

The Age Dimension to Requesting and Returning Absentee Ballots: Evidence from North Carolina

Less than two weeks away from the general election, many voters across the country are planning how to vote, whether by mail or in person. As of today, [approximately 20 million Americans have already voted](#), whether through mail-in ballots or in-person early voting. In North Carolina alone, [1.3 million absentee ballots have been requested and over 500,000 have been returned](#).

One question that remains to be seen is that of young voter turnout. Historically, young voters in the US have low turnout, but [there has been much speculation that 2020 will be different](#). Younger voters have also expressed interest in voting by mail. According to a voter intention survey conducted by MIT in early September, 40% of voters between the ages of 18 and 25 in North Carolina said they intended to vote by mail, compared to 15% of voters over the age of 65. (Here we have ignored respondents who did not plan to vote or who were undecided about their mode of voting.)

However, as mail balloting has proceeded in the state, two trends seem to undermine the idea that young voters will make up a large fraction of mail votes cast in the state. First, young voters expressed interest in voting by mail in the survey at greater rates than they have requested them. Second, young voters have been much slower to return them.

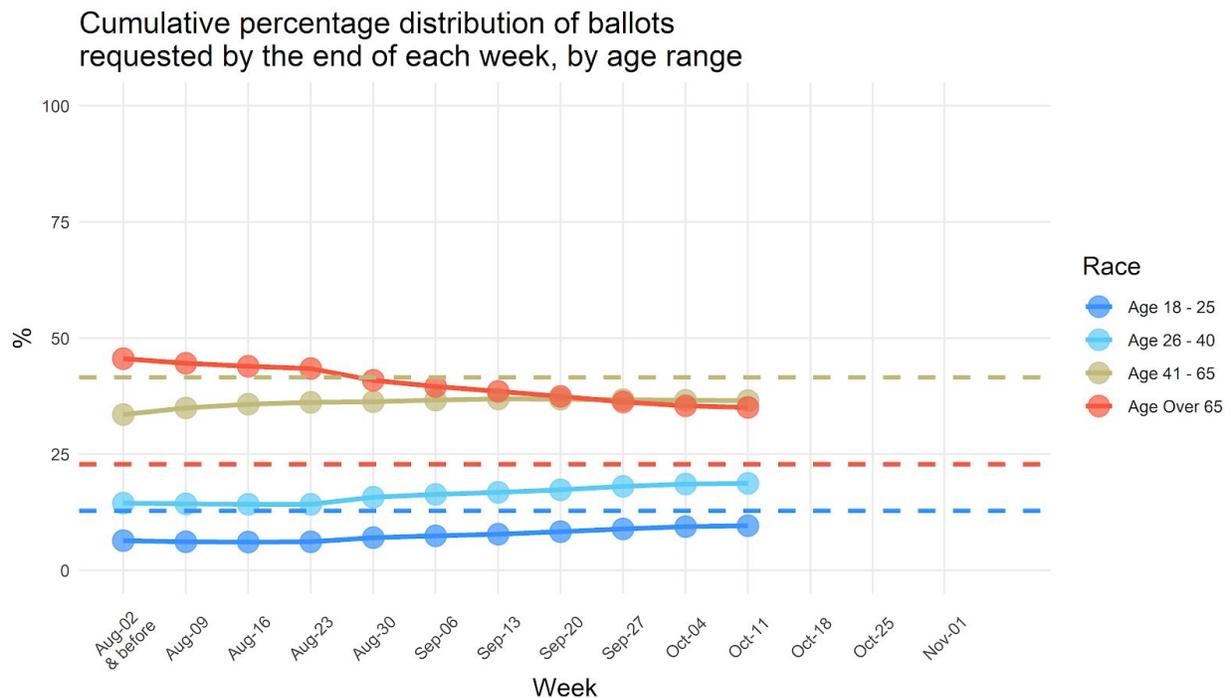
Translated to the distribution of registered voters (as provided by the NC State Board of Elections), we would expect voters under 25 to account for approximately 19% of mail-in ballots and voters over 65 to account for 12%, if these survey results hold true.

Age Group	Voter Survey Results			Voter Registration and Ballot Requests	
	Planning or already voted by mail [A]	Number in sample (weighted) [B]	Age distribution of respondents intending to vote by mail $[(A*B)/\text{sum}(A*B)]$	Age distribution of registered voters	Age distribution of voters requesting mail ballot
18 – 25	35.9%	36	10.8%	12.8%	9.6%
26 – 40	32.8%	113	30.8%	22.7%	18.7%
41 – 65	28.0%	198	45.9%	41.5%	36.6%
66+	13.4%	113	12.5%	22.9%	35.1%

Data sources: MIT Voter Intention Survey, wave 1. NC State Board of Elections

The emerging data from the North Carolina Board of Elections, however, shows that older voters are requesting mail-in ballots at far higher rates than expected. By the end of the week of October 11, voters between the ages of 18 and 25 had requested approximately 10% of all mail-in ballots, slightly less than the 13% of the total registered voting population that they represent. In comparison, voters above the age of 65 had requested 35% of mail-in ballots, despite only representing 23% of registered voters and being predicted to request only 13%.

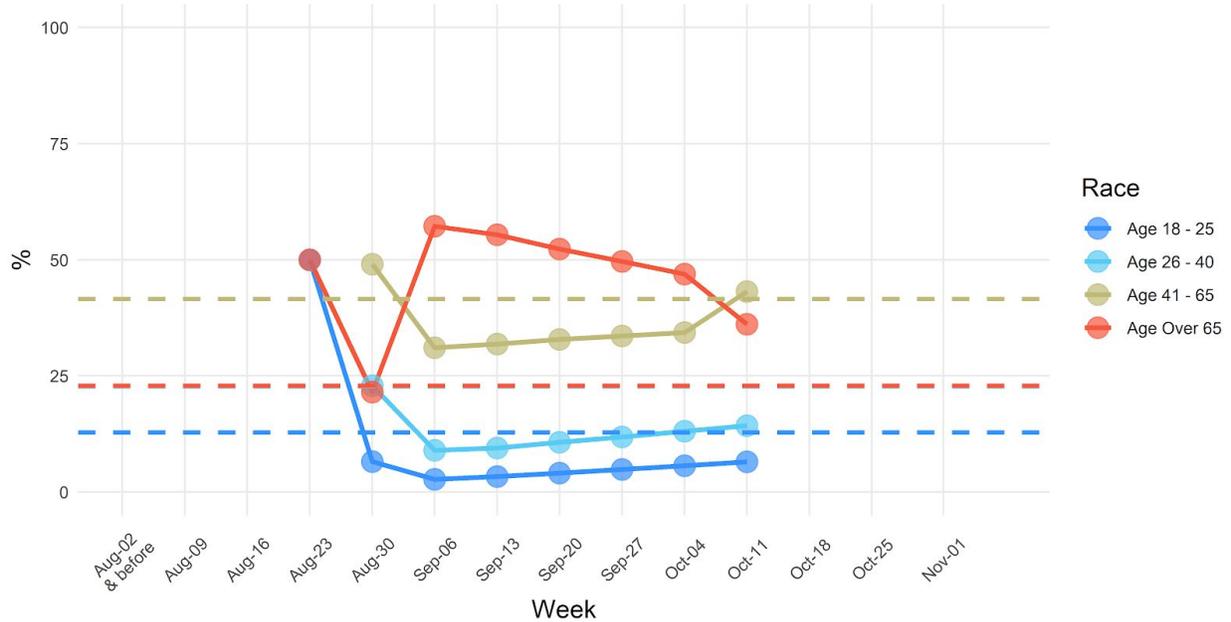
However, these numbers also reflect a steady increase in requests for mail-in ballots by voters under 66 in the past few weeks. Voters above 65 requested almost 50% of the ballots requested before August 2, but their share of cumulative ballots have slowly declined as other age groups have requested more ballots. As we get closer to the election, percentages of requested ballots are coming more in line with the distribution of ages within registered voters, though older voters are still overrepresented.



Note: Dashed lines reflect proportion of registered voters. Individuals between the age of 26 and 40 reflect approximately 23% of registered voters, which is hidden by the age over 65 line.
 Data source: North Carolina Board of Elections
 Graph Source: MIT Elections Data and Science Lab
 Graph date: 10/20/2020

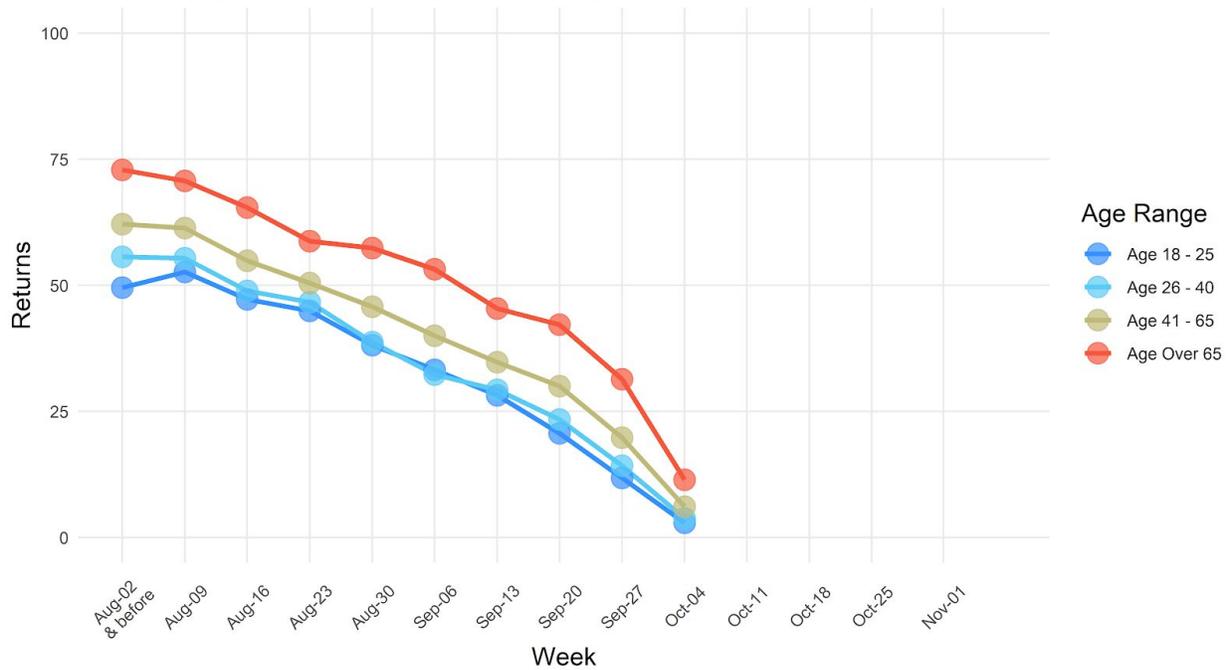
Similar trends exist for returned ballots; voters below the age of 25 have returned approximately 6% of returned ballots while voters above the age of 65 have returned 36%. It's also interesting to note that, for any given week of ballot requests, voters above the age of 65 have returned their ballots at a rate almost 25 percentage points higher than that of voters younger than 25 or between 25 and 40. However, like with ballots requested, the share of ballots returned by each age group is approaching their share of voters as we get nearer to the election.

Cumulative percentage distribution of ballots returned by the end of each week, by age range



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Percent of absentee ballots returned by week returned, by age range



Data source: North Carolina Board of Elections
 Graph Source: MIT Elections Data and Science Lab
 Graph date: 10/20/2020

While the data do not offer explanations for these trends, there are many possible reasons. One potential reason is that, since older voters are more at risk due to COVID-19, they were more active in planning for mail-in voting. Younger voters may be interested in voting by mail but not planning as far in advance, which would help explain the combined upward trends in ballots requested and returned by younger voters as we approach the election. However, it is important to consider these data when evaluating claims of record turnout in young voters; so far, it seems that older voters are still turning out at higher rates than younger ones.