



Report: Exploration of U.S. Voting Behavior and Attitudes

Subject: Key Findings from a Survey of 1,514 U.S. Registered Voters Matched to Public Voter File Records.

Date: December 19, 2019

Executive Summary.

This memorandum highlights key findings from a survey of 1,514 U.S. registered voters via online survey panel conducted October 9–24, 2019 by [Beacon Research](#) on behalf of the [Environmental Voter Project](#). Respondents provided identifying information that allowed each person’s survey response to be matched to public voter files to compare actual vs. reported voter behavior.

- **Donald Trump is Unpopular, but Performs Best with the Most Reliable Voters.** Donald Trump currently has a -10 favorability rating among all registered voters (44%-54%), but consistent voters are much more favorably disposed to the President. Trump’s favorability is +8 among the most frequent voters (54%-46%), whereas it is -14 among the least reliable voters (42%-56%).
- **Climate and the Environment are Surging as a Voter Priority.** 14% of registered voters now list “addressing climate change and protecting the environment” as their #1 priority over all other issues. This is in stark contrast to the 2016 Presidential election, where polls showed climate/environment as the top issue of 2%–6% of registered voters.
- **Climate/Environment Voters are the Most Motivated to Vote in 2020.** Of all the issue constituency groups, climate/environment voters are the most motivated to vote in the 2020 presidential election, stating that they’re willing to wait in line for an average of 1 hour 13 minutes to cast their vote.
- **Many Infrequent Voters are Unaware of Early Voting and Absentee Voting.** 25% of infrequent voters aren’t aware they live in states that offer early voting, and 29% are unaware they can cast an absentee ballot.
- **Vote-by-Mail Could Significantly Increase Turnout.** People living in vote-by-mail states are 17 percentage points more likely to say that voting is “very easy” than people in non-vote-by-mail states. This lends support to studies showing that vote-by-mail can increase turnout by 5–7 percentage points.
- **People Dramatically Over-Report How Often They Vote.** 89% of registered voters claimed to vote in every or almost every presidential election, but just 59% actually did. Similar (or worse) over-reporting was evident for midterm election participation (a 35-point gap) and primaries (a 61-point gap). This provides support for “social pressure” voter-turnout messaging, but it should serve as a cautionary tale for pollsters.



Profile of Survey Sample.

Category	Group	% of Sample
Gender	Male	43
	Female	56
Age	18-29	11
	30-44	20
	45-54	22
	55-64	22
	65+	25
Ethnicity	White	77
	Black	12
	Latino	8
Socioeconomic Status (self-reported class combined with education)	High SES	12
	Middle class (college)	19
	Middle class (noncollege)	24
	Low SES	44
Philosophy	Progressive	29
	Moderate	34
	Conservative	34

Category	Group	% of Sample
Party ID (self-identified)	Democrat	43
	Independent / Unenrolled	22
	Republican	35
Education	High school or less	28
	Some college	33
	College graduate	27
	Graduate degree	12
Area	Urban	25
	Suburban	43
	Rural	31
Vote frequency (of primary and general elections voter was eligible for, 2008-2018)	Frequent voters (75%+)	21
	Occasional voters (50-74%)	18
	Sporadic voters (26-49%)	25
	Infrequent voters (25% or less)	36

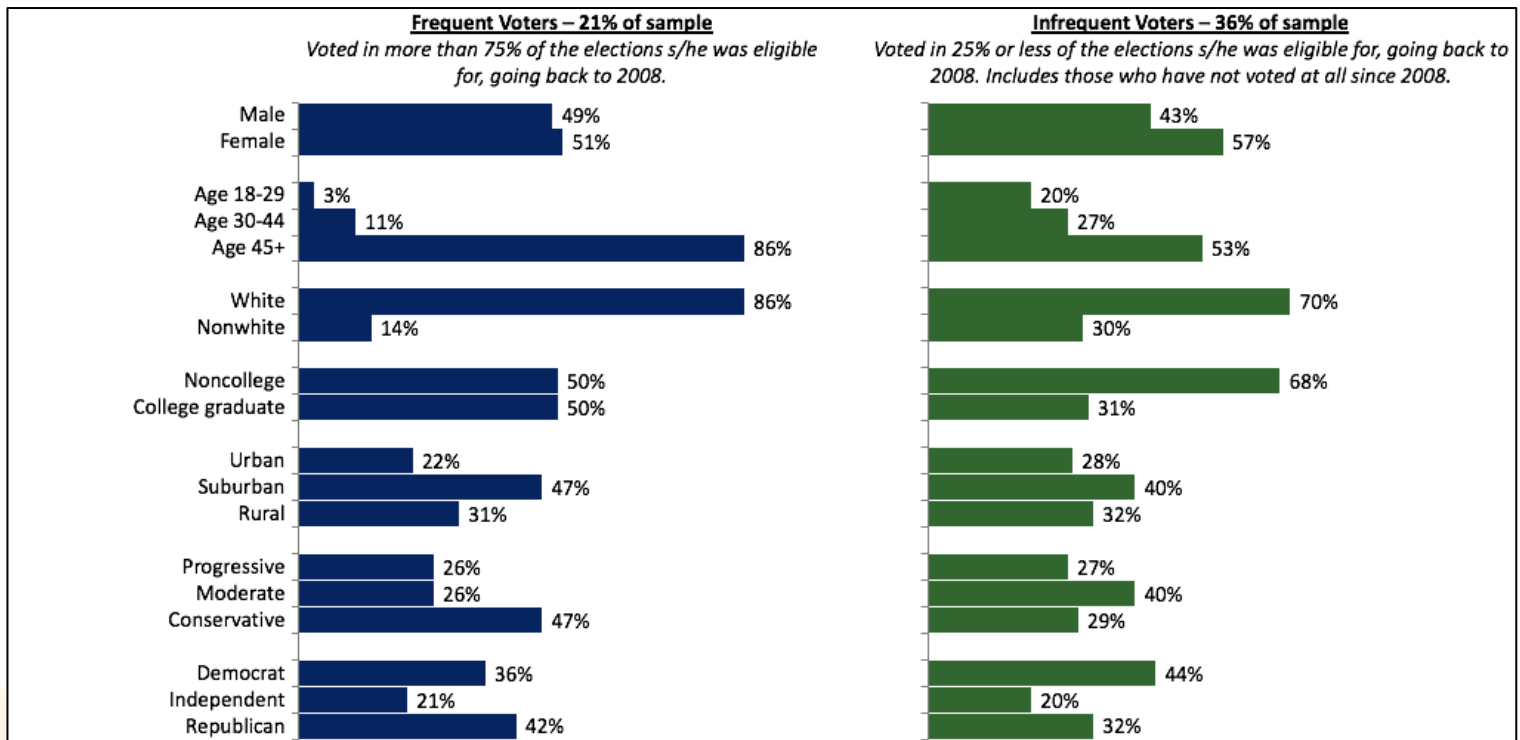


1. General Political Environment.

A. Frequent Voters are More Likely to be Older, White, Suburban, Conservative, and Republican.

The most reliable voters (those who voted in 75%+ of the elections for which they were eligible since 2008) are much more likely to be over age 45, white, suburban, and conservative than infrequent voters (those who voted in 25% or less of the elections for which they were eligible since 2008).

There are also stark differences along party lines, lending credence to the perception that Republicans tend to vote more reliably than Democrats. Among Frequent Voters, self-identified Republicans outnumber Democrats by 6 percentage points. Among Infrequent Voters, Democrats outnumber Republicans by 12 percentage points.



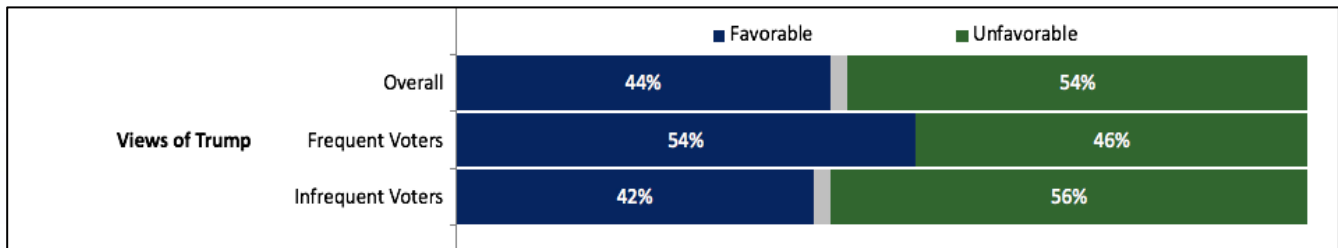
B. Donald Trump is Unpopular, but Performs Best with the Most Reliable Voters.

Just as Frequent Voters are more likely to identify as conservative and Republican, Frequent Voters are also more likely to have a favorable view of Donald Trump.

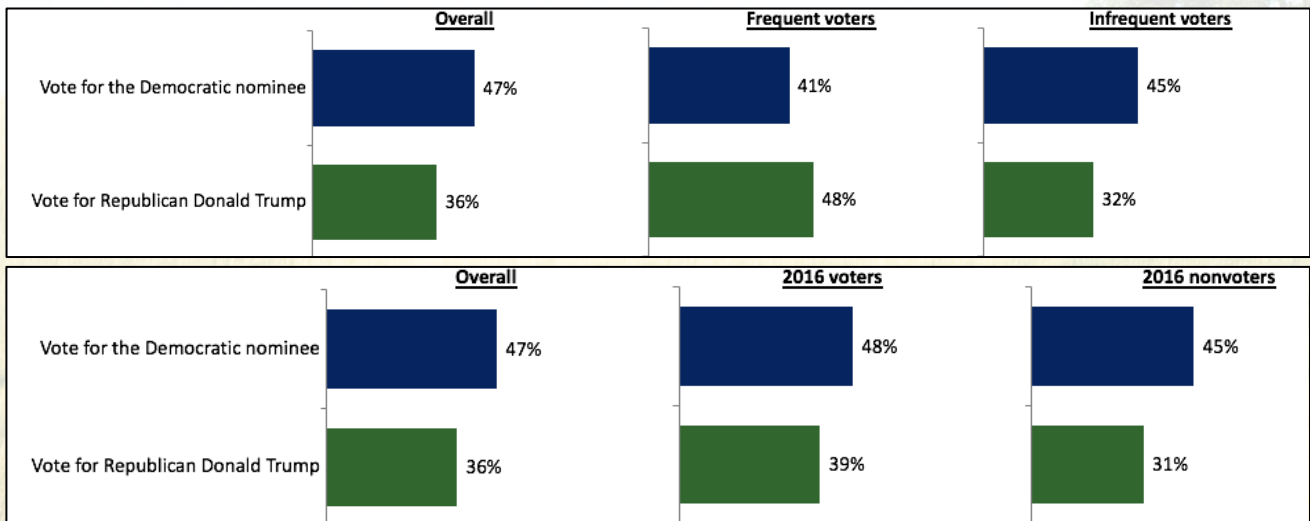
Trump has a +8 favorability rating among the most reliable voters, whereas he has a -14 favorability rating among the least reliable voters. This is also reflected in Trump’s matchup against a generic Democrat: among Frequent Voters, Trump has a 7-point lead; among Infrequent Voters, the Democratic nominee has a 13-point lead. Drilling down still further, people who voted in the 2016 presidential election favor the Democratic nominee by 9 points, whereas registered voters who skipped the 2016 election favor the Democratic nominee by 14 points.

Voter Participation Implications: Voter turnout is always a key component of every campaign (regardless of the candidate’s party), but these findings suggest that turning out new or infrequent voters could be particularly important for the eventual Democratic nominee.

Please indicate whether you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion about each of the following. If you don’t know enough about one to have an opinion, please select that option.



In the 2020 election for president, do you think you will...?



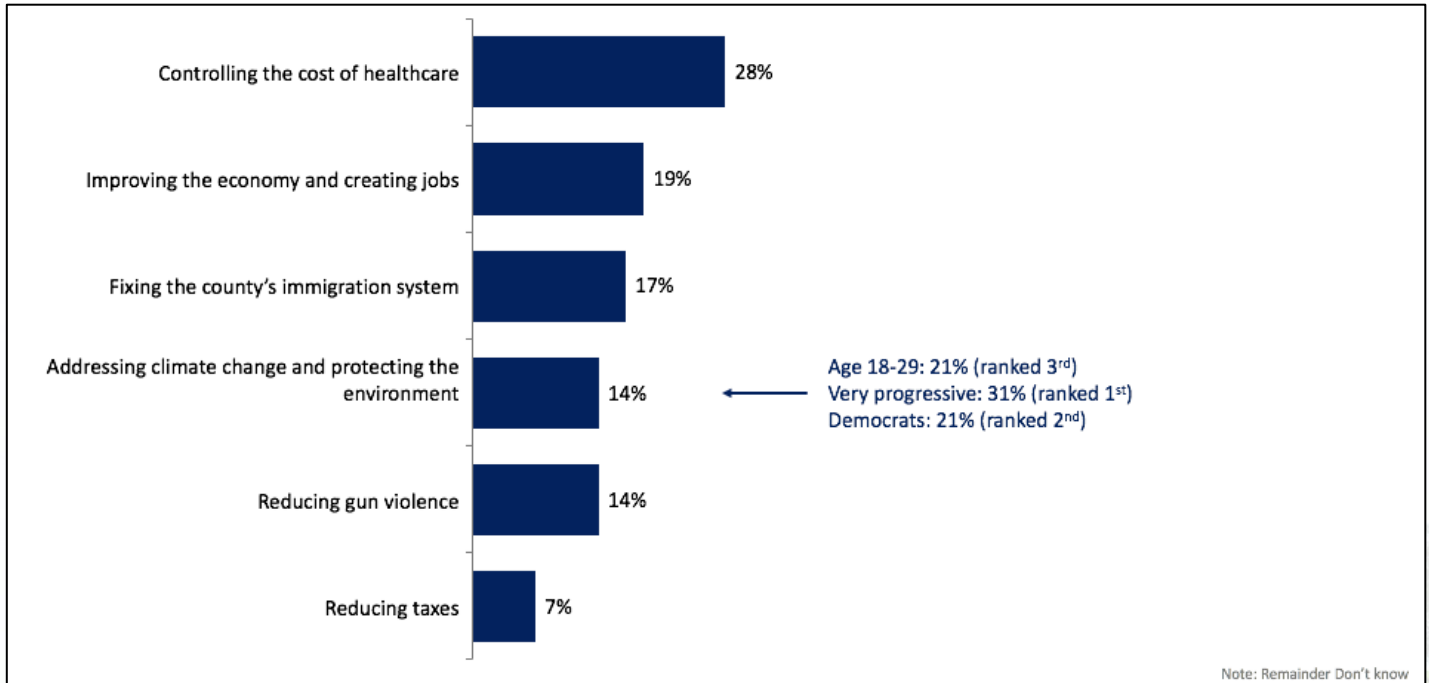
2. Voter Issue Priorities.

A. Climate and the Environment are Surging as a Top Voter Priority.

A stunning 14% of registered voters now list “Addressing climate change and protecting the environment” as their single top priority over all other issues. This is in stark contrast to the 2016 Presidential election, where [polls](#) showed climate/environment as the top issue of 2%–6% of registered voters.

21% of 18–29 year-olds list Climate/Environment as their #1 issue (ranked 3rd); 21% of Democrats also list Climate/Environment as their #1 issue (ranked 2nd); and 31% of self-identified “very progressive” registered voters list Climate/Environment as their #1 issue (ranked 1st).

Which of these issues is the single most important to you?

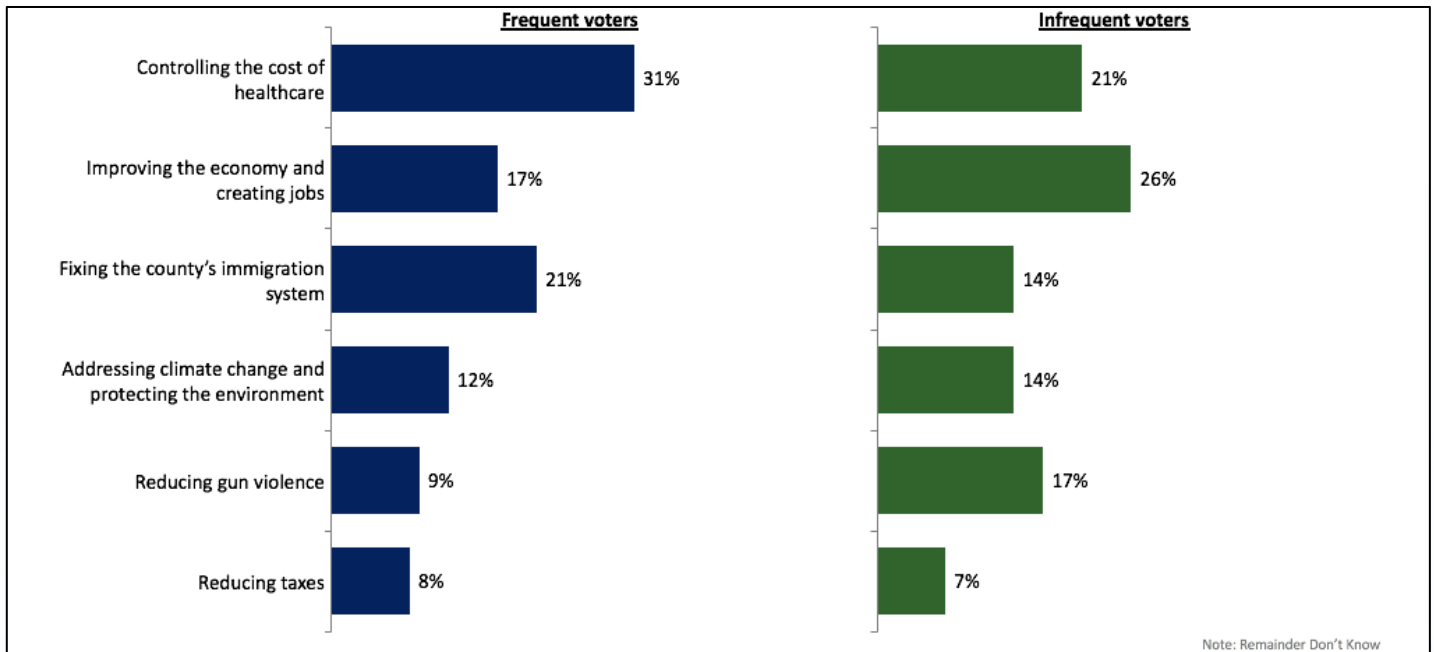


B. Frequent Voters and Infrequent Voters Have Very Different Priorities.

Frequent Voters are much more likely to list Healthcare and Immigration as a top priority, whereas Infrequent Voters are more likely to list Economy/Jobs, Reducing Gun Violence, and Climate/Environment as top priorities.

Voter Participation Implications: These findings suggest there could be significant latent political power in the Gun Control and Climate/Environmental movements, with millions of potentially supportive voters waiting to be activated.

Which of these issues is the single most important to you?



3. Perceived Difficulty of Voting.

A. Voting is Perceived as Easier by White People, Older People, and People who live in Vote-By-Mail States.

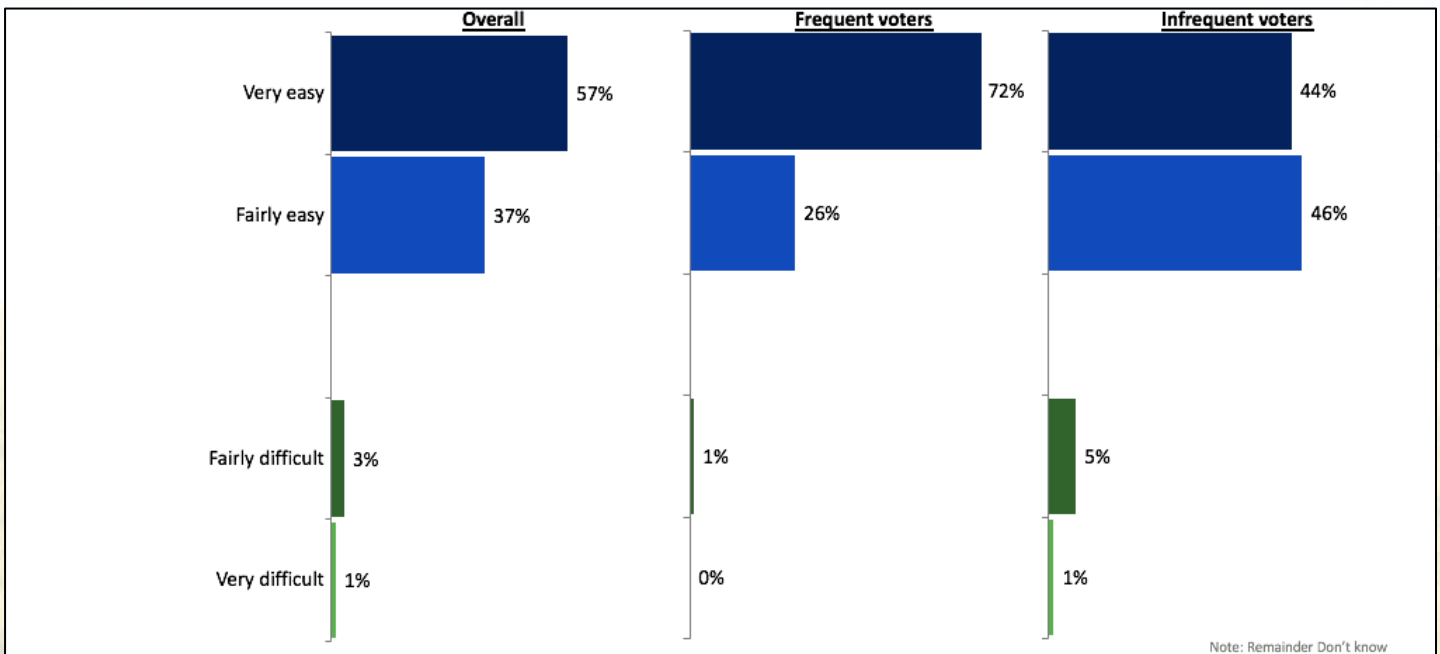
Very few people think voting is difficult, but Less Frequent Voters certainly believe voting is harder than Frequent Voters do. Unsurprisingly, young people and people of color are also less likely to view voting as “very easy.”

There is also a significant difference between the perceived ease of voting in vote-by-mail states vs. non-vote-by-mail states. 73% of respondents in vote-by-mail states said that voting was “very easy” compared to only 56% in non-vote-by-mail states.

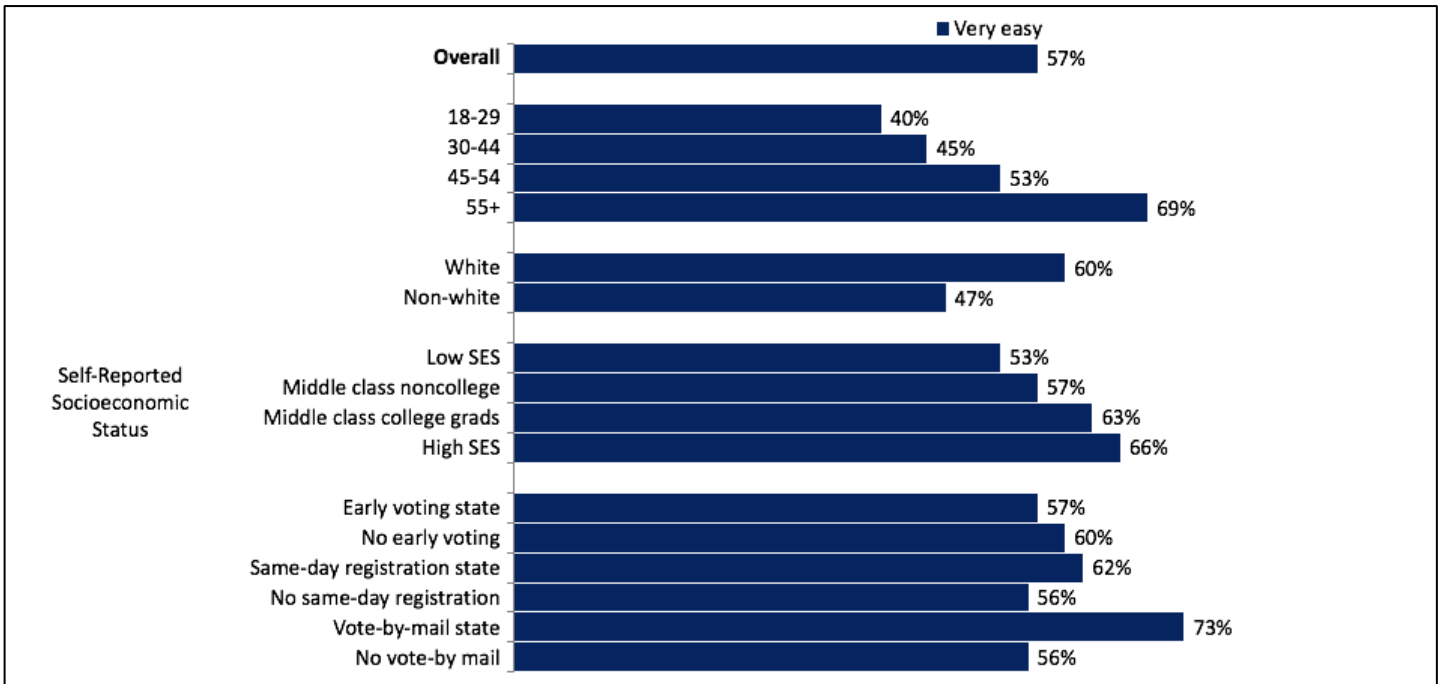
The ability to vote by mail is also one of the top things Infrequent Voters say would make them more like to vote. 28% say they would be much more likely to vote if they could do so by mail, trailing only the opportunity to vote for a candidate they agree with strongly on the issue most important to them.

Voter Participation Implications: These survey findings reveal that voters find it much easier to vote by mail, and a [Pantheon Analytics study](#) showed that a 2016 vote-by-mail program in Utah saw a 5-7 percentage point increase in turnout in vote-by-mail counties over counties that did not participate in the program. In short, there is a growing mountain of evidence that vote-by-mail legislation would significantly increase voter participation rates.

In general, do you think voting in your community is...?



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B. Americans Significantly Over-Estimate How Long It Takes to Vote.

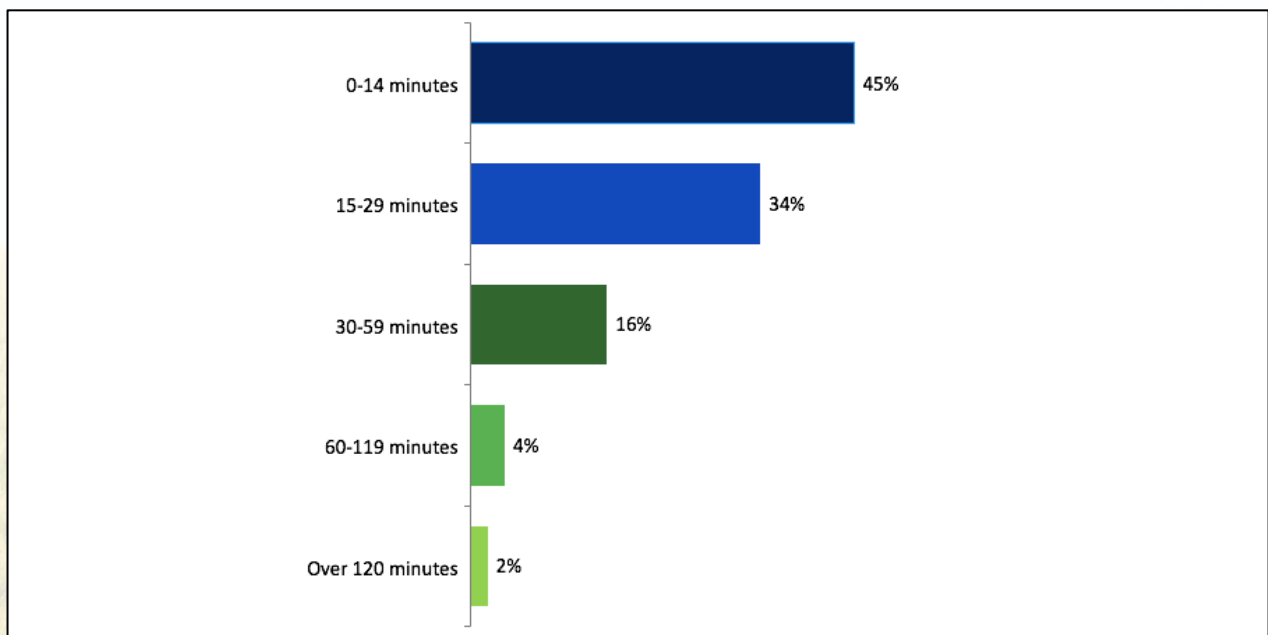
Nearly a quarter of voters think that voting in presidential elections takes more than 30 minutes. On average, respondents estimated it takes just over 20 minutes to cast a ballot. Although voting times vary significantly from location to location, the MIT Election Data and Science Lab [reports](#) that the average wait time in the 2016 presidential election was only 8 minutes.

In both 2012 and 2016, people of color [reported](#) waiting longer to vote than white voters did, and our survey findings show that these racial disparities have clearly been internalized: voters of color now understandably assume that they'll have to wait longer to vote than white voters do (Black voters predict they will wait 26 minutes, Hispanic voters predict a 23 minute wait, and White voters estimate just a 19-minute delay).

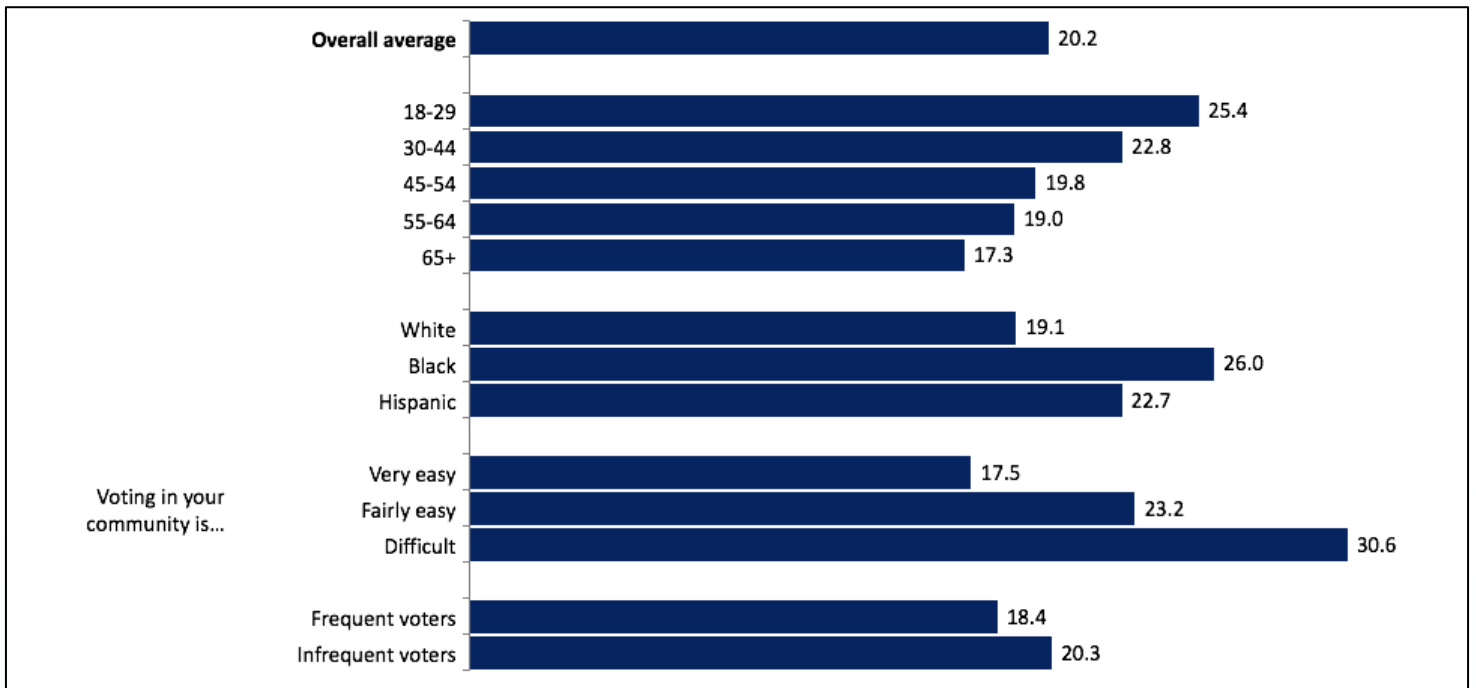
Nevertheless, even when taking into consideration the very real racial disparities in voting wait times, it seems like many voters of all races significantly over-estimate the amount of time it actually takes to vote. Moreover, Infrequent Voters think voting will include a 20-minute wait (on average), despite actual evidence of an 8-minute national average wait.

Voter Participation Implications: Voters often say that “the time it takes to vote” is a big reason why they skip an election, yet our findings show that infrequent voters are likely over-estimating their Election Day wait times. Simple voter-education messaging around the ease and speed of voting could appreciably increase voter participation rates.

In minutes, how long do you think it typically takes to vote in presidential elections in your area?



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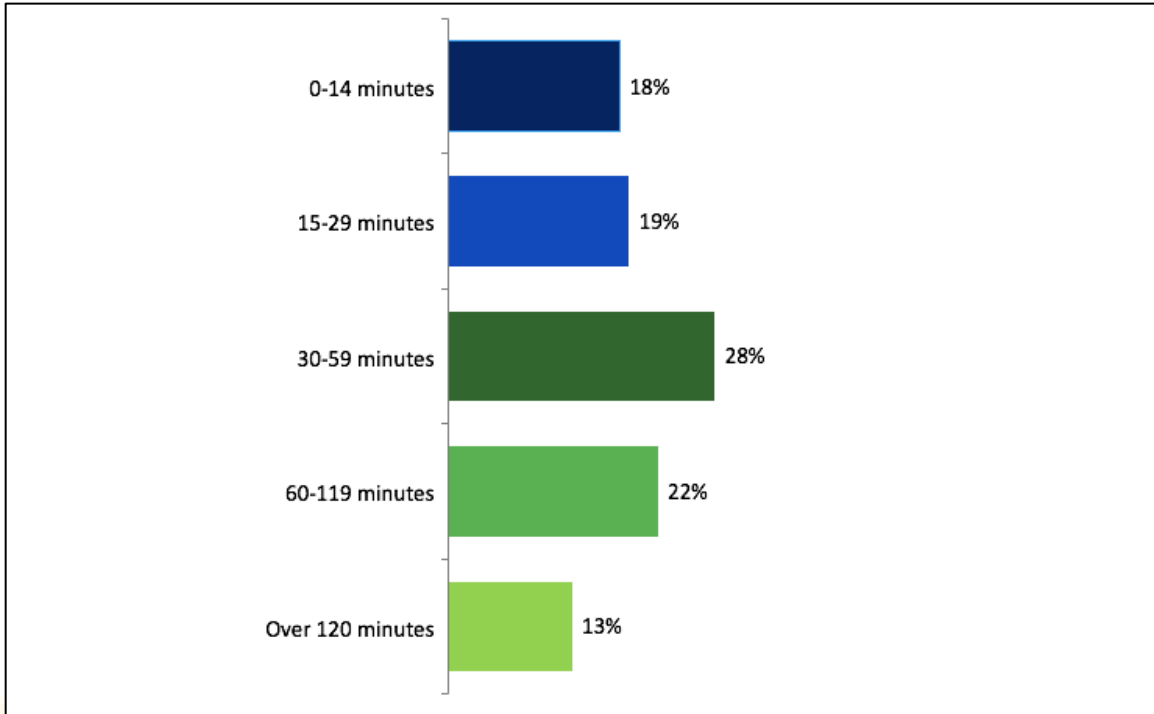


C. Environmental Voters are Willing to Wait a Long Time to Vote in 2020.

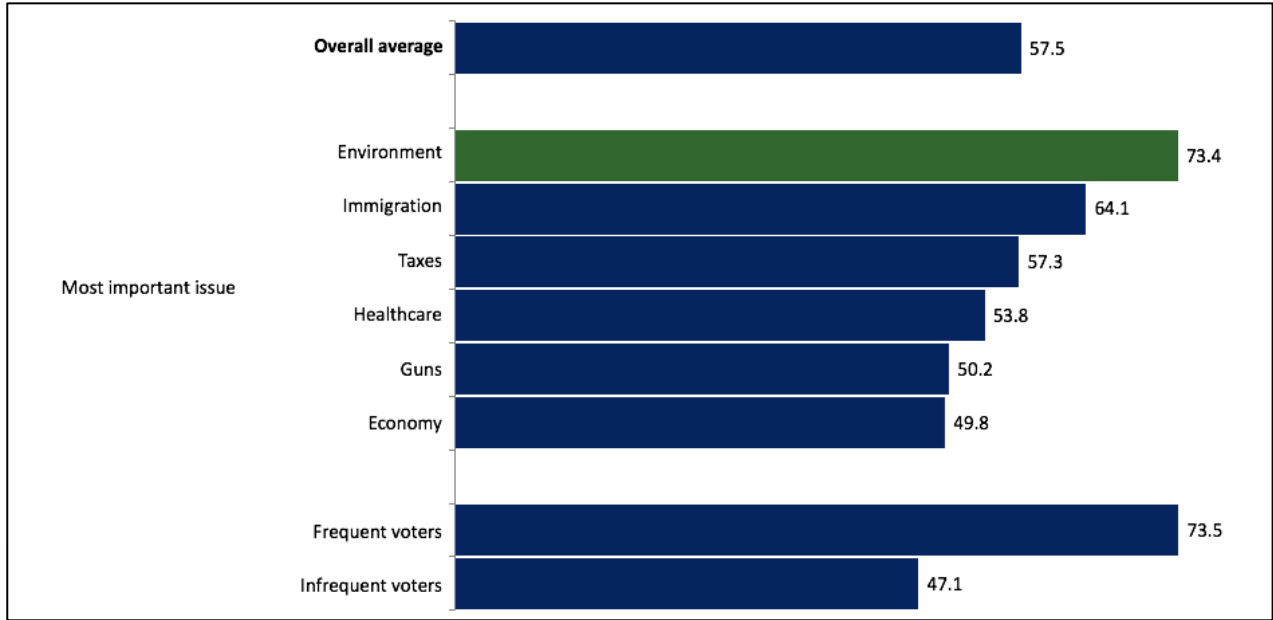
Overall, voters are extraordinarily motivated to vote in the 2020 presidential election. A stunning 35% say they are willing to wait more than an hour to vote, and even people with very poor previous voting histories now report they'd be willing to wait an average of 47 minutes to vote in the 2020 presidential election.

Of all the issue constituency groups, environmental voters are the most motivated to vote in the 2020 election. Registered voters who list climate/environment as their #1 issue priority say they'd be willing to wait an average of 73.4 minutes to cast their vote in the upcoming presidential election, which is more than 20 minutes longer than Economy or Guns voters are willing to wait.

In minutes, how long would you be willing to wait to cast a vote in the presidential election?



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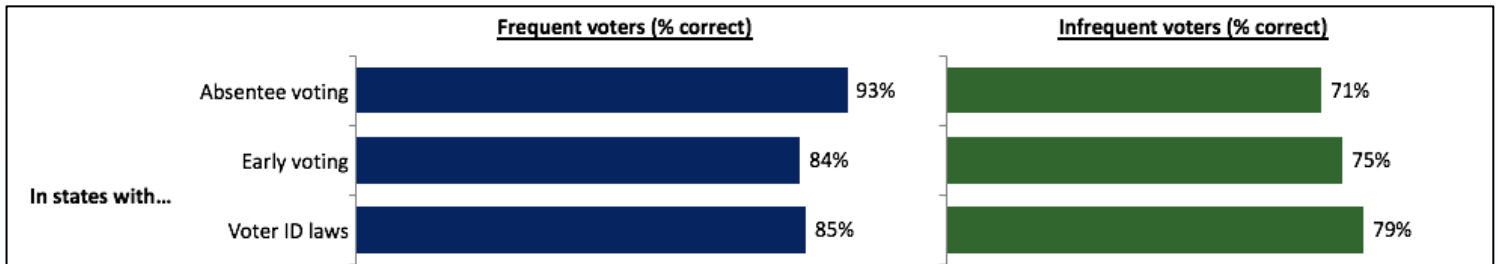
4. Knowledge and Perception of Voting Laws.

A. Many Infrequent Voters are Unaware of Laws that Make Voting Easier.

25% of Infrequent Voters aren't aware they live in states that offer early voting. 29% of Infrequent Voters aren't aware they live in states that offer voting by absentee ballot.

Voter Participation Implications: Voter turnout messaging that focuses on remedying these simple information deficits could significantly increase voter participation rates.

To the best of your knowledge, does the state you live in offer each of the following? If you are not sure, please just say so.



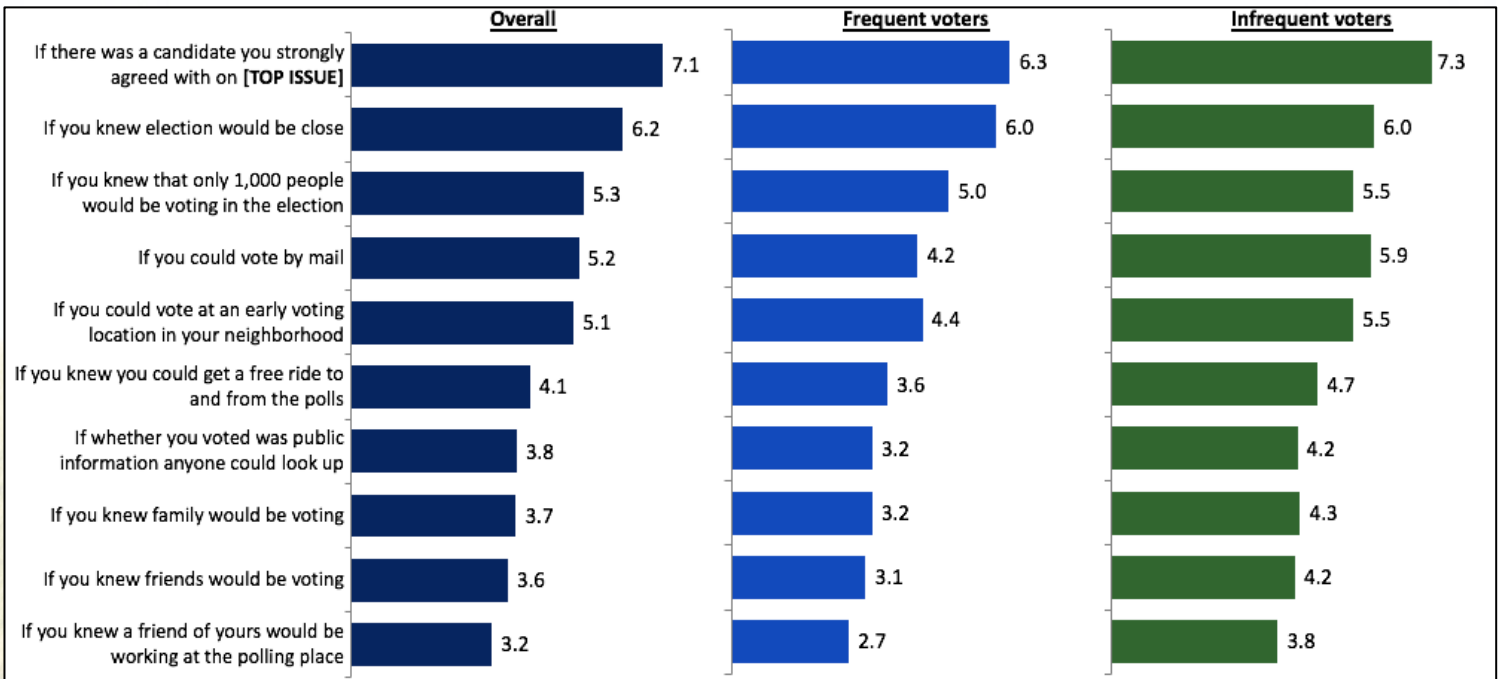
B. Vote-By-Mail and Early Voting are Process Reforms with Significant Potential to Increase Turnout Rates.

Infrequent Voters list (a) voting-by-mail and (b) in-person early voting as the likeliest process reforms to get them to vote more often.

Voter Participation Implications (Early Voting): As discussed in Section 4.A, 25% of Infrequent Voters in early-voting states don't realize that early voting is available where they live. When combined with the finding that Infrequent Voters view early voting as one of the best ways to increase their participation rates, this reveals a simple, high-leverage opportunity to increase turnout. Tens of millions of registered, infrequent voters don't know they live in early voting states, and voter education messaging that remedies this simple misunderstanding could have a quick and significant impact, perhaps even more so when paired with information about actual voting wait-times (see Section 3.B).

Voter Participation Implications (Vote by Mail): As discussed in Section 3.A, people in vote-by-mail states are 17 percentage points more likely to view voting as "very easy" than people who live in non-vote-by-mail states. This survey's findings also reveal that Infrequent Voters list vote-by-mail as something that would make them much more likely to vote. This process reform clearly has enormous potential to increase voter participation rates.

How much more likely would you be to vote in each of the following situations? [Voters scored each choice on a 1-to-10 scale, with the averages presented below]



5. Voter Turnout: Reported vs. Reality.

A. Rampant Over-Reporting of Voting Behavior.

As the Environmental Voter Project saw in our [2017 study](#), when voters' survey responses are compared to their actual voter file records, we find that people dramatically over-report how often they vote, particularly in midterm and primary elections.

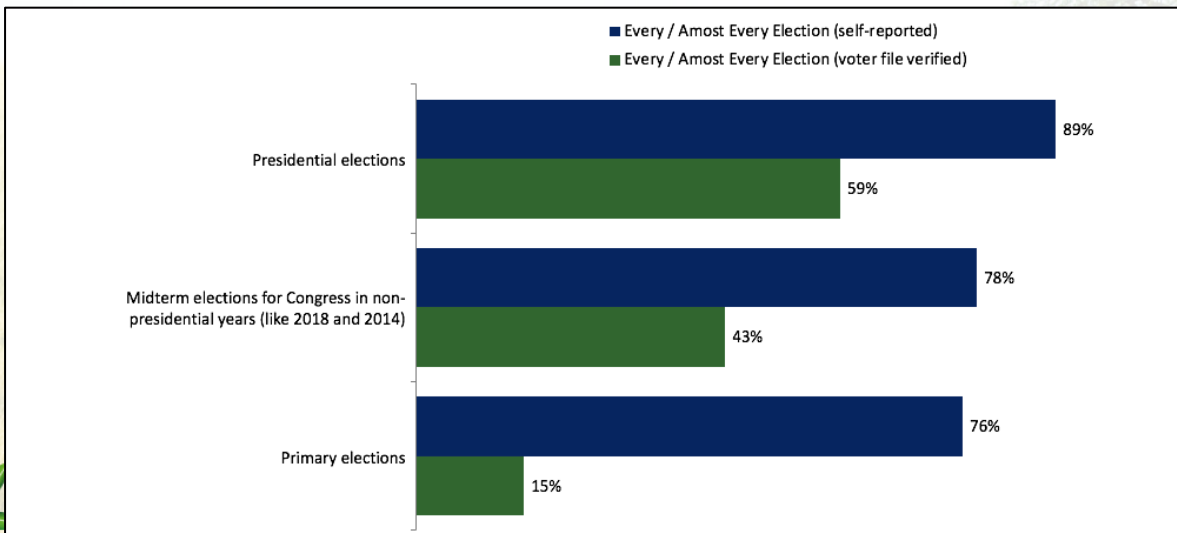
89% of registered voters claimed to vote in every or almost every election, but just 59% actually did. Similar (or worse) over-reporting was evident with regard to midterm election participation (a 35-point gap) and primaries (a 61-point gap).

These findings highlight a particularly strong "social desirability bias" with respect to voting habits; in other words, survey respondents accept the societal norm that voting is "good behavior," so they answer questions about this behavior in a way that will be viewed favorably by others, rather than simply answering truthfully.

Voter Participation Implications: These findings suggest a reason for the tremendous success of *social pressure messaging* as a voter-turnout tool. Social pressure messaging "pressures" people to vote by monitoring their compliance with societal norms (such as being a good voter). A typical example consists of mailing voters a copy of their personal voting history and reminding them that their election attendance is public record. We know that people over-report their voter participation rates in order to seem like better voters, so it makes sense that social pressure techniques which reveal election attendance records are successful at bringing voters' *actual* behavior more in line with their *reported* behavior.

Polling Implications: If voters cannot be trusted to report their past voting history, we should also be skeptical when they report their *intent* to vote in future elections. The findings of this report present clear evidence for why pollsters should use *actual voter file histories* to build "likely voter" populations for their surveys, rather than relying solely on survey respondents' stated intentions to vote.

How often would you say you vote in each of the following elections



The Environmental Voter Project.

The Environmental Voter Project (EVP) is a non-partisan nonprofit that uses data analytics to identify environmentalists who don't vote and then applies cutting-edge behavioral science messaging to nudge them into being more consistent voters. With over 3,000 volunteers, EVP canvassed, texted, called, mailed, and sent digital ads to infrequent environmental voters in over 1,100 elections in 2019 alone.

Methodology.

This study utilized a two-step process to produce a representative sample of 1,514 voter file-validated responses. The first step was a national online panel survey of 2,219 self-reported registered voters. The second step was a voter file verification process that successfully matched 68% of respondents to the voter file and appended vote history data to their responses. Analysis and reporting focused only on the 1,514 responses that were successfully matched to the voter file.

Initial Data Collection.

Beacon Research surveyed 2,219 registered voters (as well as individuals who said they had previously been registered) sourced from a variety of online panels. Surveys were completed between October 9th and 24th, 2019. Quotas based on age, gender, ethnicity, education, and geographic region were used to draw a representative sample of registered voters across the country. Minor weights were applied on these same variables after fielding to ensure the sample accurately reflected the demographic profile of the national registered voter population.

Matching to Voter File.

Respondents were asked to provide personally identifiable information (name and address) for study purposes only. This information was then matched to the TargetSmart voter file and the respondents' past electoral participation was appended. Just over two-thirds of respondents (68%) provided information that could be successfully matched. After matching, respondent PII was removed from the dataset and discarded to protect confidentiality. Respondents from California were not matched due to that state's legal restrictions on the use of the voter file. 1,514 records were successfully matched, for a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points. The margin of error is higher for subgroups. The data in this report is from those matched records only.

A more extensive presentation of the survey data can be found [here](#).

