

Why It May Be Selfish to Vote by Mail This Year

A dear friend recently presented me with a conundrum that many are dealing with. Concerned not only for her own health, but for the health of others in her immediate circle, she hopes to vote by absentee ballot to limit her exposure to new people.

My friend lives in Minnesota, where she has a dizzying array of early voting options available in the six weeks before the election. She can vote absentee, mailing in her ballot or taking it to an election office. She can give it to someone to deliver if she does not want to go herself. If she votes absentee, she can also change her mind by voting in person on Election Day or at an “early voting location,” thus cancelling her initial absentee ballot.

I find all these voting options concerning, but then I grew up in an age where everyone voted on Election Day, then gathered in front of the TV to see who won. Call me a cranky relic, but I also live in a state that specializes in close elections and long, drawn out recount battles. Perhaps I’m just a healthy skeptic.

Absentee voting requires that ballot counting be administered efficiently and honestly. That in and of itself is a tall order, COVID or no COVID. Vote by mail options also require educated voters who plan ahead and follow directions, as well as a stellar performance by the U.S. Postal Service. Only five states have experience with universal vote by mail; the majority of those voters, however, still bring their ballots in to be counted rather than relying on the mail.

Considering these obstacles, it only seems fair to pose the following question: Is it selfish to vote by mail, especially during this unsettled time?

This question seems counterintuitive in the age of COVID when the considerate thing to do seems to be to vote by mail, avoiding the polls and the risk of spreading this disease. But I would argue the opposite. The best way to love our neighbors and respect our elders is to vote in person on Election Day (or at an early polling place).

Why? Because doing so reserves mail-in voting for people who are vulnerable and increases the likelihood that their vote will be counted, not to mention yours. Doing otherwise risks swamping the electoral and postal systems with more ballots than either can handle; proper votes are less likely to be delivered and counted, while fraudulent votes are more likely to slip by even the most honest and diligent poll workers.

[According to Elise Viebeck of *The Washington Post*](#), more than half a million absentee ballots were rejected during the 2020 primary season.

More than 534,000 mail ballots were rejected during primaries across 23 states this year – nearly a quarter in key battlegrounds for the fall – illustrating how missed delivery deadlines, inadvertent mistakes and uneven enforcement of the rules could disenfranchise voters and affect the outcome of the presidential election....

The number of mail ballots rejected in 23 states in this year's primaries outstrips the nearly 319,000 mail and absentee ballots that were thrown out nationwide in the 2016 general election. The number of tossed ballots four years ago amounted to 1 percent of the roughly 33.4 million mail ballots cast that fall, according to data from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission....

The Post totals include the number of ballots rejected in a primary held in each state this year, including several that took place before the novel coronavirus emerged as a serious concern in the United States. The figures almost certainly

understate the number of rejections for several reasons, including failures by some counties to report their data.

If the primary is any indicator, America is not ready for mail-in voting. Yet, we must rely on the fifty states, ready or not, to ensure that the “one person, one vote” promise is achieved so that on or shortly after Election Day, we know who won all the races – not just the presidency – and feel confident about the results.

If we do not feel confident about the results, we will not accept them. Our fondness for the American experiment in self-governance and our willingness to consent to being governed by our elected leaders will continue to fade.

Why would you create more chaos in an already chaotic and exhausting year if you have another reasonable option?

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