

LESSONS LEARNED IN THE 2020 ELECTION

REPORT BY AEI AND THE MIT ELECTION LAB TO THE U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION



REPORT OVERVIEW

A record 160 million Americans voted in the 2020 election. For the first time in American history, over half of those votes were cast before Election Day. These historical markers exist alongside the logistical challenges faced by voters and election officials because of the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges faced as the society and economy at large grappled with how to function in light of pervasive mobility restrictions and public health precautions.

The purpose of this report is to provide an account of how the American system of election administration responded to the significant barriers erected by the pandemic challenges. It is temporally bounded by the presidential primaries at the beginning of the calendar year and the certification of the results at the end. For the most part, the report relies on analyzing the mountain of data produced administering the election and during the period after it. The report is comprehensive in its scope, touching on voter registration, the conduct of in-person and mail voting, paying for the election, tabulating the vote, voting technology, and voter confidence.

The main lesson learned from the 2020 election is that the system was robust and resilient. Voters turned out at historical levels; they reported a positive experience when they did. This resilience had two principal sources, the hard work of election officials and the enthusiastic response of the society. In the end, members of the election administration profession developed a wide range of new capabilities and competencies; the society increased its sense of responsibility for the

system's robustness. One hopes that government and society at all levels will continue in this spirit over the coming years to improve the election administration system even more.

This document provides a summary of the analysis in the complete report. Each chapter is divided into two major sections, the empirical analysis and conclusions plus lessons learned. Readers interested in following up on the data and the analysis details are referred to that document.

CHAPTER 1. PRIMARIES AND THE PANDEMIC

The 2020 primary season was interrupted by the onset of COVID-19 and set the stage for planning the much larger presidential election in November. The pandemic caused states to consider how, when, or even if they would hold primaries. There were significant political and institutional battles over these last-minute changes to primary elections. A set of states adopted more extensive (or sometimes exclusive) voting by mail, while others relied more on in-person and early in-person voting but made more minor changes to allow voters to choose to vote by mail. Yet, with all of the COVID-inspired hindrances to voting and changes to the voting system, voter turnout in the primaries was high.

Findings

- » As the pandemic came upon the nation, states began struggling with how best to respond to the exigencies of the public health crisis, sometimes

encountering conflict over the authority to redirect voting policy in an emergency.

- » Voter turnout in the presidential primaries was high by historical standards, which was more impressive considering the challenges posed by the rising pandemic.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

- » States must have clearly delineated emergency laws that pertain specifically to elections, laws that effectively balance the need for governors to protect the safety of citizens in an emergency, with the need for emergency election measures to be regarded as legitimate.
- » Americans will vote amid great difficulties if they are motivated.
- » The nation benefited from the fact that the pandemic struck during the primary season rather than right before the general election.

CHAPTER 2. RECORD TURNOUT AND A SHIFT TO VOTING BY MAIL

Voter turnout hit record levels in 2020, which was especially remarkable because of the challenges presented by the pandemic. States saw dramatic shifts in the modes of voting. Voting by mail increased dramatically at the national level, voting on Election Day dropped nearly equally dramatically, and early in-person voting increased.

Findings

- » National turnout, measured as a percentage of the eligible electorate, was the highest for over a century.
- » All 50 states and DC saw an increase in turnout compared to 2016, measured as a percentage of the eligible population.
- » The sheer volume of new votes cast in 2020 compared to 2016 — an increase of 21 million voters — presented administrative challenges that would have existed even without a pandemic.
- » The rate of voting by mail roughly doubled from 2016, to 43 percent of votes cast. The 2020 election was the first in which the predominant mode of voting nationwide was by mail.
- » Almost all states suddenly transitioned from offering “one and a half” modes of voting (one major in-person mode plus a convenience method) to three, indicating the administrative complexity on top of the volume of ballots.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

- » The expansion of convenience voting opportunities helped state and local jurisdictions accommodate the significant increase in turnout.
- » The nature of the pandemic raised questions about conflicting authority amid a public health emergency that states should resolve for the future.
- » States and localities should reevaluate the infrastructural needs based on new modes of voting, but they should also be cautious in assumptions they make about the near future.

CHAPTER 3. MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF VOTING BY MAIL

By far, the most prominent administrative change to voting in 2020 was the rise in voting by mail. Every state saw an increase in mail ballots compared to 2016, both in volume and as a share of votes cast. In most states, this shift required a significant change in administrative practices and the purchase or lease of expensive equipment to handle the volume of mail. The months of lead time between the spring public health crisis and the post-Labor Day general election season gave election officials, campaigns, civic groups, and the media the opportunity to communicate with voters about how to request ballots and how to fill them out and return them so that they would arrive in time or not be rejected for the failure to follow all the instructions.

Part of the successful shift to mail ballots involved the behavior of voters in the general election, who not only returned mail ballots in historic numbers, but also returned them earlier than before. An important outcome of the process of expanding access to voting by mail was the development of a strong partisan divide over the wisdom of this expanded access, either in the particular case of the 2020 election or in general.

Findings

- » The onset of the pandemic had an apparent causal effect in expanding the use of mail voting up to 10-fold virtually overnight in the presidential primary season.
- » Most states saw a decline in mail ballots in the general election compared to the primaries.
- » The number of mail ballots cast in 2020 was over 66 million, up from nearly 29 million in 2016.
- » Every state saw an increase in the number of mail ballots cast compared to 2016.

- » The biggest increases in mail ballot usage occurred in states that decided to mail ballots to all voters on a one-time basis in 2020. States that already had “no excuse” absentee laws and those that allowed COVID to serve as an excuse had the second-greatest increase in mail ballots. The states that showed the slightest increases in mail ballot usage required an excuse to vote by mail that excluded COVID.
- » Voters returned mail ballots at a faster clip than ever before.
- » Rejection rates of mail ballots were 0.80 percent in 2020, down from 0.96 percent in 2016. As a general matter, the greater the percentage of rejected ballots in 2016, the bigger the state decline in 2020.
- » States varied significantly in verifying the identity of mail voters; sometimes, counties within states also varied significantly.
- » The number of mail ballots rejected because the return signature was judged not to match went up compared to 2016 in proportion to the increase in the number of mail ballots.
- » The variation in rates of ballots rejected for non-matching signatures varied more within states than across states.
- » Although most mail voters returned their ballots by mail, the use of drop boxes increased four-fold among states that were not previously all vote-by-mail.
- » Before 2016, there were no-to-small differences in the use of mail ballots by followers of the two major parties.
- » In 2020, 60 percent of Democrats reported voting by mail compared to 32 percent of Republicans.
- » Democrats who voted by mail were much more confident their votes were counted as intended than Republicans who voted by mail.
- » Among voters who voted by mail in 2020, 80 percent said it was very or somewhat likely they would do so in the future, 86 percent of Democrats, 66 percent among Republicans, and 79 percent among independents.
- » The reduction in the mail ballot rejection rate in 2020 is to be praised, but many states will have high rejection rates and high intercounty variability.
- » Chapter 4. Meeting the Challenge of Voting in Person
- » Despite the surge in voting by mail, maintaining access to in-person voting continued to be a priority throughout the country, even though it proved a challenge. The challenge arose from many sources. The evidence suggests that these challenges were met throughout the country. The challenges in accommodating the demand for in-person voting were met with considerable effort and assistance from the public and non-profit groups.

Findings

- » Not only did the percentage of those voting in person decline in 2020 compared to 2016, but the raw number declined. Depending on the data source used, in-person voting declined from 96 million to 87 million (EAVS) or 108 million to 90 million (CPS).
- » The biggest decline in Election Day voting occurred for the most part in the eastern part of the U.S. and along the northern tier of states.
- » The number of physical polling locations available on Election Day declined by approximately twenty percent compared to 2016.
- » Schools continued to be the most common Election Day polling place, but their use continued a long-term decline. Community centers became more common polling places in 2020.
- » Although their availability garnered considerable media attention, less than one percent of respondents to the Survey of the Performance of American Elections reported voting in a sports arena on Election Day; nearly two percent voted early in an arena. In larger metro areas, almost three percent of voters reported casting a ballot in an arena.
- » The recruitment of poll workers was a national challenge met by a barrage of efforts, including renewed activity among election officials and new non-profit organizations stood up specifically for the cause.
- » Local election officials who responded to our survey, on the whole, were satisfied that they were able to obtain a sufficient number of poll workers. These responses were echoed in answers to a similar question in the EAVS.
- » The number of election workers probably declined by only 4 percent compared to 2016, a much smaller decline than in the number of in-person voters.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

- » The record high usage of mail ballots will likely persist in future elections, but at lower levels than 2020.
- » Voting by mail at a very early date may recede, as the conditions of the pandemic led parties and groups to encourage voters to cast their ballots as early as possible.
- » Drop boxes are likely to be more commonly available to and used by voters in the future.

- » Local election officials more often mentioned problems with training poll workers than with recruiting them.
- » Despite substantial efforts to recruit younger poll workers, the average age of poll workers declined only somewhat compared to 2016, from 57.0 years old to 55.1 years old. The decline in the age of poll workers predominantly occurred in the largest jurisdictions.
- » In-person voters reported positive experiences when they went to vote, on par with previous years.
- » In-person voters reported widespread use of poll worker masks and hand sanitizers and less frequent use of physical barriers between and among poll workers and voters.
- » The average wait time to vote on Election Day increased somewhat compared to 2016, from 13.0 minutes to 14.3 minutes. Wait times for early voting increased more than wait times to vote on Election Day.
- » The most considerable wait time increases occurred in mid-sized communities, not small rural areas or the most densely populated cities.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

- » In-person voting is here to stay.
- » In-person voting continues to rely on the availability of multi-use public buildings.
- » Election officials should reconsider how resources are allocated to polling places to minimize wait times.
- » The pool of Election Day poll workers may continue to come disproportionately from the elderly.
- » Election officials and civic organizations should enter into long-term partnerships to recruit poll workers.
- » Partisan balance requirements may be the highest barrier to poll worker recruitment.
- » States should comprehensively review signature matching processes to ensure statewide uniformity and effectiveness.

CHAPTER 5. COUNTING THE VOTE

Counting votes and certifying election results are complex tasks in a typical presidential election. Still, challenges were magnified in the 2020 election with so many changes in voting rules and procedures and significant shifts from Election Day voting to mail voting.

Four factors have characterized the counting of votes and certification of elections in recent presidential elections. First, the initial, unofficial count of votes in days immediately after Election Day has slowed. Second, the slower early counting is related to the rise in late-arriving mail ballots and provisional ballots. Third, recent elections have seen evidence of a “blue shift” where late counted votes lean more toward the Democratic Party. Fourth, states have a great variety of deadlines for election certification, and some of those deadlines are very close to the dates when the presidential electors meet.

These factors continued in the 2020 presidential election, but the implemented electoral changes often meant a more complex story of how votes were counted and elections certified. In 2020, states retained their wide range of dates in law and practice by which they certified their elections. Still, many states have election certification dates that make resolving a contested election by the appropriate date very difficult. Finally, the post-Election Day process often includes post-election auditing. Thirty-four states have some form of audits in state law, and 2020 saw an increase in a new form of auditing, the “risk-limiting audit” (RLA).

Findings

- » The 2020 election witnessed a continuation of trends established in recent elections, whereby vote counting has slowed and the votes counted are disproportionately Democratic the further away from Election Day the counting proceeds. These trends are due to certain types of ballots taking longer to count completely and large urban areas taking longer to complete the vote count.
- » Despite these national generalities, many states deviated from the national trend.
- » In 2020, most states counted nearly 100% of their final totals of ballots within 48 hours of polls closing on Election Day. Six states — Iowa, Florida, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Louisiana — counted nearly one hundred percent of their total ballots within four hours of polls closing.
- » Research that has looked at the speed with which states reported their votes has concluded that (1) states with more mail ballots are slower to report vote totals, (2) states that limit the pre-processing of mail ballots are slower, and (3) states that allow mail ballots to arrive after Election Day are slower.
- » The magnitude of the “blue shift,” the pattern whereby later-counted ballots are disproportionately Democratic, depends on when one starts the

comparison. Indeed, if one compares final election results with vote reports in the first three hours following polls closing, there was a national “red shift” in 2020.

- » Many states have certification deadlines that come very close to the “safe harbor” benchmark for certifying elections, thus perhaps giving insufficient time for careful consideration of recounts and challenges.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

- » States should take a holistic look at their election processes to identify changes that would increase the speed of counting ballots.
- » States should examine their laws for certification of elections with an eye to getting a certified, final count by six days before the meeting of the presidential electors.
- » States should be more transparent in reporting their unofficial, running total of results,
- » States should have a formal program of post-election auditing, not only of vote tallies, but also of the processes surrounding the election.

CHAPTER 6. ELECTION COSTS

The 2020 election, like prior elections, was funded primarily by state and local governments. However, two recent federal streams provided additional funds, and there was also a significant infusion of funding from private philanthropy and the private sector. Estimates of annual election funding find a wide range of spending estimates ranging from \$2 billion to \$3 billion or \$8 to \$15 per vote cast. Anecdotal evidence and our survey of local election officials confirm that more was spent on the 2020 election because of the pandemic. Although the funding sources for the 2020 election were primarily state and local governments, states and localities benefitted from federal funds that provided one-time assistance for the 2020 election. The first was two federal appropriations, in 2018 and 2019, for election security. An additional \$400 million in federal funds were disbursed to states in 2020 to help them run elections during the pandemic. In addition, three major private philanthropic efforts disbursed over \$300 million to jurisdictions to aid their efforts to run elections during the pandemic. Finally, not to be overlooked were corporate in-kind donations, such as the use of the arenas typically used by National Basketball Association franchises and other contributions made through groups such as Business for America.

Findings

- » In the typical year, between \$2 billion and \$3 billion is spent to administer elections.
- » Recent federal funding for security and pandemic response represented the first significant infusion of funds from the federal government for elections in nearly two decades.
- » With the state-required matching funds, the CARES Act resulted in spending \$479.5 million new dollars on dealing with election costs associated with the pandemic.
- » At least three major efforts by private philanthropy brought hundreds of millions of dollars directly to state and local election administration: funds distributed by the Center for Tech and Civic Life (local jurisdictions), the Center for Election Innovation and Research (states), and the Schwarzenegger Institute of the University of Southern California (local jurisdictions).
- » CEIR grants were intended to “support states’ efforts to provide nonpartisan, accurate, and official voting information to the public.”
- » Schwarzenegger Institute grants were available “for local and state elections officials who want to reopen polling stations they closed because of a lack of funding.”
- » CTCL grants went largely to temporary staffing, mail/absentee ballot supplies, poll workers, PPE, election equipment, and polling place rental/cleaning.
- » In response to our local election official survey, three-quarters of jurisdictions reported that it cost at least fifty percent more to run the presidential election in 2020 than typical.

Conclusions and Takeaways

- » There is a great need for better and more standardized reporting of election funding. The lack of clear information likely hindered efforts to advocate for increased funding for 2020.
- » Private philanthropy provided a critical lifeline to a diverse group of election jurisdictions that would not have been necessary had the emergency election response been adequately funded by the state and federal governments.

CHAPTER 7. VOTING TECHNOLOGY

Two drivers of change prompted many state and local jurisdictions to alter the voting technologies they used in 2020: the shift from in-person voting to mail

balloting and the migration away from direct recording electronic (DRE) voting machines toward hand-marked optical scanners. The former prompted many jurisdictions, especially larger ones, to purchase high-speed optical scanners to manage large numbers of paper ballots centrally. The latter continued a trend that has been underway for the past decade.

The confluence of these two trends resulted in the biggest shift in how votes were counted in at least two decades. Even jurisdictions that continued to use DREs saw increases in votes cast by mail, resulting in these jurisdictions processing an increased number of hand-marked scanned ballots.

Findings

- » The 2020 election accelerated the trend of electronic voting machines being retired in favor of scanned paper ballots.
- » When the dramatic rise in the number of mail ballots is taken into account, the increase in the use of mail ballots in 2020 is particularly notable. The percentage of American voters casting a ballot on paper may have been the greatest in over half a century.
- » Around three-quarters of in-person voters were checked in on an electronic poll book, up from one-half in 2016.
- » The number of high-speed scanners used to process mail ballots increased over 2016.

Conclusions and Takeaways

- » The 2020 election showed the importance of paper ballots that can be independently audited.
- » A priority needs to be placed on understanding the conditions under which voters can spot mistakes on BMDs.
- » Centralized high-speed scanning of mail ballots should be more common as voters increasingly vote by mail.

CHAPTER 8. VOTER REGISTRATION

An underappreciated challenge to the 2020 election was voter registration. Many new registrations occur in person, either through voter registration drives or visits to departments of motor vehicles. With social distancing mandates and curtailed motor vehicle departments' hours, registration opportunities were reduced in parts of the country, at least during the spring. At the same time, some states either shifted

to online registration or had developed that capacity in recent years, which offered a means to overcome in-person registration barriers.

Voters and election administrators faced at least two novel challenges to registration in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For states without Election Day registration, COVID-19 restrictions blocked many registration pathways. For states with Election Day registration, the challenge was getting those who preferred to vote by mail on the rolls so that they could request a ballot.

In the end, the number of registered voters reached a historical high, as did the number of voters. Therefore, it is hard to argue that registration restrictions caused a dramatic dip in registration levels. However, COVID-related restrictions may have caused a slowdown in registration levels during the spring, even if they bounced back later in the year. Furthermore, there was likely a shift in registration modalities, from in-person methods to remote methods, particularly registration online.

Findings

- » As with voter turnout, registration levels reached new heights in 2020. The number of voters in active status grew by 12.8 percent over 2016, to over 209 million.
- » The number of new valid registration forms grew by 15.6 percent. For context, the size of the voting-eligible population grew by only 3.6 percent over the same period.
- » The number of states offering some form of online voter registration increased to 40 for 2020, up from 28 in 2012. The number of new registrations received online went up even more, more than doubling from 4.3 million to 9.5 million.
- » During the middle half of the year, the shutdown in public services created a deficit of in-person registrations that was made up by the availability of online options.
- » Young people were disproportionately likely to report that they registered online.

Conclusions and Takeaway

- » Voters and administrators benefit when there are multiple fail-safe methods to register.

CHAPTER 9. VOTER CONFIDENCE

Questions of voter confidence rose to prominence once again in the 2020 election. Threats to confidence abounded. The root of those threats was controversy over how to respond to the emergency presented by the pandemic. The need to shelter-in-place and socially distance made long-established electoral practices — practices that had been developed to instill voter confidence — impracticable or even dangerous. Uncertainty about the course of the pandemic prompted shifts in election policy that were sometimes made at the last minute. Controversy arose over whether accommodations would be short-term or permanent. Uncertainty arose over the authority of executive officials to invoke emergency powers to implement accommodations.

All of this occurred amid a polarized political environment in which members of the two parties already held opposed opinions about election administration policy even before the pandemic hit and in which the political strength of the two parties was equally matched nationwide. The unfolding pandemic deepened these partisan divisions even further.

The result for voter confidence is both surprising and in keeping with recent partisan divisions over government policy in general. It is surprising because, despite heightened disagreements over election administration, overall confidence in the election went up, not down. However, the overall increase in confidence occurred among a record level of contention between Democrats and Republicans over how confident one should be about the conduct of the election. In the end, the increase in Democratic confidence outweighed the decline in confidence among Republicans. This helps explain the paradoxical bottom-line result: overall confidence went up even though partisan disagreement about whether the rules of the election were fair also increased.

Findings

- » Overall national confidence that votes were cast as intended was greater than in nearly two decades.
- » The increase in overall confidence masks the significant difference between Democrats and Republicans. The Democratic increase in confidence outpaced the Republican decrease, which accounts for the overall national increase.
- » Voters by mail were more confident than those who voted in person, which continues a trend of increased confidence by mail voters for the past decade.
- » The small number of voters who had a bad experience casting a ballot, in person or by mail, was

much less confident than those who had a positive experience.

- » The partisan divide over voter confidence was especially acute in opinions about votes nationwide, followed by votes in the state and county/city. The partisan divide over confidence in one's own vote was much less.
- » The strongest divisions over confidence in whether votes in one's state were counted as intended occurred in closely contested states that also had high usage rates of mail ballots.
- » Confidence is based on a psychological process that reconciles the voter with the outcomes while he or she ingests largely partisan messages that signal whether one set of policies is preferred to another.

Conclusions and Takeaways

- » Prominent political leaders set the tone in determining levels of voter confidence.
- » The partisan divide that opened in 2020 was due more to Democrats becoming more confident than Republicans becoming less confident.
- » The confidence divide between the parties at the mass level is influenced mainly by long-held values that preceded the 2020 election.
- » Election reform should rarely be justified in terms of improving voter confidence. Instead, reform should be rooted in scientific principles and justified in terms of convenience and security.