Election 2020: What Went Right

WHAT WENT RIGHT IN 2020

State and local officials conducted the general election under extraordinary circumstances. The COVID-19 global pandemic created many significant challenges for the election, including the need to: institute health safety protocols; increase election funding; recruit hundreds of thousands of poll workers; and process and tabulate record numbers of mail-in ballots. One week after the election, it is clear from the data thus far that the election was conducted fairly smoothly when considering the challenges presented by COVID-19, with few irregularities and none that altered the outcome of the presidential election.

These challenges were also borne by voters, who had to make difficult decisions about exercising their fundamental right to vote in the face of significant public health threats, as well as concerns about long lines, potential violence, and equipment malfunctions—all while navigating a landscape of changing election rules and processes.

Voters, poll workers, and state and local officials participated in and conducted an election with record turnout: at least 158 million Americans voted in the election, with 65 million people casting ballots by mail (pending tabulation), 35 million voting early in person, and 57 million voting on Election Day. The Organization of American States (OAS), at the invitation of the Trump Administration, sent 28 observers to observe the election and gave the election high marks. OAS said in its preliminary report that it did not find “any serious irregularities.” Other election experts share this assessment.

Poll Workers

In past elections, the majority of poll workers have been over 60 years old, a high-risk age group for COVID. In the lead up to the election, election officials were concerned about poll worker shortages. There were also concerns that election workers would not show up and that there might be widespread issues with first-time election workers. None of these concerns materialized in significant ways.

By and large, polling locations had sufficient numbers of poll workers to man the polls during early voting and Election Day. Power the Polls, an organization committed to recruiting poll workers, recruited 700,000 people. Some states, such as Michigan, recruited and trained more poll workers than needed in order to ensure back ups.

Record Turn Out

Despite significant challenges, the 2020 presidential election had the highest turnout of any election since 1968, with 66.8% of eligible voters turning out to cast their ballots. In total, at least 158 million Americans voted in the election, the largest number of voters in U.S. history.
Access to the Polls Despite COVID

Many states changed their laws to expand access to voting during the pandemic, whether by early voting, mail-in voting, or alternate forms of voting, such as curbside voting. This helped to spread out voting and reduced the pressure (and risks) of long lines, crowded polling places, and poll worker fatigue on Election Day.

Early voting was expanded in most states. At least 101.9 million voted early nationwide, and in several states, early ballots exceeded the total number of votes cast in 2016. There were, however, instances of long lines for early voting, with some waiting up to 11 hours to vote due to enthusiasm on the first day of voting.

Americans used mail-in ballots in record numbers in the 2020 election; more than 65 million votes were cast by mail. For the general election, 34 states and Washington, D.C. did not require an excuse to vote by mail.

USPS Delivery of Ballots

With the significant increase in mail-in ballots, there were concerns that the US Postal Service would not be able to deliver ballots on time. In fact, the vast majority of ballots were delivered in a timely manner and most delays were in states with more lenient ballot acceptance deadlines. All in all, the US Postal Service delivered more than 122 million ballots that used a special service type identifier.

During the election, a U.S. district judge in Washington, D.C., ordered the Postal Service to take “extraordinary measures” to expedite ballots, and later ordered the USPS to sweep its processing facilities for ballots. USPS did this in all plants that processed ballots, and treated every ballot as though it had to be in the hands of election officials at the close of polls—even in states where it would have sufficed to have the ballots postmarked on Election Day. The Postal Service conducted multiple daily sweeps and nightly “All Clears” of the processing facilities to find misplaced ballots, and the sweeps conducted on Election Day identified only a handful of ballots. Any ballots that missed state election deadlines were not of a volume that could alter the outcome of the presidential race.

Ballot Processing and Tabulation Occurred with Accuracy and Transparency

For those states with pre-canvassing, mail-in ballots were processed swiftly and reported results beginning on Election Day. States without processing before Election Day and states that had not updated some of their election infrastructures—including Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan—were slower to tabulate and report votes (some are continuing to count), but were methodical and transparent in their counting, with election workers working through many nights to process ballots. Observers from both parties were present in counting rooms to monitor when mail-in ballot envelopes were opened, and when the ballots were counted and recorded.¹

Some jurisdictions placed video cameras in the counting rooms, with many offering live streams of the vote tabulation.

**Voting Issues and Irregularities were Limited, and Did Not Alter the Outcome**

Every election experiences some number of administrative errors or irregularities that do not affect the outcome. The Organization of American States, at the invitation of the Trump Administration, sent 28 observers to observe the election and found in its preliminary report that there were no “serious irregularities.” Other election experts shared this assessment: “We've not seen major systemic problems or attempts to obstruct voting for voters...the problems we have seen have for the most part been isolated and sporadic” said Kristen Clarke, National Task Force on Election Crises member and president of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. Benjamin Ginsberg, a Republican election lawyer who worked on the Bush v. Gore dispute after the 2000 election, similarly stated that there is “no evidence” of widespread fraud in this election.

A number of issues did arise, though none of them affected the outcome of the election. In Franklin County, Ohio, for example, officials made the switch to backup paper pollbooks after electronic pollbooks malfunctioned due to administrative errors. Some counties experienced long lines on Election Day.

A New York Times report found that “election officials in dozens of states representing both political parties said that there was no evidence that fraud or other irregularities played a role in the outcome of the presidential race.” Below are statements from select election officials in swing states expressing confidence in the election and their state’s results thus far:

- **Arizona**: Secretary of State Katie Hobbs said, “My office has been putting out information for months about how election processes work in the state & all we do to ensure security & fairness. If you haven’t been paying attention, that’s on you, but don’t show up when you don’t like the result & scream fraud w/ no evidence.”

- **Georgia**: Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said, “I understand half of the people will be happy, half of the people will be sad, but I want 100% of the people to understand that the process was fair and accurately counted.” Gabriel Sterling, voting systems manager for the Secretary of State’s office, said that Georgia election officials have not seen any “widespread irregularities” in the counting of votes.

- **Michigan**: Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said, “In Michigan we have worked hard at every level to ensure every valid vote counts. I am so grateful for the work of our local clerks & elections workers who are steadfastly committed to ensuring the results of our elections are an accurate reflection of the will of our voters.”

- **Minnesota**: Secretary of State Steve Simon said: “I don’t know of a single case where someone argued that a vote counted when it shouldn’t have or didn’t count when it should. There was no fraud.”
Nevada: Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske said there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud in Nevada.

Ohio: According to the New York Times report, Secretary of State Frank LaRose said that while it was not unusual to discover a handful of improprieties in a statewide election, systemic fraud has not happened.

Pennsylvania: Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar said, “No matter how you chose to vote this year...every method is incredibly safe and secure.”

Wisconsin: Wisconsin’s chief election official, Megan Wolfe said, “Wisconsin’s election was conducted according to law and in the open...At this time, no evidence has been provided that supports allegations of systemic or widespread election issues.”

Regardless of party affiliation, election officials in these states and others are confident in the processes and accuracy of the count in their states.