

# Who Votes by Post? Understanding the Drivers of Postal Voting in the 2019 British General Election

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While most voters in democratic countries still cast their ballot on election day, the proportion of the electorate which opts for postal voting has been steadily, and often dramatically, increasing. This transformation in electoral politics, however, is under-researched, particularly with regards to the motivations underlying the decision to cast a postal vote. In this article, we analyse the factors that drive an individual to vote by post rather than at the polling station. Using data from the 2019 British Election Study, we show, among other findings, that citizens for whom in-person voting would entail higher costs, such as the elderly and disabled, are more likely to opt for the convenience of postal voting. In addition, we find that partisans are unlikely to vote by post, suggesting that they derive greater expressive benefits from voting in a public setting. Finally, our analysis demonstrates that constituency marginality matters when it comes to opting for postal voting: citizens in more competitive constituencies are significantly more likely to ensure their votes by casting their ballots by post rather than on election day.

**Keywords:** Absentee Voting, Britain, British Election Study, Political Participation, Postal Voting, Turnout

## 1. Introduction

Elections play a central role in democratic politics. Not only do they shape the political future of a democracy, but they also allow citizens to come together and share the political experience of casting a ballot on election day. The importance of election day, however, is declining. There is a transformation taking place,

with a growing proportion of citizens across many industrialised democracies choosing to vote before polling day by post, rather than at the ballot box. The rise in postal voting means that election day is no longer fixed—a development that has major implications for parties and candidates, but also potentially for the health of the democracy itself. There are now, effectively, multiple polling dates for parties to prepare for. Party campaigns have responded to this change and recruiting supporters to postal votes ‘is now a major part of campaign activity, as parties know that they are more likely to be returned than conventional votes’ (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018, p. 303).

The increasing popularity of postal voting has unsurprisingly led to a growing body of literature on its implications. Scholars have explored its impact on electoral participation (e.g. Karp and Banducci, 2001; Kropf, 2012), party choice (Rallings *et al.*, 2010) and satisfaction with vote choice (Lago and Blais, 2019). We are also starting to gain insights into the types of voters who are more likely to cast their ballot by post (e.g. Gronke and Toffey, 2008; McAllister and Muller, 2018; Miller and Chaturvedi, 2018; Högström, 2021). The existing studies on who votes by post, however, still tend to focus on the effects associated with a limited range of factors at a time, rarely focusing on the potential relevance of voters’ socio-demographic characteristics, political attitudes and campaign experience within a single analysis.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the study of postal voting in Britain is both limited and relatively dated, despite the rapid increase in postal voting, which now accounts for around a fifth of all votes cast.<sup>2</sup>

This study uses data from the British Election Study to address this lacuna. It explores how voters’ socio-demographic profile, political identity and campaign experience affect their likelihood of casting a postal ballot at the 2019 UK general election. In doing so, it not only draws further attention to the rise in postal voting, but also extends our understanding of the voters who are driving this transformation in electoral politics. The analysis reveals strong evidence that postal voting is driven primarily by voters’ desire to reduce the costs of in-person voting. We find that groups for whom the costs of in-person voting are high, such as the elderly and the disabled, are more inclined to prefer postal voting. We also find that voters who are unlikely to derive expressive benefits from in-person voting at the polling station, such as voters without a partisan identity, are happier to cast the more private, but convenient, postal ballot. These findings show that the growing popularity of postal voting is driven by its appeal to certain types of

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<sup>1</sup>For notable exceptions, see Gronke and Toffey (2008) or Miller and Chaturvedi (2018).

<sup>2</sup>Rallings *et al.* (2010) examine what kind of electors voted by post at the 2005 general election, but the take up of postal voting in Britain has nearly doubled since.

voters, a finding that has considerable implications for parties as they need to plan for multiple polling dates and factor time into their micro-targeting efforts.

In the next section, we give a brief account of postal voting. We then outline our theoretical expectations, describe the data and empirical strategy. This is followed by the presentation of the empirical findings. Finally, this article provides a discussion of the implications that emerge from the empirical evidence.

## 2. Postal voting in Britain and beyond

Postal voting, like other forms of absentee voting, was originally introduced as a temporary wartime measure to allow those deployed away from their normal residence to participate in elections. While initially introduced out of necessity, many countries have since relaxed their regulations around voting to make postal voting—typically referred to as ‘absentee voting’ in North America—a permanent feature of their electoral systems. In Britain, the Representation of the People Act 2000 allowed voters to register as a postal voter—either temporarily or on a permanent basis—on demand when they register to vote via their local authority (Stewart, 2006). Once registered, ballots are sent to postal voters several weeks prior to polling day. These can then either be returned in the post free of charge, or delivered in-person to the polling station on election day.

The roll-out of on-demand postal voting in Britain formed part of a wider programme of modernisation in electoral administration from the early 2000s (Wilks-Heeg, 2008). However, the expansion of postal voting has not been without criticism on the grounds of its (potential) susceptibility to fraud (Wilks-Heeg, 2009; James and Clark, 2020). For instance, in a high-profile case in 2005, an election court in Birmingham found evidence of widespread fraud, declaring the results of the 2004 elections in two wards void (Stewart, 2006). In response to widespread criticism, the Labour government passed the Electoral Administration Act 2006, which introduced measures to increase security and required applicants to provide a signature when registering for a postal vote. Postal voting has also been criticised internationally on the grounds that it undermines the secret ballot (Elklit and Maley, 2019), though studies find that instances of fraud or impersonation are rare in Britain (James and Clark, 2020).

The expansion of postal voting on demand has been driven largely—though not exclusively (concerns around accessibility, for example, also matter (James, 2020, p. 143))—by a desire to increase turnout in elections. This rationale is well-grounded in political science. Under the classic rational choice model of voting, a citizen is more likely to turn out if the perceived benefits associated with the act of voting outweigh the perceived costs (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). The liberalisation of postal voting has made it possible for a much larger portion of the electorate to reduce the costs involved in participating (Karp and Banducci, 2001).

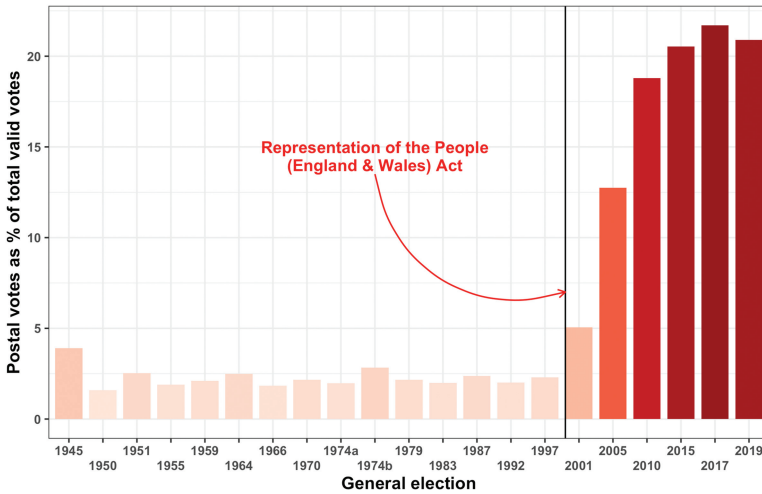
In-person voting requires citizens to physically attend a polling station on a specific day within the limited opening hours. Postal voting, meanwhile, offers more flexibility—a citizen receives her ballot paper(s) in the post several weeks before polling day and she casts her vote by completing and returning the paper(s) in the post at a time that is convenient. In Britain, she may also return her completed postal ballot to the polling station on election day. The flexibility offered by postal voting, therefore, reduces the costs associated with the physical act of casting a ballot, as well as the likelihood that individuals with constraints on their mobility or time are unable, or too busy, to visit the polling station on the day of the election (Blais *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, those who choose to not vote often cite the inconvenience of voting as the main motivation behind their abstention (Clement, 2015).

At present, many democracies permit citizens to register for a postal vote ‘on demand’—and voters have responded positively to these measures. Prior to the 2016 US presidential election, approximately one in five voters cast their ballot by mail in states where they did not require an excuse to do so (Hartig *et al.*, 2020), and early estimates suggest that over 100 million Americans cast their ballot by mail in 2020 (U.S. Elections Project, 2020). This trend is repeated elsewhere in countries such as Australia, where 1 in 10 voters vote by post (McAllister and Muller, 2018), and Germany, where postal voting has increased from 4.9% of voters in 1957 to 28.6% in 2017 federal elections (Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2018). In Switzerland, surveys estimate that the proportion of voters using postal voting has quadrupled since the early 1990s to around 7 in 10 (Luechinger *et al.*, 2007), and data from the Spanish Institute of National Statistics show that more than one million postal ballots were cast during the country’s 2019 general election, an increase of around 30% compared with 2008.

A very similar pattern is emerging in the UK where voters have been turning to postal voting in growing numbers since the turn of the century. Figure 1 presents the percentage of valid votes cast by post at every general election since postal voting was made available to civilians by the Representation of the People Act 1948. The take up of postal voting was low between the 1950 and 1997, with less than 3% of all valid votes being cast by post, largely due to the restricted pool of voters who were able to qualify. By 2019, postal voting had increased to around 21%. With over one in five ballots now cast by post, it is important to extend our understanding of which electors are particularly prone to doing so.

### 3. Expectations

Who are the voters opting to cast their ballot by post rather than visiting a polling station? Existing explanations of postal voting centre on self-selection effects, focusing primarily on the role of various socio-economic and demographic factors.



**Figure 1.** The rise in postal voting

It is widely accepted that there is a positive relationship between a voter's age and their likelihood of voting by mail in the USA (Karp and Banducci, 2001; Kropf, 2012; Shino and Smith, 2020), as well as in Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany and Switzerland (McAllister and Muller, 2018; Garnett, 2019). The same applies to rurality, which is found to be a good predictor of postal voting in Norway and the USA (Stein and García-Monet, 1997; Finseraas and Vernby, 2014). The existing evidence regarding other socio-economic and demographic factors, however, is somewhat mixed. While Karp and Banducci (2001) argue that increased education is positively related to absentee voting, Shino and Smith (2020) observe the reverse. Similarly, while Kropf (2012) finds income to be positively linked to early voting in the USA, Shino and Smith (2020) show that income positively influences early in-person voting but has a negative effect on postal voting. It is widely accepted that certain voters are more likely to cast their ballot by post than others, but the existing evidence shows mixed patterns for several key explanatory factors. Moreover, we still know little about the relationship between political attitudes and postal voting, and what explains the uptake of postal voting in Britain.

First, we theorise that postal voting is a function of voters' desire to reduce the costs associated with voting. The decision to vote, or not, can be considered as a function of the perceived costs and benefits associated with casting one's ballot (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). While scholarly debate around rational choice model of voting continues, it is reasonable to expect that postal voting can influence the cost function of Downs' framework (Monroe and Sylvester, 2011). Namely, it can reduce the cost of voting. This is particularly so among voters who face higher costs associated with voting at the polling station by virtue of their

personal circumstances, such as voters who are elderly or disabled. These voters—due to ill health or concerns around mobility—are likely to find the act of physically going to the polling station more difficult and burdensome.<sup>3</sup> The cost-reducing benefit that they derive from the convenience afforded by postal voting is greater for such voters and, hence, they ought to be particularly likely to cast their ballot by post.

Citizens in more densely populated (urban) and less densely populated (rural) areas also likely face asymmetric costs when it comes to voting in person (Finseraas and Vernby, 2014). In urban areas, polling stations are often within walking distance of voters' place of residence (García-Rodríguez and Redmond, 2020), while voters in rural areas may have to travel longer distances to cast an in-person ballot on polling day. In Britain, the largest constituency, Ross, Skye and Lochaber, is approximately 12 000 km<sup>2</sup>, while the smallest, Islington North, is just 7.35 km<sup>2</sup>. Postal voting, therefore, can reduce voting costs substantially for rural voters who are less likely to find their polling stations as accessible. Indeed, rurality has already been shown to influence turnout (Geys, 2006), while evidence from the USA suggests that early voting is more popular in areas where polling stations are less accessible (Stein and García-Monet, 1997).<sup>4</sup> This lends further support to the idea that spatial costs are influential in shaping citizens' assessment of voting. It is highly rational for voters living in rural areas to be more likely to turn to postal voting as a means of seeking a more convenient alternative to in-person voting and reduce their cost of participating in the election.

H<sub>1</sub> (*reducing costs thesis*): Older and disabled citizens, as well as those who live in less populated (rural) areas are more likely to vote by post.

Secondly, we expect voting method to not only influence the cost function of the voting calculus, but also the benefits derived from the act of voting. Scholars have long attempted to resolve the so-called 'paradox of voting', wherein the act of voting is deemed irrational due to the low probability of a single vote being decisive, but turnout still occurs (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). It is now widely accepted that individuals also derive intrinsic benefits from voting that are not necessarily conditional upon their preferred candidate winning (Fiorina, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>The existing empirical evidence supports this thesis as studies have found postal voting to be more among the elderly and the disabled (e.g. Miller and Powell, 2016; Garnett, 2019; Shino and Smith, 2020; Högström, 2021).

<sup>4</sup>García-Rodríguez and Redmond (2020), using data from Ireland, show that these asymmetric costs can moderate the impact of rainfall on turnout. In urban areas where people tend to go to the polling station on foot or by bike, given the proximity of polling stations, rainfall has a stronger depressing effect on turnout than in rural areas where voters are more likely to use a car or public transport to get to their polling station.

In this sense, voting can be characterised both as a pragmatic act that aims to improve the electoral prospects of one's preferred candidate(s) or party as well as an expressive act that brings about emotive, psychological benefits (Hamlin and Jennings, 2011).

Hillman (2010) argues that expressive behaviour is intrinsically linked to identity. In this sense, expressive voting has been compared with the expressive benefits derived from supporting one's sports team in a stadium or on television—a single individual cheering on their team will not likely affect the outcome of the match, but the individual can nevertheless gain expressive benefits from doing so (Huddy *et al.*, 2018). Expressive partisanship, similarly, allows a partisan to re-affirm her identity to her party, and her membership of this social group, by voting in person at the polling station (Huddy *et al.*, 2018). It is of course true that there are no witnesses to the act of ticking a box on the ballot paper, but the rest of the 'event' that in-person voting involved is being played out in a public arena (Arceneaux *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it is likely that voters who have a partisan identity are more likely to be drawn to in-person voting as they can derive expressive benefits from this more public re-affirmation of their partisan allegiance in a manner that voters without a partisan identity do not.

Postal voting, in contrast, is a private act, wherein one casts their ballot in the privacy of their own home. It can, therefore, severely limit the expressive benefits that partisans receive from casting their ballot in a public setting. As such, we expect voters without a partisan identity to be more willing to 'lose out' on the expressive benefits of in-person voting and opt for the more convenient postal ballot instead.

$H_2$  (*expressive partisanship thesis*): Citizens who derive greater expressive benefits from voting in person, such as partisans, will be less likely to vote by post.

#### 4. Data and method

These expectations are evaluated using survey data from Wave 19 of the British Election Study. It was conducted after the 2019 general election and provides the most comprehensive insight into the personal and political profile of 2019 general election voters to date.

##### 4.1 Dependent variable

The dependent variable in our study is *postal vote*. As we are concerned with the probability of postal voting, as opposed to in-person voting, we operationalise it as a dichotomous measure that distinguishes between voters who cast their ballot

in person at the polling station (0) and those who voted by post (1). This operationalisation, which we adopt given the data constraints, does not distinguish between individuals who have registered as permanent postal voters or those who voted by post only during the 2019 general election. Respondents who do not recall how they cast their ballot or did so via a proxy are excluded from the analysis.<sup>5</sup>

This is a self-reported measure of how one casts her ballot and, as such, open to response bias. It is true that self-reported turnout, for example, tends to inflate turnout figures, as the perceived social desirability of being involved in the democratic process often leads to the overreporting of turnout (Karp and Brockington, 2005). While we accept that such biases can distort estimates of turnout, there is no reason to believe the same would apply for one's voting method. In other words, we do not consider voting by post vis-à-vis in person to be socially (un)desirable.

#### 4.2 Key explanatory variables

Our first hypothesis posits that postal voting is largely driven by convenience-based incentives, whereby voters who face higher costs by voting in person at the polling station are more likely to opt for a postal ballot. First, we capture voters' age through seven distinct categories, ranging from '18-24 years old' to '75 years old or older'. Secondly, *disability* distinguishes between voters whose day-to-day activities are not limited because of any disabilities or health problems (0); those whose day-to-day activities are limited a little because of a disability or health problem (1); and those whose day-to-day activities are limited a lot because of a disability or health problem (2). Finally, we include *population density* as a proxy measure for the rurality of the voter's constituency and is operationalised as the natural logarithm of the number of individuals per square kilometre in the respondent's constituency.

Our second hypothesis suggests that partisanship has a negative effect on voters' likelihood of voting by post as voters with a partisan identity derive greater expressive benefits from voting in person than those without one. We test for the effect of partisanship in two ways. First, we adopt a dichotomous measure *party ID* which distinguishes between voters who do not identify with any party (0) and those who do identify with a party (1). Secondly, given that parties may vary in the extent to which they benefit from postal voting (Rallings *et al.*, 2010), *party* captures further nuance about voters' partisanship. It is operationalised as a

<sup>5</sup>Estimates from models where the variable is operationalised as a dichotomous measure that distinguishes between those who cast their ballot at the polling station or voted by proxy (0) and those who voted by post (1) are robust to those presented here.



categorical measure, where the reference category includes voters who do not identify with any political party (baseline) and the remaining respondents are grouped by whether they identify with the Conservative Party, Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National, Plaid Cymru, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Green Party, the Brexit Party or any other party. This approach allows us to capture both the general effect associated with having a partisan identity or not, as well as test for asymmetrical effects of partisanship that might be associated with supporters of different parties.

#### 4.3 Control variables

In addition to the key explanatory variables detailed above, we apply a number of controls that might play some role in determining who votes by post. First, we control for aspects of voters' personal profile. *Gender* is operationalised as a dichotomous variable indicating those who identify as men (0) or women (1). Recent research has shown that women, while no longer less likely to vote than men (Carreras, 2018), still tend to be less likely to engage with many public-facing political activities (Marien *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, the more private act of casting a postal vote, as opposed to going to a polling station to cast an in-person vote, might be more appealing to women than men. *Sexuality* distinguishes between voters who describe themselves as heterosexual (0) and those who consider themselves to be part of a sexual minority group (1). Comparisons of voter engagement between sexuality groups demonstrate that sexual minorities participate in political activity at a higher rate than their heterosexual peers (Turnbull-Dugarte and Townsley, 2020). Their greater desire to participate is likely to incentivise postal voting as it allows early voting. In addition, we include measures for *education*, which is operationalised as a dichotomous variable that distinguishes between voters with a higher education degree (1) and those without one (0), and *income*, which ranges from 1 'under £5,000 per year' to 15 'over £150,000'.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, we include two factors relating to voters' views on voting and campaign experience. *Civic duty* describes the extent to which voters agree with the statement that it is every citizen's duty to vote in an election, ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'. We expect civic duty to be positively associated with postal voting. It is fair to say that postal voting makes it less likely that a voter will be unable to participate due to unforeseen practical circumstances that might arise on polling day. It effectively represents a form of insurance that limits the risk of not being able to vote in an election. Therefore, postal voting is likely to appeal particularly strongly to voters for whom electoral participation is

<sup>6</sup>The existing evidence on the effect of education and income on casting a postal vote is mixed (Kropf, 2012; Shino and Smith, 2020).

of greater importance. Next, we control for *campaign contact*, distinguishing between voters who received no contact from any political party in the lead up to the election (0) and those who were contacted by at least one party (1). The liberalisation of postal voting rules to allow citizens to vote by post ‘on demand’ has meant that parties now commonly plan their ground campaign around ‘multiple polling dates’ to account for the fact that postal voters cast their ballots early and actively recruit postal voters through campaign contact (e.g. Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018; Townsley and Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020). Moreover, contact by a party in the run up to the election, even if not tailored to potential postal voters, reminds voters of the election and is likely to encourage those who have their empty postal ballot to fill it out and send it in.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we include two variables that for geographical heterogeneity that might influence the probability of opting to vote by post. The first is a measure of the constituency *marginality* which indicates the winning majority vote share in an individual constituency: lower values indicate seats where the majority of the victor was small and where political competition and campaigning was likely to be intense. Secondly, we include a categorical variables that indicates respondents living in the England (baseline), Scotland or Wales.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.4 Empirical strategy

Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, the potential effects of the explanatory variables on voters’ likelihood of casting a postal ballot are evaluated using logistic regression models applying probability weights and standard errors clustered by constituency. We run two parallel logistic regression models, one with the binary *party ID*, and one with the categorical *party*.

## 5. Findings

Table 1 summarised the main findings from the multivariate models, with Model 1 including the binary party ID variable and Model 2 the categorical party variable.

<sup>7</sup>Full variable description available in the Supplementary Appendix. One additional control that we also consider (and report in the appendix is trust). Given the initial instances of electoral fraud detailed in UK postal voting in 2005 (Stewart, 2006), we might expect individuals with lower levels of political or social distrust to be less inclined to be postal voters. Testing for this shows no relationship between trust and postal voting (see Supplementary Figure S1).

<sup>8</sup>Our sample only included 16 individuals from Northern Ireland who were excluded from the analysis.

**Table 1** Who votes by post?

X	Model 1	Model 2
Age <sup>a</sup>		
25–34	0.02 (0.18)	0.01 (0.18)
35–44	0.35* (0.17)	0.33* (0.17)
45–54	0.56** (0.17)	0.54** (0.17)
55–64	0.50** (0.16)	0.46** (0.16)
65–74	0.84** (0.16)	0.78** (0.17)
75+	1.07** (0.18)	1.00** (0.18)
Disability <sup>b</sup>		
Yes, limited a little	0.14* (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)
Yes, limited a lot	0.60** (0.08)	0.61** (0.08)
Population density	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Constituency majority (inverse marginality)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)
Party ID	-0.15** (0.06)	-
Party <sup>c</sup>		
Conservative Party	-	-0.05 (0.07)
Labour Party	-	-0.22** (0.07)
Liberal Democrats	-	-0.27** (0.10)
SNP	-	-0.20 (0.20)
Plaid Cymru	-	-0.02 (0.36)
UKIP	-	0.55 (0.28)
Green Party	-	-0.31* (0.13)
Brexit Party	-	-0.06 (0.16)
Others	-	-0.62** (0.24)
Civic duty	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)
Campaign contact	0.15** (0.05)	0.16** (0.05)
Gender	0.14** (0.05)	0.15** (0.05)
Sexuality	0.20* (0.08)	0.21* (0.08)
Income	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Education	-0.13** (0.05)	-0.11* (0.05)
UK nation <sup>d</sup>		
Scotland	0.07 (0.09)	0.11 (0.11)
Wales	-0.22* (0.10)	-0.21* (0.11)
Constant	-1.89** (0.26)	-1.92** (0.26)
Observations	11 602	11 602

Note: standard errors clustered by constituency in parentheses;

\* $p < 0.05$ ,

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>a</sup>Reference group is '18–24'.

<sup>b</sup>Reference group is 'none'.

<sup>c</sup>Reference group is 'no party ID'.

<sup>d</sup>Reference group is 'England'.

Note first that voters' likelihood of choosing to cast a postal ballot, as opposed to an in-person ballot, is not driven by any one characteristic or type of characteristics. It is a function of voters' personal profile, partisanship, as well as their

views on voting and campaign experience. It is, therefore, important to not attribute the growing popularity of postal voting to any one segment of the electorate.

We first consider the evidence regarding the ‘reducing costs thesis’. The evidence offers broad support for this argument. We observe positive, and statistically significant, effects for all age categories, but one, in both models. These positive coefficients are generally increasing in size as well, from 0.35 (Model 1) and 0.33 (Model 2) for the ‘35–44’ age cohort all the way to 1.07 (Model 1) and 1.00 (Model 2) for ‘75+’ age cohort, suggesting that there is a rather consistent trend towards the greater reliance on postal voting as we move from the youngest to the oldest age cohort. The effects associated with disability are also positive and statistically significant across the two models. The positive coefficient of 0.14 and 0.14 (Models 1 and 2) shows that voters with a disability that limits their day-to-day activities a little are slightly more likely to cast a postal vote than those with no disability, while the stronger positive effects of 0.60 (Model 1) and 0.61 (Model 2) demonstrating that voters whose disability limits their day-to-day activities a lot are particularly likely to vote by post. Taken together, we find strong support to the notion that voters who are older and disabled are much more prone to casting a postal ballot than their younger and more mobile peers. The effects associated with population density, however, are less robust. In the case of both model specifications, the positive coefficients (0.03) for population density are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

The evidence regarding the ‘expressive partisanship thesis’ also tells a rather interesting story. The negative and significant coefficient of  $-0.15$  for party ID in Model 1 indicates that voters who identify with a party of any colour are *less* likely to vote by post than those who do not have a partisanship identity. This is in line with our expectation that the former gain greater expressive benefits from voting in person. The findings from Model 2, however, show that the expressive benefits are not felt symmetrically across the supporters of different parties. In fact, there appears to be an ideological divide taking place. It is the supporters of the centre-left parties that contest seats across Britain who are least likely to vote by post, as evident in the negative coefficients of  $-0.22$  for the Labour Party,  $-0.27$  for Liberal Democrats and  $-0.31$  for the Green Party. We do not find a significant effect for voters who identify with the Conservative Party, UKIP, the Brexit Party or the nationalist parties.

With regards to control variables, we find consistently significant effects for five factors related to voters’ personal profile, views on voting and campaign experience. The positive coefficients of 0.14 (Model 1) and 0.15 (Model 2) for gender suggest that female voters are more likely to cast a postal ballot than their

male counterparts, while the positive coefficients of 0.20 (Model 1) and 0.21 (Model 2) for sexuality suggest that voters who belong to a sexual minority group are more likely to vote by post than those who describe themselves as heterosexual. Moreover, we find that degree-holding voters are less likely to vote by post than those without a degree, as shown by the negative and significant coefficients of  $-0.13$  (Model 1) and  $-0.11$  (Model 2). With regards to voters' views on voting and campaign experience, we find that voters who perceive voting to be one's civic duty to be more likely to vote by post, as shown by the positive and significant coefficients of 0.09 (Models 1 and 2), and that voters who are contacted by at least one party or candidate in the lead up to the election are also more likely to cast a postal ballot than those who receive no such contact, as shown by the positive and significant coefficients of 0.15 (Model 1) and 0.16 (Model 2). These patterns follow the expectations as highlighted above.

In the case of constituency marginality, we observe significant correlation between the size of the winning party's majority and postal voting. The lower the winning party's majority (the more marginal the seat) the greater the likelihood that an individual reported voting by post. We take this as evidence that, in those electoral contests where campaign competition was highest, individuals were likely more incentivised to insure their vote by voting early given the high stakes nature of marginal seats.

There is no difference of significance between the the probability of being a postal voter associated with a respondent's location in Scotland vis-à-vis England. Where we do observe variation, however, is between Wales and England as signalled by the negative 0.22 (Model 1) and 0.21 (Model 2) coefficients.

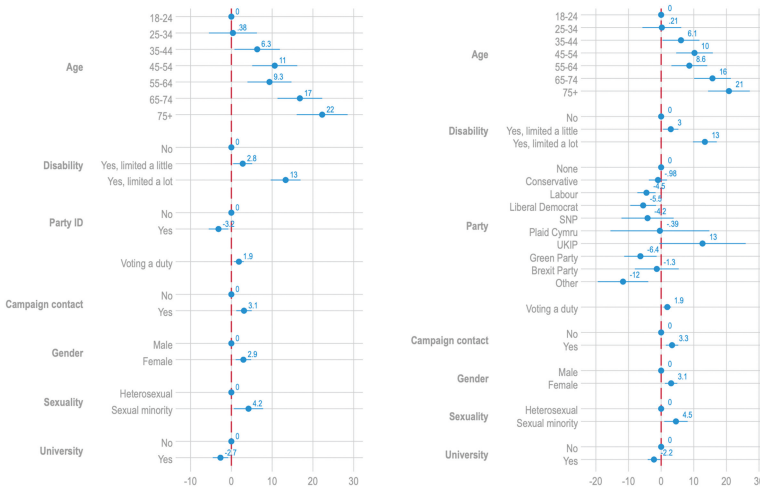


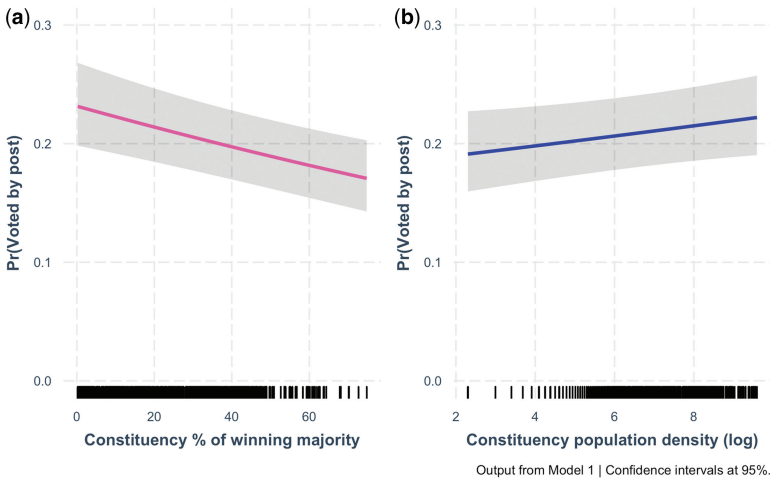
Figure 2. Average marginal effects on the probability of voting by post

To gain a more intuitive understanding of the magnitude of the effect sizes, Figure 2 presents the average marginal effects of the individual-level variables on the probability of voting by post.

As visualised, it is the effects associated with voters' age and disability that stand out, in particular, suggesting that the rise in postal voting is predominantly driven by practical considerations and desire for a more convenient voting method. When comparing the probability of casting one's ballot by post among the youngest (18–24) and oldest (75+) age groups, we observe the latter to be more than 20 percentage points more likely to cast a postal ballot; 22 percentage points if using the specification of Model 1 and 21 percentage points if using the specification of Model 2. The effect associated with disability is slightly smaller, but nonetheless relatively large. We observe a 13 percentage-point increase in the probability of casting a postal vote when comparing voters who have a disability that significantly limits their day-to-day activities to voters who have no disability. Both effects are not only statistically significant, but also substantively meaningful. Postal voting is popular among the elderly and those who face limitations in their physical mobility.

The effects associated with partisanship are also evident, but generally much smaller than those linked to age and disability. First, there is a significant and substantively meaningful difference in voters' likelihood of casting a postal ballot based on whether they hold a partisan identity or not. We observe a 3.2 percentage-point *reduction* in voters' probability of casting a postal vote when comparing voters who have a partisanship identity to those without one. As highlighted earlier, there is, however, variation in this effect along party lines. We observe a 4.5 percentage-point decline in the probability of casting a postal vote when comparing voters who identify with the Labour Party to those who have no partisan identity, while the respective declines are 5.5 percentage points for those identifying with Liberal Democrats and 6.4 for the Green Party. Expressive partisanship does disincentivise postal voting, although it is worth bearing in mind that the effects associated with it are somewhat smaller and concentrated among supporters of centre-left parties.

In Figure 3 we report the marginal effects of our constituency-based variables. Figure 3A reports the effect of constituency marginality while Figure 3B depicts the effect of population density. As illustrated, we observe no effect of substance or significance in the case of population density: the probability of casting a vote by post is symmetrical amongst those constituencies that are densely populated and those that are less heavily populated. The marginality of the constituency tells a different story. In those constituencies where winning party's majority is lowest (i.e. marginality is the highest) we find a significantly higher probability that a respondent will have voted by post.



**Figure 3.** Average marginal effects of political geography

## 6. Conclusion

More and more voters are choosing to cast their ballot by post, rather than in person on election day, with postal votes making up over fifth of all valid votes at the most recent general election in the UK. This transformation in the voting habits of the electorate means that election day is no longer fixed (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018; Townsley and Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020). While there is a growing body of literature on the implications of postal voting, the evidence about who votes by post is a lot scarcer, especially in the case of Britain.

This study uses survey data from the British Election Study to address this lacuna. It examines the effects of voters' personal and political profile, and campaign experience on their likelihood of voting by post at the 2019 general election in Britain. We find evidence that the decision to engage in postal voting is a function of voters' desire, or need, to reduce the costs of in-person voting. It is particularly popular among the elderly and disabled. In addition, we find that voters who do not have a partisan identity and are, therefore, less likely to derive expressive benefits from in-person voting are also much more inclined to cast the more private postal ballot. There is a clear evidence that the appeal of postal voting in Britain is not restricted to any one segment of the electorate but influenced by a broad range of individual-level factors.

These findings have significant broader implications. First, the differences between the profiles of postal voters and those who cast their ballot in person further reinforce the need for parties to extend their micro-targeting efforts. It is widely acknowledged that electoral campaigns are becoming increasingly sophisticated, with campaigners going to great lengths to analyse voters and their

preferences, and adapt political advertisements accordingly (e.g. Kreiss, 2016; Krotzek, 2019). It is happening across and within constituencies, as well as online and offline. The evidence presented here adds time to the list of factors that campaigners should consider when tailoring their advertisements. Given that early voters systematically differ from those who wait until election day to cast their ballot, it is important for parties and candidates to also tailor their campaign messages over the length of the campaign period and, in doing so, maximise the potential appeal of such messages.

Secondly, the asymmetric effect of partisanship on how voters cast their ballot suggests that it is particularly important for certain parties, and their candidates, to continue executing prominent get out the vote campaigns all the way up to election day. The evidence presented in this article shows that it is the supporters of centre-left parties who are, in general, most likely to wait until election day to cast an in-person ballot. These voters seem to derive greater expressive benefits from voting at the polling station. It does, however, mean for centre-left parties that they are in greater need to run prolonged get out the vote campaigns all the way until election day as it is their supporters who are the least likely to have voted early.

Thirdly, the role of expressive partisanship in the postal voting cost and benefit equation offers a potential explanation for experimental findings showing the great difficulty that parties have in recruiting partisans to postal votes (Townsend and Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020). If partisans derive greater benefits from voting in person than by post, it is unsurprising that they are not persuaded to cast postal ballots by the ‘avoid missing out on participating’ argument. It is simply the case that they would rather do so in person.

Finally, the evidence presented here lends support to the notion that it is first and foremost the pragmatic, rather than emotive or duty-based, factors that shape how voters think about the act of casting their ballot. The largest effects we find are associated with voters’ age and disability, suggesting that there are significant segments of electors who are drawn to voting methods that are more convenient and easier to access than in-person voting at the polling station on election day. Given that turnout at general elections remains a concern in Britain, with the 2019 general election turnout once again remaining below 70%, this article lends implicit support to the idea that future efforts to incentivise more electors to cast a ballot should focus on extending voting methods that reduce the cost of voting, rather than trying to convince them of the greater than currently perceived benefits of doing so. One of the options available in Britain is, for example, the introduction of Internet voting.

### **Supplementary data**

Supplementary data are available at *Parliamentary Affairs* Online.



## Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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