

Voting by Mail by Age in the 2016 General Election in Cuyahoga County

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This analysis examines how VBM and voting in-person (VIP) vary by age.¹ This may be a particularly important issue in the coming election for older persons since they have been found to be at greater health risk from exposure to COVID-19 at polling places should those places of congregation not adequately limit that risk.² Historically, younger persons of voting age have a lower voter participation rate than older persons³ and concern about COVID-19 could further reduce their participation unless conditions at the polling places are perceived as safe or they vote by mail.

Methods

Data on voters in the 2016 general election provided by the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections provides year of birth and method of voting (VBM and VIP). The method of voting was tabulated in age ranges for this analysis.⁴

Results

Among voters in the 2016 election, an estimated 31.8% used the mail to vote and 68.2% voted in person. However, there is substantial variation in these proportions by age of voter. The age distribution of persons voting in person versus by mail in the 2016 general election in the county is shown in Table 1. The data and Figure 1 illustrate that older voters use VBM proportionately more than younger voters.

¹This report is one of two analyses and another planned by the author concerning the use of voting by mail versus in-person voting and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on those alternatives. In one report, research showed that Black and Hispanic/Latino voters used voting by mail (VBM) proportionately less often than White voters in Cuyahoga County in the 2016 General Election. See Salling, Mark, "Reliance on Voting by Mail Could Reduce Voter Turnout Among Black and Hispanic/Latino Voters in Cuyahoga County", **Focus on Facts**, Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University, August 2020. [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/urban_facpub/1667/?_ga=2.164942457.713709285.1597244231-2147088642.1590280455]. A third report (forthcoming) looks at VBM/VIP by age among race and Hispanic/Latino voters.

² "Older Adults", **YOUR HEALTH**, June 25, 2020. [<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>]

³ See "Historical Reported Voting Rates", U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015. [<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/voting-historical-time-series.html>]

⁴ Only successfully geocoded voter addresses are included in this analysis and one cited in footnote 1. Geocoding of addresses was necessary in order to estimate VBM versus VIP voting for racial and ethnic distributions in that study. However, only a small percentage (17,831 or 3%) of voters' addresses were excluded so that the number of voters analyzed is 606,977, versus 616,422 of actual voters in the 2016 election. The author chose to include only the geocoded voters in order to report consistent results with analyses of racial and ethnic differences in VBM. Lack of significant bias resulting from this exclusion is indicated by a correlation coefficient of 0.982 between counts of birth year by VBM and VIP for geocoded versus non-geocoded voters.

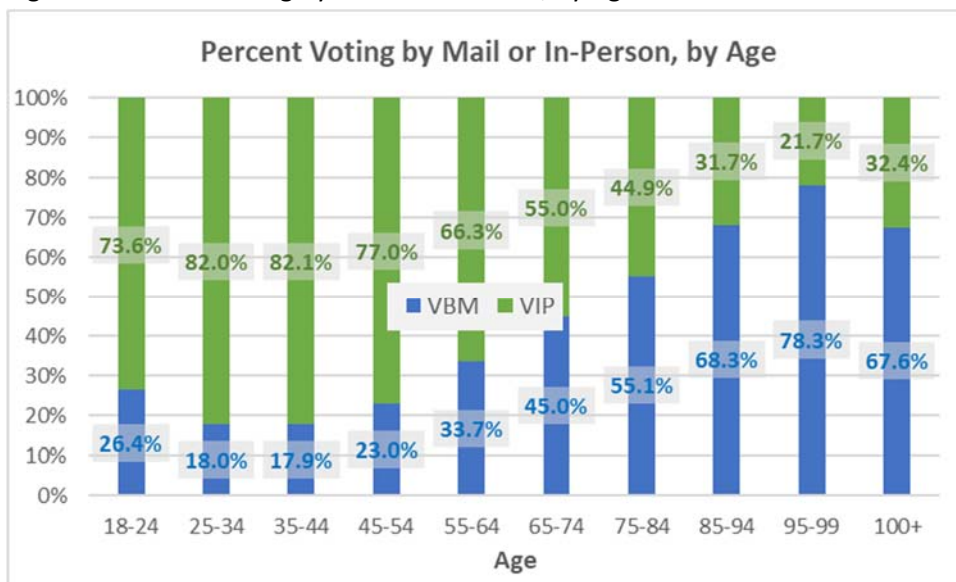
Among voters age 65 and older, more than half (51.5%) used the mail-in vote, whereas, less than a quarter (24.4%) of voters younger than 65 used the postal service for casting their ballot. From age 75 on, more than 55 percent of the population voted by mail.

In contrast, younger voters overwhelmingly voted in person, ranging in percentage from approximately 18 percent for the 25-to-44-year-old voters to a third (33.7%) of middle-aged, 55-to-64 years old, voters.

Table 1: Persons Voting by Mail (VBM and Voting In-person (VIP) by Age

age	Voters		Percent		Distribution by Age	
	VBM	VIP	VBM	VIP	VBM	VIP
18-24	10,217	28,454	26.4%	73.6%	5.3%	6.9%
25-34	15,613	71,059	18.0%	82.0%	8.1%	17.2%
35-44	15,107	69,195	17.9%	82.1%	7.8%	16.7%
45-54	23,901	79,869	23.0%	77.0%	12.4%	19.3%
55-64	43,058	84,854	33.7%	66.3%	22.3%	20.5%
65-74	41,844	51,081	45.0%	55.0%	21.7%	12.3%
75-84	27,021	21,987	55.1%	44.9%	14.0%	5.3%
85-94	14,660	6,808	68.3%	31.7%	7.6%	1.6%
95-99	1,494	415	78.3%	21.7%	0.8%	0.1%
100+	230	110	67.6%	32.4%	0.1%	0.0%
Total	193,145	413,832	31.8%	68.2%	100.0%	100.0%
18-64	107,896	333,431	24.4%	75.6%	55.9%	80.6%
65+	85,249	80,401	51.5%	48.5%	44.1%	19.4%

Figure 1: Percent Voting by Mail or In-Person, by Age



Conclusions

With increased concern for safety in areas of congregation due to COVID-19, voters may be more inclined to vote by mail or, regrettably, not vote at all this coming election. Voters of all ages should be encouraged to vote by mail, the elderly especially for the more significant concerns about their exposure to COVID-19, and the younger population because of their overall low turnout rates and their relative reluctance to use the mail for voting.

In summary, vigorous efforts on two fronts may be required to avoid low turnout rates and risk to health in voting in person.

- Greater outreach is needed to younger voters (and to all voters) to vote by mail.
- Strict adherence to CDC guidelines at all polling places must be assured so that older voters in particular, will not be put at greater risk when voting in person.

While a statewide analysis would be more definitive it is likely that similar efforts to both urge voters to vote by mail and to protect the health of voters who vote in person this November are needed.⁵

⁵ Arguments to improve election safety include “How to Save Elections from a Pandemic”, by Eric Cortellessa, **Washington Monthly**, April/May/June 2020. [<https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/april-may-june-2020/how-to-save-elections-from-a-pandemic/>]