or less likely than Democrats to misremember their past voting method; nor were Republican in-person voters more or less likely than Democrats to misestimate their anticipated voting method in November 2020. Indeed, we find that Trump supporters who usually vote in-person and who said they would do so again in the November election, were less likely to shift to voting by mail in November, despite the pandemic, than those who did not support the president.

## **Trump on Absentee Ballots and Vote-by-Mail**

Although he criticized voting by mail in the 2016 election, President Trump began to escalate his attack on mail-in voting on Twitter in Spring, 2020, as presidential primaries were underway across several

American states.<sup>3</sup> In tweet after tweet, the President’s criticisms intensified as some Governors considered expanding vote by mail options as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to pick up steam.<sup>4</sup> Threaded through his tweets were the twin themes of voter fraud and the risk of voting by mail to the Republican Party, as exemplified by his tweet, “MAIL-IN VOTING WILL LEAD TO MASSIVE FRAUD AND ABUSE. IT WILL ALSO LEAD TO THE END OF OUR GREAT REPUBLICAN PARTY. WE CAN NEVER LET THIS TRAGEDY BEFALL OUR NATION.”<sup>5</sup> “I think mail-in voting is going to rig the election,” Trump told Chris Wallace on *Fox News Sunday* on July 19, 2020.<sup>6</sup> The President’s relentless messaging against voting by mail continued into early August.<sup>7</sup> Then, on August 4, 2020, the President abruptly reversed course and tried to distinguish between “Vote by Mail” and “Absentee Voting,” with particular reference to method of voting in Florida.<sup>8</sup>

Fortuitously, Trump’s abrupt reversal on the acceptability of mail-in voting in Florida, as we detail below, came three days after we completed the survey data collection of registered voters in the Sunshine

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<sup>3</sup>“Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. Tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, doesn’t work out well for Republicans.” See, [@realDonaldTrump, April 8, 2020](#).

<sup>4</sup>See, [@realDonaldTrump, May 20, 2020](#) and [@realDonaldTrump, May 26, 2020](#).

<sup>5</sup>See [@realDonaldTrump Tweet, May 28, 2020](#).

<sup>6</sup>“Full interview: President Trump on ‘Fox News Sunday’,” *Fox News Sunday*, available at <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6174046609001#sp=show-clips> (last accessed August 30, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>See, [@realDonaldTrump, July 21, 2020](#); [@realDonaldTrump, July 30, 2020](#); [@realDonaldTrump, July 30, 2020](#); [@realDonaldTrump, August 4, 2020](#).

<sup>8</sup>“Whether you call it Vote by Mail or Absentee Voting, in Florida the election system is Safe and Secure, Tried and True,” Trump tweeted. “Florida’s Voting system has been cleaned up (we defeated Democrats attempts at change), so in Florida I encourage all to request a Ballot Vote by Mail! MAGA”. “Trump backtracks on mail-in voting, says it’s OK to do in Florida,” *Politico*, August 4, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/04/trump-backtracks-mail-voting-florida-391373>, last accessed August 30, 2020).

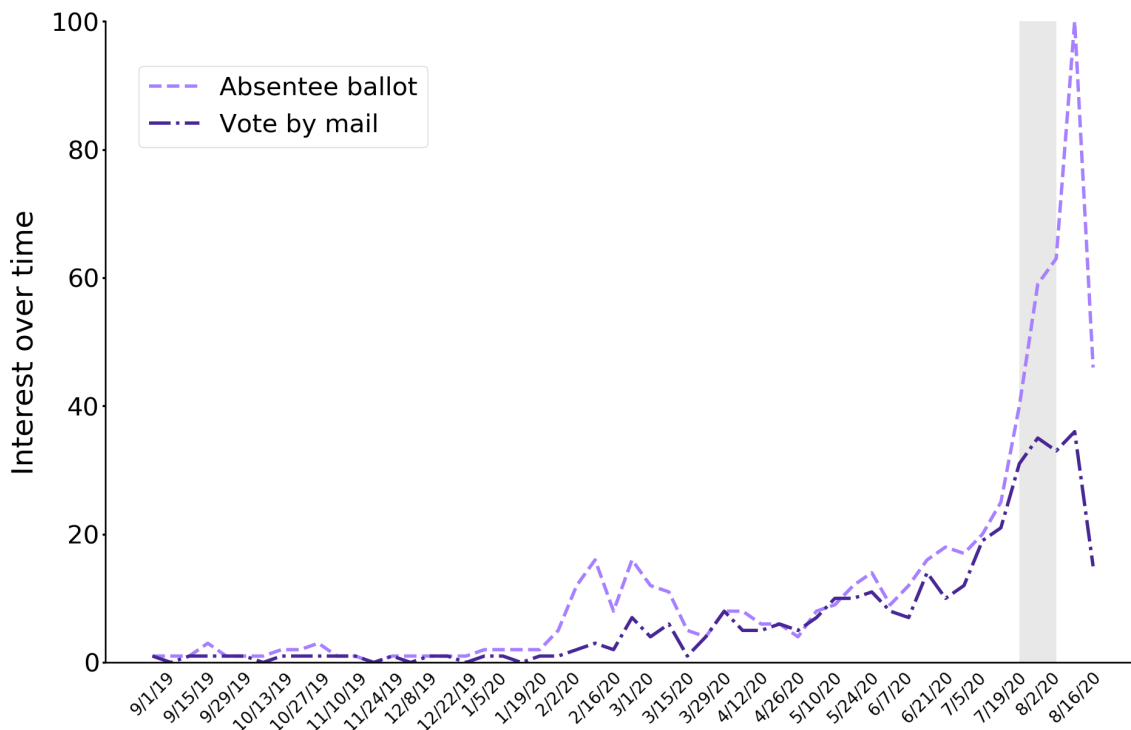
State, on August 1, 2020. Although our survey—which was launched on July 21, the same day Trump was interviewed on *Fox News Sunday*—did not anticipate Trump’s tweets against mail-in voting, it is likely that his pronouncements affected the news environment concerning mail voting in Florida, as seen in Figure 1. The figure plots Google searches by Florida residents over a one-year period, using the terms “Absentee ballot” and “Vote by mail.” The y-axis is normalized so that the maximum value of 100 denotes the search peak for the two terms, a value of 50 denotes the terms were half as popular, and a value of 0 denotes there were no searches for the terms. The shaded vertical area delimits when our survey was in the field. It is clear from Figure 1 that the salience of mail-in voting in Florida took a sharp tick upwards in mid-July, just as Trump started his tweet storm against mail ballots.

Communication by elites can shape the political agenda, increase the salience of an issue, and frame attitudes in the mass public (Zaller 1992). With audience fragmentation in the digital media environment, the salience of some issues can become heightened (Feezell 2018), as speakers are able to frame an issue by elevating certain features (Chong and Druckman 2007). Clearly, Trump’s critical messaging on mail-in ballots over the summer drove the narrative, piquing the interest of many Floridians. But did his tweetstorms alter the recall of Florida voters, specifically the method by which they usually cast their ballot? Similarly, did it influence the method by which registered voters said they planned on casting their ballots in the upcoming 2020 General Election?

## **Partisan Motivated Reasoning and Elite Cue-Taking**

Given the highly polarized landscape, Trump’s heightened position-taking on mail-in voting in late July 2020 did not occur in a vacuum. Partisan motivated reasoning is borne out of the fact that one’s partisanship is a consistently salient cue that individuals fall back upon in a variety of different political realms (Kunda 1990). Partisanship shades the reality experienced by individuals, shaping opinions by bringing them into alignment with the goals and belief systems motivated by the party (Levendusky 2010; Bisgaard 2015). When presented with new information, Republicans and Democrats will have their inference and interpretation influenced by the goals and beliefs motivated by their respective party; indeed, individuals will go so far as to seek information that confirms their reasoning, while actively rejecting information that does not conform to their beliefs and motivations (Lavine, Johnston and Steenbergen

Figure 1: Interest in “Absentee ballot” and “Vote by mail” by Floridians (Google Search Terms)



Note: Interest over time values represent Google search interest for absentee and vote by mail searches by Floridians. The y-axis is normalized, so that the maximum value of 100 denotes the search peak for each terms, a value of 50 denotes the term was half as popular, and a value of 0 denotes there is no data available for the term. The shaded area is the time-frame when the survey was in the field, July 21 - August 1. Data retrieved from <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US> (last accessed August 28, 2020).

2012). Stripped to its core, partisan motivated reasoning, no matter how strong, can move individuals toward their own party’s framing of the issue (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013).

Partisan motivated reasoning helps us better understand the process by which individuals might internalize party identification and use it to motivate their reasoning for different beliefs and behaviors. As with perceptions of voter ID laws and fair elections more generally (Ansolabehere and Persily 2007; Bowler et al. 2015), partisanship likely colored how voters processed the President’s statements on mail-in voting. Republicans were likely more susceptible to being motivated to think this method of voting was undependable or subject to fraud. Even among individuals who regularly and reliably vote by mail, such motivated reasoning might have encouraged them to distort how they updated their priors in a partisan direction.

Trump’s exhortations against mail-in voting came at the expense of Florida Republicans, who long have dominated voting by mail in the state. For example, in the 2016 General Election, Republicans cast

nearly 60,000 more mail ballots than Democrats, even though Democrats outnumbered Republicans by roughly 400,000 registered voters (Smith et al. 2019). Even Trump, since becoming a registered voter in the state in 2018, has cast mail-in ballots.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Republicans consistently have a lower rate of rejected mail-in ballots in Florida (Baringer, Herron and Smith 2020), which should give them confidence that their mail-in ballot will count as valid. Nonetheless, given the newfound salience of voting by mail and the direction of Trump’s messaging, we argue that many Republicans in the Sunshine State—particularly Trump supporters—likely reconsidered how they perceived mail-in voting. As such, we expect partisan motivated reasoning to influence how Florida registered voters—particularly Republicans who usually vote by mail—not only recalled the method by which they usually voted, but also the method by which they said they would vote in the upcoming presidential election.

Intertwined with partisan motivated reasoning is elite cue-taking (Bullock 2011; Zaller 1992). The increase in elite polarization has clarified partisan positions on issues, informing mass public opinion and making it more consistent and tightly connected (Levendusky 2010). Polarization, interacting with partisan motivated reasoning, creates an environment in which individuals are more receptive of elite cues in forming their policy or behavioral judgements, allowing them to align their positions with one another more strongly. More polarization among elites generates clearer cues for voters, which increases cue-taking by the elite’s base (Levendusky 2010). Like other cases, Trump’s inflammatory messaging over the summer against mail-in voting sent strong, directional signals to his base about where they should stand on the issue (Mason 2018). As a result, many voters will eventually “follow the leader” when it comes to the elite’s policy stance (Lenz 2013).

The President’s messaging against mail-in ballots countered the messaging of numerous experts—from Republican and Democratic county Supervisors of Elections in Florida to members of his own party—including Florida State Representative Joe Gruters. Gruters, an unabashed supporter of Trump and the Chair of the Republican Party of Florida, stated, “[P]eople that feel uncomfortable with voting in person, even though we’re months away, anybody has that right to request an absentee ballot. And

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<sup>9</sup>“Trump backtracks on mail-in voting, says it’s OK to do in Florida,” NPR, August 4, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/04/trump-backtracks-mail-voting-florida-391373>, last accessed September 5, 2020.

the Florida Republicans have dominated in years past.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, scholars have found that elite cues contradicting expert opinion can shape citizen decision-making. Even with seemingly dubious messaging from elites, citizens are often “unable or unwilling to separate accurate cues from questionable ones,” as “disagreement with expert opinion [can be] shaped significantly by political elites’ cues” (Darmofal 2005). The connection between voters and elite cues can be so powerful that it interrupts the ability for co-party elites with opposing view points to influence the voter’s opinions (Agadjanian 2020).

## Expectations

We argue that cue-taking from the President on the dangers of voting by mail superseded partisan motivated reasoning, with his supporters who usually vote by mail—Republicans, independents, and Democrats alike—were more likely to misrecall the method by which they normally voted, as well as misestimating how they said they planned to vote in the 2020 General Election. Several recent studies point to the partisan differences when it comes to behavioral response to the pandemic (Allcott et al. 2020; Clinton et al. 2021; Grossman et al. 2020; Gadarian, Goodman and Pepinsky 2021), so we think that personal health concerns over COVID-19 might mitigate the retrospective misrecalling and prospective misestimating of voting by mail by Republicans and Trump supporters. Given the President’s negative pronouncements on voting-by-mail, though, we are primarily interested in the strength of elite cue-taking and partisan motivated reasoning on mail-in voters, particularly Republicans, and their retrospective recollection and prospective estimation about voting a mail-in ballot.<sup>11</sup>

Our survey of Florida voters—who, through administrative records we are able to validate if they

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<sup>10</sup>See, “Florida Republican mail fliers push mail-in ballots, even as Trump bashes them,” *Orlando Sentinel*, July 13, 2020, available at <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/politics/2020-election/os-ne-florida-republicans-mail-ballots-20200713-3wu4lihusbcilmn5utus56bzfm-story.html> (last accessed September 5, 2020).

<sup>11</sup>We are not interested here in the question of what respondents “truly believe” (Schaffner and Luks 2018) regarding their method of voting, as we *know* definitively the method by which they voted in past elections and the method by which they voted in the 2020 General Election.



usually have voted by mail in past elections, and if they actually voted by mail in the November 2020 election—allows us to determine whether the President’s opposition to that mode of voting altered their recollection of how they usually vote and anticipation of how they planned on voting in November. Given the incessant messaging by the President at the time our survey was in the field, we would certainly think that Republicans and Trump supporters would be less likely to say they support voting by mail. But that is not our question here. Rather, we are interested in whether Republicans and Trump supporter who vote by mail are more likely to disavow how they *usually* vote, and also more likely to say they would vote in person in the November 2020 election, but actually voted by mail once again.<sup>12</sup> Given the perceived health risks due to COVID-19, and the importance of health considerations more generally on shaping political behavior (Gollust and Rahn 2015; Denny and Doyle 2007), we expect those who usually vote by mail but who are personally concerned about COVID-19 to be more likely to ignore elite cues and partisan motivated reasoning when recalling or anticipating the method by which they usually vote, and correctly report their method of voting.

We certainly do not expect all registered voters in Florida to be equally persuaded by the President’s divisive rhetoric when it comes to their own recollection of how they usually vote, or how they plan to vote in the November election. An individual’s openness to persuasion (Nir and Druckman 2008; Zaller 1992) is not uniform. We argue that when it comes to heuristics about voting by mail, the President’s tweets and statements at press conferences are not likely to be equally effective (Bartels 1996), even among partisans. We suggest that registered voters who support Trump—Republicans, but also No Party Affiliates (NPAs) and even some Democrats—will be disproportionately more likely to not recall correctly their method of voting in past elections as well as to disavow that method of voting in the upcoming election.

We expect Republicans who usually vote by mail, particularly supporters of the President, to be more likely to misremember the method by which they usually vote in an effort to reconcile the public and widespread criticisms of mail-in voting by Trump. That is, among respondents who we know usually vote by mail, we expect Republicans—and specifically those who said they would vote for Trump—to

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<sup>12</sup>Our question wording in the survey is: “What vote method do you usually use to cast your ballot,” and “By what method do you plan to cast your ballot in the November 2020 Election?”

fail to recall their own use of mail-in ballots and to disavow voting by mail in the November election (only to actually vote by mail once again). Beyond partisan motivation, the reported mis-remembering of mail-in voting and misestimating of voting by mail in November 2020 is due, we argue, to the voting behavior of Trump supporters no longer being consistent with the elite cues coming from the President. Beyond partisan motivated reasoning, we argue that elite cue-taking has shaped beliefs around mail-in voting; supporters of the President were unwilling to recall their past behavior, and were willing to fall in line and say that they planned on casting an in-person ballot in November.<sup>13</sup>

## Survey Design and Data

In order to understand the independent effects of partisan motivated reasoning and elite-cues on how voters both recollected their usual method of voting and the method by which they planned on voting in the November 2020 Election, we conducted a statewide email survey of Florida registered voters from July 21, 2020 to August 1, 2020. During this time period, our survey garnered over 11,000 completed responses. Following other recent uses of Florida’s publicly available voter file (Biggers and Smith 2020; Shino et al. 2020; Baringer, Herron and Smith 2020; Herron and Smith 2014), our representative sample frame of registered voters was randomly drawn from the June 2020 publicly available statewide voter file, conditioned on a voter including his or her email. We supplemented this with information

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<sup>13</sup>It is certainly possible that our survey, which was administered online and clearly indicated the university affiliation of the co-PIs, is picking up social desirability effects; that is, that some respondents may have been engaged in satisficing behavior, but as Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus (2013, p. 58) suggest, there is no reason to “equate ‘strong’ frames with more normatively desirable opinions—particularly because strength is based on perceptions and not normatively derived criteria *per se*.”

from a March 30, 2020, statewide vote-by-mail Daily “Absentee” upload file.<sup>14</sup> Descriptives for Florida registered voters population and our random survey sample composition are shown in Appendix D.

We administered our survey in two waves. We sent the first wave to the entire sample population of 150,000 randomly selected Florida registered voters; it was fielded from July 21, 2020 to July 27, 2020. Due to initial under-representation of non-white voters, we administered a second wave to only non-white members of the original sample who had not completed the survey by July 27, 2020. The data collection ended on August 1, 2020. The questionnaire included a variety of questions aimed at the respondent’s level of concern over contracting COVID-19, previous vote method, and prospective vote method in the 2020 General Election.<sup>15</sup> We then linked respondents to the statewide voter file and vote history files in order to obtain their validated method of vote in the 2016, 2018, and 2020 general elections.<sup>16</sup>

## **Empirical Framework**

Taking a conservative empirical approach to test our expectations, our base models include only registered voters in our survey who voted by mail in the 2016 *and* 2018, general and/or primary, elections in Florida. Sub-setting the data to those who only voted by mail-in in the previous two general elections leaves us with 4,141 respondents. By restricting our analysis to only mail-in voters, we intentionally exclude newly registered voters in Florida, registered voters who skipped either or both of the two general

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<sup>14</sup>The Daily Absentee files are uploaded by counties and submitted to the Florida Division of Elections (FDOE). These files are generated both pre-election and post-election by the 67 Florida Supervisors of Elections, and each file lists the disposition of a county’s slate of VBM voters as of the date of the file.

<sup>15</sup>For question wording, see Appendix C.

<sup>16</sup>We use the Florida Division of Election’s June 2020 vote history files to determine vote method in the 2016 and 2018 General Elections, as well as presidential preference primary elections in 2016 and 2020, and the August statewide primaries in 2016 and 2018. We use the final vote by mail designation in the Daily Absentee upload file from November 18, 2020 to determine if a respondent voted by mail in the November 3, 2020 General Election.

elections, and registered voters cast an in-person ballot in either election.

First, we determine if respondents—who, according to administrative records, cast a mail ballot in each of the past two general elections—reported on the survey that they usually vote by mail or not. We do the same for voters who cast mail-in ballots in both the 2016 and 2018 general elections who said they planned on voting in person in the 2020 presidential election, which we then validated using administrative records from the November 2020 election.<sup>17</sup> We replicate the analysis, conditioning on voting by mail in *every* statewide election since 2016, and the results remain consistent. In addition, to make sure that our results are not driven by other factors than the ones hypothesised in this study, we run placebo tests for voters who had voted in-person, early or on Election Day, in both 2016 and 2018 elections.

Our empirical strategy is two-fold. First, we analyze which mail-in voters (utilizing the validated administrative records) are more likely to not recall their usual method of voting. Second, we analyze which mail-in voters (again, according to the official voter histories) have a higher probability of reporting intention to vote in-person in November but voted by mail again. Our first dependent variable is *retrospectively* not correctly recalling one’s vote method, coded 1 if respondents reported they did not usually vote a mail-in ballot, and 0 if they reported that they usually vote by mail. Our second dependent variable is *prospectively* expecting to vote in-person at the polls in November but instead voting by mail, and 0 if they said they would stick with their old habit of mail-in voting.

Let  $\mathcal{J}$  denote the population of voters and let each member of the population be characterized by the triple  $(y, x, u)$ . The response variable  $y$  denotes voter turnout,  $x$  captures the voter’s observable characteristics, and  $u$  denotes the voter’s unobservable characteristics. Let  $\{y_i, x_i\}_{i=1}^N$  be our random sample of Florida registrants who have voted by mail in both 2016 and 2018 General Elections (or general and primary elections). To derive our logistic model, we use a latent variable framework specified as:  $y_i^* = x_i'\beta + u_i$ ;  $y_i = 1[y_i^* > 0]$ , where  $1[\cdot]$  is an indicator function taking unity if the bracketed logical is true, and zero otherwise. Using this latent variable framework and letting  $\Lambda$  be the standard logistic distribution of  $u_i$ , the logistic model is specified as:  $P(y_i = 1|x_i) = \Lambda(x_i'\beta) = \exp(x_i'\beta)/[1 + \exp(x_i'\beta)]$ . Then, using our sample of observations we estimate the specified logistic model using the maximum

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<sup>17</sup>For variable coding, see Appendix A.

likelihood approach.

We estimate a series of logistic regression models conditioning on voter’s demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and income), fear of contracting COVID-19, support for Trump in the 2020 election, and political awareness.<sup>18</sup> In our nonlinear (logistic) models we are interested in measuring how a discrete change in fear of contracting COVID-19 and support for Trump changes the conditional choice probability of *retrospective* vote method misrecall or *prospective* vote method change. We follow Wooldridge (2010), who proposes using average marginal effect, which is the discrete change on the conditional choice probability averaged across the distribution of our explanatory variables.

### ***Retrospectively Not Recalling Voting by Mail***

Which voters who regularly vote by mail were more likely to *retrospectively* not recall the method by which they usually voted in past elections? Table 1 displays estimates from a series of logistic regressions with robust standard errors clustered by county. The dependent variable in all four models is vote method misrecall. That is, respondents who we know cast mail ballots in previous elections and who reported that they *do not usually* vote by mail are coded as 1, and those who reported that they *do usually* vote by mail are coded as 0. The only difference across the four models is that the dependent variable in the first two columns shown in Table 1 is coded 1 if respondents voted by mail in both 2016 and 2018 General Elections (but said they do not usually vote by mail), whereas in the last two columns we replicate our findings with a more conservative condition of what *usually* voting by mail means, coding the dependent variable as a 1 for respondents who voted by mail in *all four* of the previous statewide elections, but claimed they *did not* usually vote by mail.

The models control for several factors, including a respondent’s fear of contracting COVID-19, demographics (age, gender, race), level of education, party of registration, ideology (traditional 7-point ideology scale (coded from very liberal to very conservative)), and political awareness (3-point scale

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<sup>18</sup>We estimate identical models with county fixed-effects and clustered standard errors by county to account for heterogeneity in mail-in voting across Florida’s 67 counties. See Appendix B.

of attention to the news (coded from a none at all to great deal)). We find that respondents who were fearful about contracting COVID-19 had a lower likelihood of not correctly recalling that they usually vote by mail relative to their counterparts. Similarly, we find that Democrats had a lower likelihood of retrospectively not correctly recalling their vote method compared to Republicans (the reference category). We also find that conservatives were more likely than liberals to not recall correctly how they usually vote. Finally, we find that older voters and those paying less attention to news about government and politics were less likely to misrecall their vote method compared to younger voters and those who pay a great deal of attention to the news.

These results hold when we employ a more stringent condition for what “usually” vote by mail may mean to a respondent. In models 3 and 4, we limit our sample of respondents to those who we know from the vote history files that actually voted by mail in *every* statewide general election and August primary since 2016. That is, models 3 and 4 in Table 1 are estimated using all respondents who we know from the state’s official administrative records voted by mail in the 2016 and 2018 August primaries and November general elections.<sup>19</sup> In models 3 and 4 we drop No Party Affiliates, as those not registered with a party were not permitted to participate in Florida’s closed August primary elections in 2016 and 2018. When controlling for a respondent’s intention to vote for Trump in the November 2020 election, as model 4 in Table 1 shows, we find that not correctly recalling one’s vote method is again strongly related to a respondent’s support for the President. Indeed, as with model 2, we find that even among our restricted sample of voters who usually vote by mail, a respondent’s support for Trump (model 4) washes out the significant finding of both party registration and ideology in model 3. These supervoters who always vote by mail and who are most fearful of COVID-19 remain significantly less likely to misrecall that they usually vote by mail.

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<sup>19</sup>We replicate our analysis using county fixed-effects, with consistent findings. See Appendix B.

Table 1: *Retrospectively Not Correctly Recalling Voting by Mail*

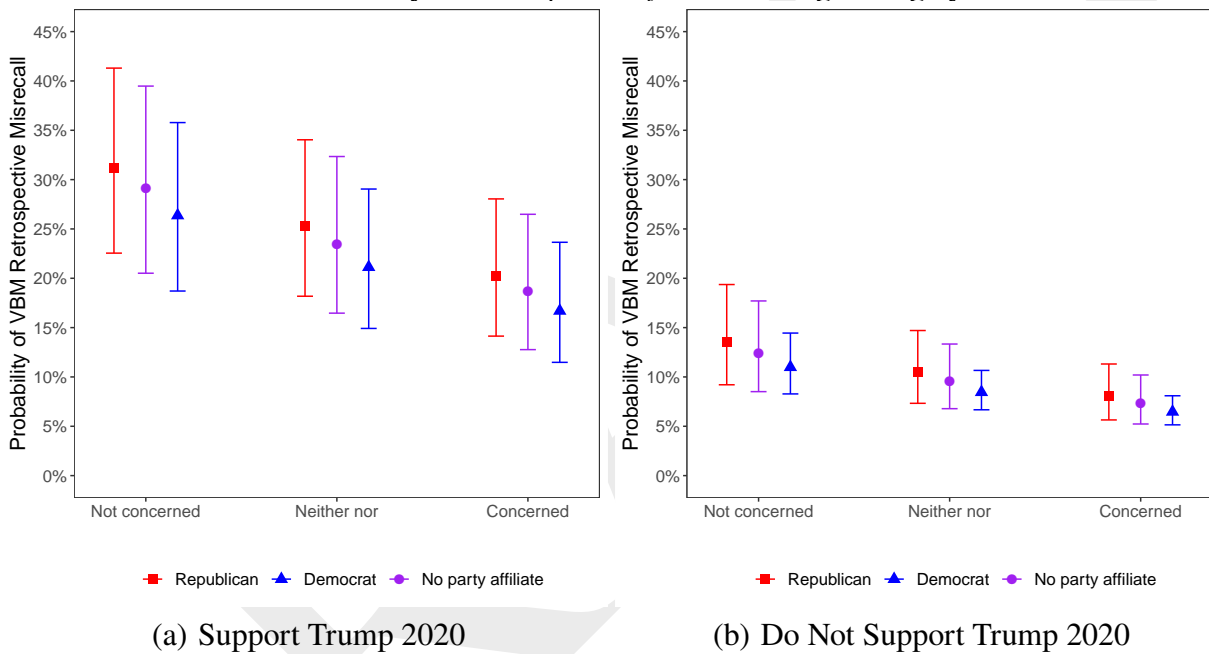
	VBM voter 2016-2018 General Elections		VBM voter 2016-2018 General & Primary Elections	
	Partisan Motivation <i>est.(se)</i>	Elite Cue-Taking <i>est.(se)</i>	Partisan Motivation <i>est.(se)</i>	Elite Cue-Taking <i>est.(se)</i>
(Intercept)	-0.543 (0.355)	-0.850* (0.382)	-0.642 (0.641)	-1.299 (0.678)
Fear contract COVID-19	-0.386*** (0.055)	-0.290*** (0.059)	-0.422*** (0.088)	-0.336*** (0.092)
Vote Trump 2020		1.065*** (0.188)		1.932*** (0.405)
No Party Affiliate	-0.228 (0.137)	-0.098 (0.155)		
Democrat	-0.579*** (0.148)	-0.234 (0.177)	-0.562* (0.254)	0.256 (0.348)
Ideology	0.163*** (0.037)	0.025 (0.046)	0.176** (0.067)	-0.049 (0.079)
Age	-0.106** (0.036)	-0.120** (0.038)	-0.134 (0.072)	-0.144 (0.074)
Female	-0.004 (0.092)	-0.016 (0.097)	-0.107 (0.152)	-0.100 (0.157)
White	-0.103 (0.118)	-0.136 (0.125)	-0.225 (0.205)	-0.229 (0.214)
Education	-0.071 (0.048)	-0.053 (0.051)	-0.084 (0.080)	-0.066 (0.083)
Political awareness	0.241** (0.079)	0.303*** (0.086)	0.394** (0.142)	0.456** (0.147)
AIC	3280.875	2962.892	1260.149	1164.525
BIC	3343.862	3031.189	1309.738	1218.939
Log Likelihood	-1630.437	-1470.446	-621.074	-572.263
Observations	4,019	3,673	1,826	1,705

Note: Sample includes only respondents with validated mail-in voting in previous elections. Dependent variable, misrecalled vote method, is coded 1 if respondent reported usually voting in person, and 0 if reported usually voting by mail. VBM stands for vote-by-mail. Florida has closed primary election, therefore, no party affiliates are not included in the last two columns. Logistic models estimated using maximum likelihood and robust standard errors are clustered by county. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

To assess the impact of voting for Trump in the 2020 General Election on misremembering one's usual vote method, given a respondent's party registration and fear of contracting COVID-19, Figure 2 provides the estimated marginal effects of failing to retrospectively recall voting by mail, while keeping the other controls at their modal value. The marginal effects for the two plots are estimated for those respondents who voted by mail in both 2016 and 2018 General Elections, as shown in column 2 in Table 1. Regardless of their expressed fears of contracting COVID-19, respondents who reported supporting Trump in November had a higher probability of not correctly recalling that they usually vote by mail. As shown in Figure 2(a), this is a common pattern across all registered Republicans, Democrats, and

NPAs. For example, roughly 31% of Republicans who supported Trump and who said they were not concerned about contracting COVID-19 misrecalled not usually voting by mail, which drops to 21% for Republicans who were concerned about contracting COVID-19, but these differences are not statistically significant. A similar behavioral pattern—again without significant differences—is apparent among NPAs and Democrats for those who said they planned to vote for Trump in 2020 (Figure 2(a)), and those who did not support him (Figure 2(b)), including Republicans.

Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Support for Trump in 2020, by Party and Fear of Contracting COVID-19, on the Probability of *Retrospectively* Misrecalling Voting by Mail



However, as shown in Figure 2(b), compared to those who said they supported Trump, the probability of misrecalling retrospective vote method is significantly lower among respondents who reported that they did not plan to vote for Trump in November 2020, regardless of COVID-19 concerns or party. That is, conditioning on support for Trump, when we compare respondents' likelihood to not recall correctly that they usually vote by mail, the difference is statistically significant. Support of Trump's reelection is a significant predictor of respondents who usually vote by mail failing to recall how they usually vote, regardless of fear of contracting COVID-19. Republicans who vote by mail—but also Democrats and NPAs—who planned on voting for the President were clearly more likely to misrecall that they usually vote by mail. This is clear evidence that Trump's attacks on mail-in voting had an effect



on how his supporters—across parties and irrespective of health concerns—remembered the method by which they usually vote. At the extreme, we find that Republicans who did not intend to vote for Trump and expressed a greater concern about contracting COVID-19 were significantly more likely to unabashedly recall their usual vote method, compared to Republican Trump supporters who expressed no concern over contracting COVID-19.

## ***Prospectively Misestimating Plan to Vote in Person in the 2020 General Election***

We now look prospectively at which habitual VBM voters were more likely to say in late July that they planned to vote in-person in the November 2020 election, but who actually voted by mail. In Table 2, we estimate logistic regression models with robust clustered standard errors by county. The dependent variable is coded 1 for respondents who said they planned on voting in person, either on Election Day or during the early voting period, in the November election, but who instead again voted by mail. The sample in the first two columns in Table 2 includes respondents who we know voted by mail in both 2016 and 2018 General Elections. Estimates shown in the last two columns of Table 2 are further restricted to a subsample of respondents who voted by mail in the four elections (primary and general) held in Florida in 2016 and 2018.

The first model (Partisan Motivation) in Table 2 estimates the likelihood of respondents who we know usually vote by mail, voting by mail again even though they said they planned on casting a ballot in person in November, but exclude whether a respondent planned on voting for Trump. We control for fear of contracting COVID-19, demographic characteristics, party, and political awareness. As shown in Table 2, those who were concerned about contracting the virus and Democrats were less likely to alter their prospective vote method—they said they would, and they actually did, vote by mail in the November election—as compared to their counterparts, who said they would vote in person but then voted again by mail.

As with retrospectively misrecalling vote method, we assess whether support for Trump explains misestimating prospective vote method in the November 2020 election. We re-estimate the model (Elite Cue Taking), this time controlling for Trump support. As expected, we find it to be an important predic-

tor of a respondent who usually votes by mail, saying that he or she anticipated switching to in-person voting in November, but actually voting by mail once again. We find that fear of contracting COVID-19 is still an important predictor, even when controlling for Trump support, as respondents worried about the coronavirus were less likely to misestimate their intention to vote by mail in November. In addition, we find that respondents who follow the news were more likely to say they would switch modes of voting to in-person while voting by mail in November 2020, only to revert back to their habitual method of voting by mail. In the final two columns in Table 2, we replicate both models using the sample of respondents who had voted by mail in the 2016 and 2018 primary and general elections (again, dropping NPAs). As shown in Table 2, our findings are quite consistent, despite the much more conservative condition of including only respondents who voted by mail in past two primary and general elections.

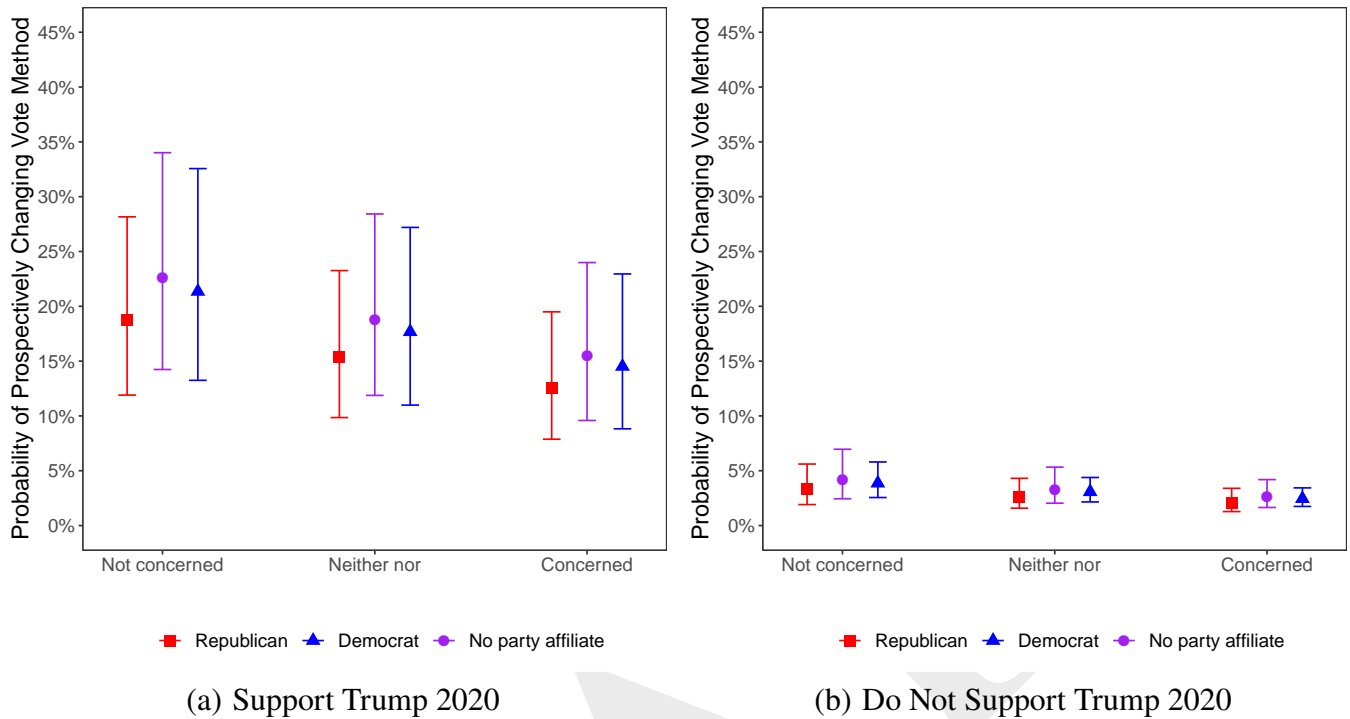
Table 2: *Prospectively Planning to Vote in Person but Voting by Mail in November 2020*

	VBM voter 2016-2018 General Elections		VBM voter 2016-2018 General & Primary Elections	
	Partisan Motivation <i>est.(se)</i>	Elite Cue-Taking <i>est.(se)</i>	Partisan Motivation <i>est.(se)</i>	Elite Cue-Taking <i>est.(se)</i>
(Intercept)	-1.856*** (0.445)	-2.610*** (0.470)	-0.799 (0.553)	-1.477* (0.593)
Fear contract COVID-19	-0.393*** (0.065)	-0.235*** (0.069)	-0.291*** (0.078)	-0.199* (0.082)
Vote Trump 2020		1.910*** (0.248)		1.851*** (0.343)
No Party Affiliate	-0.088 (0.162)	0.240 (0.176)		
Democrat	-0.584** (0.190)	0.166 (0.226)	-0.405 (0.213)	0.368 (0.299)
Ideology	0.322*** (0.048)	0.101 (0.058)	0.233*** (0.057)	0.023 (0.069)
Age	-0.063 (0.046)	-0.096 (0.049)	-0.189** (0.062)	-0.202** (0.064)
Female	-0.117 (0.113)	-0.096 (0.118)	0.104 (0.130)	0.112 (0.136)
White	-0.142 (0.146)	-0.199 (0.154)	-0.032 (0.181)	-0.097 (0.188)
Education	-0.108 (0.059)	-0.054 (0.062)	-0.050 (0.069)	-0.022 (0.073)
Political awareness	0.199* (0.094)	0.254* (0.100)	0.337** (0.121)	0.481*** (0.130)
AIC	2338.970	2088.896	1578.143	1451.371
BIC	2401.815	2157.036	1627.583	1505.636
Log Likelihood	-1159.485	-1033.448	-780.072	-715.685
Observations	3,962	3,621	1,796	1,680

Note: Sample includes only respondents with validated mail-in voting in previous elections. Dependent variable, misexpected vote method, is coded 1 if respondent reported planning on voting in person in November 2020, but actually voting by mail in the election, and 0 if they actually did vote in person in the November 2020 election. VBM stands for vote-by-mail. Florida has closed primary election, therefore, no party affiliates are not included in the last two columns. Logistic models estimated using maximum likelihood and robust standard errors are clustered by county. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

In Figure 3, we estimate marginal effects for change in prospective vote method conditioning on a respondent's fear or contracting COVID-19, party, support for Trump. Figure 3(a) shows that the probability of prospectively expecting to vote in-person but instead voting by mail is higher among Trump supporters, regardless of fear of contracting the virus and party. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 3(b) those who did not support Trump in 2020 had a considerably lower probability of changing their habitual vote method in November 2020, compared to Trump supporters. As shown comparatively in Figures 2(a) and 3(b), the difference in misestimating intended vote method is statistically significant across Trump and non-Trump supporters, but not within party or health concerns for COVID-19.

Figure 3: Marginal Effects of Support for Trump in 2020, by Party and Fear of Contracting COVID-19, on the Probability of *Prospectively* Misestimating Voting by Mail in November, 2020



### Placebo Test: In-Person Voters *Retrospectively* Misrecalling and *Prospectively* Misestimating Vote Method

Our findings so far have shown that respondents who usually vote by mail, who were Trump supporters, had a lower probability of retrospectively misrecalling that they had voted by mail, and a lower probability of saying they planned to vote in person in the November election, but actually voted again by mail. While these findings are consistent and robust under different model specifications, we wonder whether retrospective and prospective vote method misrecall/misestimation for the two groups still hold for habitual *in-person* voters. The first two columns of Table 3 estimate retrospective vote method misrecall for in-person voters. Similar to the models estimated in Table 1, the first column shown in Table 3 includes concern over COVID-19 and the other covariates, while the second model adds support for Trump.

Table 3 provides the results of a placebo test, and as such, is limited to the more than 2,000 respondents in our survey who we know voted in-person in both the 2016 and 2018 General Elections. As expected, regardless of their fear of contracting COVID-19 or their support for Trump, we find that

respondents who voted in person in the 2016 and 2018 General Elections were neither more nor less likely to misrecall their method of voting in previous elections. In other words, retrospective vote-by-mail misrecalling by Trump supporters, as shown in the analysis above, is not evident among habitual in-person voters.

What about respondents who we know that usually vote in person, and who reported that they would vote in-person in the November 2020 election? Did they actually vote in-person, or, like some of our usual vote-by-mail respondents, did they change to mail-in voters? The last two columns of Table 3 estimate similar models to Table 2, but restricted to only those who we know usually vote in person. Not surprisingly, given the pandemic, those who were more concerned with contracting COVID-19 were more likely to chose to vote by mail instead of their usual in-person voting in the November 2020 election, given that mail voting was a safer vote method health-wise. Most importantly, though, as shown in the last column of Table 3 and consistent with our argument, Trump supporters who we know usually vote in person were more likely to follow through and vote in-person in November. Trump was a fervent critic of voting by mail. As shown in Table 3, Trump’s supporters who normally voted in person were no more or less likely to retrospectively misrecall how they normally voted, and were even less likely than non-Trump supporters to shift from in-person voting to casting a mail ballot.

## Discussion

Over the past two decades, the popularity of voting by-mail has increased considerably among American voters (US Election Assistance Commission 2017; Shino and Smith 2020). The onset of COVID-19 in Spring 2020 only accelerated the rate of mail-in ballots across the states (Thompson et al. 2020; Baringer, Herron and Smith 2020; Shino, Suttman-Lea and Smith N.d.). But the politicization of mail-in voting due to the President’s constant attacks has important implications for voters’ trust in the election system. We find that habitual mail-in voters who support the President are willing to disavow mail-in voting, misremembering that they usually use the method and misestimating that they would not use it in the 2020 General Election. Drawing on a large representative sample of Florida voters conducted in late Summer 2020, we find that the President’s rhetoric against the “fraudulent process” of voting by mail may have led to further erosion of trust in mail-in voting, as his supporters—who we

know use the method—were less likely to be forthcoming about voting by mail.

Table 3: Placebo Test for *Retrospective* and *Prospective* Vote Method Change of In-Person Voters

	Retrospectively not correctly recalling voting in-person		Prospectively changing vote method from in-person to VBM	
	Partisan Motivation $\beta(se)$	Elite Cue-Taking $\beta(se)$	Partisan Motivation $\beta(se)$	Elite Cue-Taking $\beta(se)$
(Intercept)	-2.899*** (0.590)	-2.216*** (0.650)	0.654 (0.582)	1.428* (0.669)
Fear contract COVID-19	0.179 (0.120)	0.066 (0.127)	0.501*** (0.108)	0.342** (0.121)
Vote Trump 2020		-0.614 (0.333)		-1.163** (0.359)
No Party Affiliate	0.053 (0.279)	-0.158 (0.324)	0.604* (0.285)	0.202 (0.340)
Democrat	0.176 (0.250)	-0.245 (0.303)	0.342 (0.248)	-0.262 (0.343)
Ideology	-0.180** (0.062)	-0.158* (0.069)	-0.281*** (0.064)	-0.183* (0.073)
Age	0.199*** (0.054)	0.200*** (0.057)	0.091 (0.057)	0.095 (0.060)
Female	-0.013 (0.146)	0.055 (0.151)	-0.085 (0.156)	-0.041 (0.164)
White	0.126 (0.185)	0.176 (0.195)	0.279 (0.186)	0.345 (0.195)
Education	-0.059 (0.082)	-0.090 (0.085)	-0.051 (0.089)	-0.086 (0.093)
Political awareness	-0.229 (0.131)	-0.212 (0.144)	0.069 (0.140)	0.102 (0.151)
AIC	1459.328	1362.815	1152.850	1055.958
BIC	1517.472	1425.827	1205.581	1113.113
Log Likelihood	-719.664	-670.407	-566.425	-516.979
Observations	2,476	2,272	1,441	1,334

Note: Sample includes only respondents with validated in-person voting in both 2016 and 2018 general elections. The dependent variable for the first two columns is coded 1 if respondent misrecalled usually voting in person, and 0 if correctly recalled usually voting in-person. VBM stands for vote by-mail. The dependent variable in the last two columns is coded 1 if respondent reported planning on voting in person in November 2020, but actually voted by mail in the election, and 0 if they actually did vote in person. Logistic models estimated using maximum likelihood and robust standard errors are clustered by county. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

The politicization and negative cues that Trump assigned to voting by mail encouraged his supporters to align themselves with their candidate’s signaling. Our findings support previous scholarship on partisan motivated reasoning, but more importantly, it reveals how partisanship (and even ideology) can be overwhelmed by elite cue-taking, as captured by support for the President. We find Republicans to be significantly more likely than their Democratic and NPA counterparts to incorrectly recall the method by which they voted in the previous elections; but this misrecalling pales in comparison to Trump supporters who were willing to disavow their normal way of voting, as well as miscalculate their method of voting in the upcoming November election, so as to stay in step with the President’s critical take on mail-in voting. As such, our findings point to the limitations of partisan motivated reasoning, as support for Trump, regardless of party affiliation, is an even stronger predictor of how voters recall

how they usually vote and plan to vote in the future.

We also gauge if partisan motivated reasoning and elite-cue taking had limits in the era of the coronavirus. We find that those who usually vote by mail and who were concerned about contracting COVID-19 were indeed more likely to correctly recall their usual method of voting, and were also more likely to stick with voting by mail in the 2020 General Election. This concern over one's personal health withstands partisanship and support for Trump, but the marginal effects are limited. It remains to be seen in future campaigns whether Republicans are willing to let the former President shape their recollections of how they usual vote, or shape their future preference for a method of voting.

Given the attention to vote method by President Trump in 2020, our findings suggest that there will continue to be a partisan divide over *how* we vote. Even after COVID-19 health concerns subside, we expect that strong elite cues and partisan motivated reasoning will continue to shape how voters think about the method by which they vote. Of course, we do not know what kind of constraints will exist now that Trump is out of office, that COVID-19 vaccines are broadly being administered, much less when the pandemic finally ebbs. Will voters continue to see personal contagion as a salient issue when considering the method by which to vote? We suspect that as long as the electoral environment continues to operate in an increasingly polarized context ([Bentele and O'Brien 2013](#); [Hicks et al. 2015](#)), the politicization of mail-in voting will continue, further permeating the way voters recall their usual method of voting and how they indicate they will vote in future elections.

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