Ballot Tracking Use in the U.S.
Pre-SPSA Workshop - MEDSL Grant Two Pager

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The Center for Inclusive Democracy and the Elections Information & Voting Center is exploring ballot tracking use, local election official communication related to ballot tracking options, impact of ballot tracking on voters' trust, and how ballot tracking impacts ballot rejection. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this research seeks to inform efforts to combat misinformation about the integrity of voting by mail and aims to strengthen democracy in the U.S.

Approach

The research project is collecting comprehensive information on voter usage rates of ballot tracking, conducting interviews with state and local officials, tracking communications and education practices, in order to address the following four main research questions:

1. What are the patterns of and reasons for adoption and non-adoption of ballot tracking;

2. What is the effectiveness of LEO communication and education in encouraging widespread and equitable usage by voters;

3. What is the impact of ballot tracking systems on voter information and trust; and

4. What is the occurrence of mail ballot transmission and returns; address updating; ballot rejections; ballot curing, and other points of ballot leakage or "loss" in the "chain" of mail voting.

Our research evaluates mail balloting systems across all adopting states, including detailed ballot transaction and ballot curing information provided by the ballot tracking systems. Each of these questions are being examined for variation by demographic and geographic subgroup. We also plan to conduct statewide opinion surveys in four states or local jurisdictions (to be selected after analysis of multi-state ballot tracking data), comparing views of election integrity and conduct between matched samples of voters who use and who do not use ballot tracking in the four states.

This multi-pronged approach will include:

> 1. In-depth quantitative assessment of ballot return system data, including race, ethnicity, age, party, vote history, and turnout status;
> 2. Analysis of additional steps required for vote by mail ballots compared to in-person voting;
> 3. Voter surveys of ballot tracking usage and views of the election integrity;
> 4. Local election jurisdiction surveys of outreach methods;

5. Comprehensive interviews of select election officials; and

6. Content analysis of local election jurisdiction advertising, promotional materials, and voter guides containing information related to ballot tracking systems.

The major methodological innovation of the proposed research is to use detailed transaction information captured by ballot tracking systems to examine as many of the "links" in the chain of by-mail voting, creating more precise estimates of when and where ballot leakage, loss, or rejection occurs, including: 1. Leakage, loss, and rejection due to invalid addresses and which are not cured; 2. Rejection due to late arrivals, disaggregated into late mailing by voters and late arrival due to disparities in USPS delivery times; 3. Rejection due to failed signature verification and lack of curing, categorized into failed voter responses and insufficient time/outreach from elections officials; and 4. Leakage and loss due to non-turnout (lack of return of ballot).

Project Status

Currently, we are waiting on the delivery of most of our individual-level ballot tracking data from BallotTrax and Ballot Scout vendors. To date, we have acquired BallotTrax data for California and Colorado.

Our survey project is contingent upon having sufficient information to draw a valid sample and administer a high quality survey, ideally using existing survey panels. We hope to conduct surveys in at least three states. Ideally, these states will have relatively high levels of partisan competition and demographic diversity, since we know from prior work that partisanship has a strong impact on voter confidence levels and that use of ballot tracking varies by race and education levels.

We are current researching methods to draw a sample and conduct a survey. We are constrained by the proportion of registered voters who use ballot tracking (*pBT*), turn out to vote (*pTO*), panel coverage in a state (*pPANEL*), and projected response rate (*pRESPONSE*). [1]

$$\text{SAMPLE} \sim (pBT * pTO * pPANEL * pRESPONSE) * \text{VOTERS}$$

We have already had early discussions with YouGov about drawing a sample from their existing panel, matched to a list of voters, but are waiting to secure additional commitments before we continue these discussions. We will develop our survey instrument over the next two months, contingent upon state partnerships.

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[1] A less attractive alternative would be to conduct a survey within a set of states and jurisdictions in which we already know there is high ballot tracking usage, and use after the fact vote validation and use of ballot tracking to make comparisons.