U.S. VOTE FOUNDATION AND OVERSEAS VOTE PRESENT THE

2020 ELECTION DAY VOTER EXPERIENCE STUDY

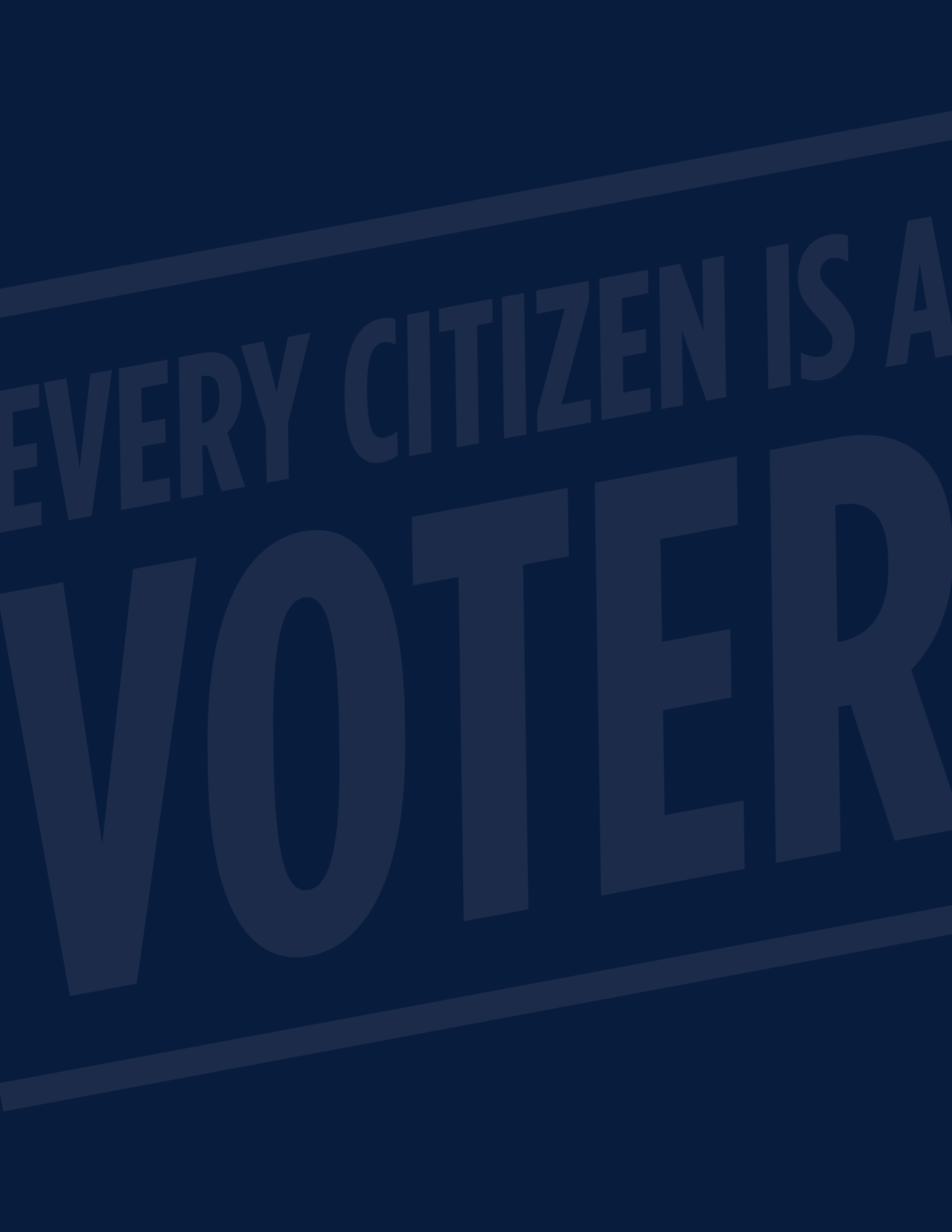

EVERY CITIZEN IS A
VOTER

Table of Contents

Highlights / Key Findings 1

- o Research Objective
- o Survey Structure and Overview of Key Findings

Support for the US Electoral System

Confidence in the Ballot-counting Process in the 2020 US Election 4

- Overall Confidence
- Variations in Confidence by Voting Method
- Variations in CONFIDENCE BY Political Party
- Variations in Confidence by Gender
- Variations in Confidence by Race and Ethnicity
- Variations in Confidence by Education Level

Concern over the Integrity of the 2020 US Election 5

- Overall Concern
- Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Voting Method
- Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Political Party
- Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Gender
- Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Race and Ethnicity
- Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Education Level

Satisfaction with the US Electoral Process 7

- Overall Satisfaction
- Variations in Satisfaction by Voting Method
- Variations in Satisfaction by Political Party
- Variations in Satisfaction by Gender
- Variations in Satisfaction by Race and Ethnicity
- Variations in Satisfaction by Education Level

Faith in the US Electoral System 9

- Overall Faith in the Electoral System
- Faith in the Electoral System by Voting Method
- Faith in the Electoral System by Political Party
- Faith in the Electoral System by Gender
- Faith in the Electoral System by Race and Ethnicity
- Faith in the Electoral System by Education Level

Table of Contents Contd.

Confidence in Institutions and Problems Facing the Nation 11

- Trust and Confidence
- Issues Facing the Nation

Analysis of Trends Based on Voting Method 13

- Early In-Person Voting
- At the Polling Place as a Registered Voter
- At the Polling Place with a Provisional Ballot
- Newly Registered and Voted on Election Day
- Domestic Absentee/ Vote-By-Mail in the US
    - Why they Voted Absentee
    - How they Requested their Ballots
    - Problems with the Process
    - Time to Vote
    - Ballot Instructions
    - Ballot Return
    - Ballot Tracking

Overseas Absentee/ Vote-By-Mail from Abroad 15

- Ballot Request
- Ballot Receipt
- Ballot Return
- Ballot Tracking
- Problems
- Focus on Printing Problems

Military Voters 17

- Military Absentee /Vote-By-Mail
- Respondents Associated with the Military

Non-Voters 18

Conclusions and Recommendations 18

Appendices

Appendix 1: Voters' Suggestions on Reform. 19

Appendix 2: Recommendations on Overseas and Military Voter Reforms 21

Appendix 3: Survey Demographics. 23

HIGHLIGHTS / KEY FINDINGS

The 2020 Election Day Voter Experience Study, conducted by U.S. Vote Foundation (US Vote) together with its Overseas Vote initiative from November 2-13, 2020, provides new insights into 15,495 voters' experiences during the 2020 General Election.

- **Motivation:** Overall, nearly all respondents (98%) reported that they had high or very high motivation to vote in the 2020 election; 94% of respondents reported voting; 6% did not.
- **Satisfaction:** The vast majority of respondents (89%) indicated that they were satisfied with their overall voting experience.
- **Confidence:** Most respondents (73%) were confident that their ballots would be counted as intended, though more than a quarter of respondents (27%) were not; some of the biggest differences appeared between Republicans (63%) and Democrats (78%) and Independents (71%).
- **Integrity:** A majority (85%) of respondents are worried about the integrity of US elections; this trend is consistent across all groups and respondent characteristics.
- **Elections:** A bare majority (51%) are satisfied with the way elections work in the US, but many (49%) are not. These trends varied by different characteristics such as voting method and partisanship, but also gender.
- **Faith:** Most respondents (59%) have faith in the US electoral system, but a sizable minority (41%) do not; with substantial variation on partisanship, gender, and race and ethnicity.
- **Process:** Across all types of voting methods, most report a seamless process. The vast majority do not report problems and most found the instructions on how to vote easy to follow.
- **Non-voters:** The main reason individuals report not voting is due to not receiving a ballot rather than a lack of motivation.
- **Domestic and Overseas Absentee:** 99.5% of domestic and 92% of overseas absentee voter respondents indicated that they received their ballot in time to vote.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study was to gain insight into voters' experiences and attitudes concerning the voting process during the 2020 General Election, which was held on November 3, 2020. The survey most closely examined domestic and overseas absentee voters in order to understand logistical issues they face, how well the absentee voting process worked for them, whether they intended to vote in the same manner in the future and what, if any, reforms they would recommend.

US Vote sent out survey invitations to overseas voters one day prior to Election Day, and to domestic voters on Election Day with the intent to capture fresh information and feedback versus remembered experiences that might be tainted with the media aftermath of the election.

The survey captured a snapshot of voters' electoral behavior and support for the US electoral system, based upon important social demographics, political characteristics, and the type of voting method used in the 2020 election. In addition, to capturing these attitudes, the survey provided respondents with ample opportunity to provide input on their feelings toward the voting process, why they voted (or did not vote) in the manner they did, how to improve the voting process, and, finally, whether they would consider voting in the future and in what manner.

The data on voting problems gleaned from this survey will guide US Vote's reform recommendations and process improvements. US Vote will specifically reach out to local election officials with the results of the survey in order to provide them with timely voter feedback.

Voter satisfaction with the voting experience by voting method used

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Total Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Total Dissatisfied
Early in-Person - before Election Day	69.80%	23.94%	93.74%	4.70%	1.57%	6.27%
At the Polling Place as a Registered Voter	66.41%	26.29%	92.70%	4.64%	2.66%	7.30%
At the Polling Place with a Provisional Ballot	58.91%	26.36%	85.27%	7.75%	6.98%	14.73%
Newly Registered and Voted on Election Day	49.02%	50.98%	100.00%	0%	0%	0%
Domestic Absentee/Vote-By-Mail in the US	66.83%	27.49%	94.32%	4.20%	1.48%	5.68%
Overseas Absentee/Vote-By-Mail from Abroad	43.05%	41.64%	84.69%	11.38%	3.93%	15.31%
Military Absentee/Vote-By-Mail	49.52%	40.87%	90.39%	7.21%	2.40%	9.61%

SURVEY STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

The survey comprised 132 questions of which any voter would receive only a select number depending on the method of voting they had used to cast their ballot. These options included:

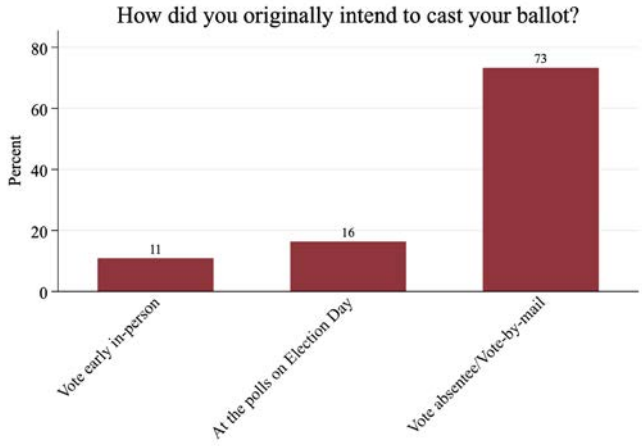
1. Early in-person voting;
2. At the polling place as a registered voter;
3. At the polling place with a provisional ballot;
4. Newly registered and voted on Election Day;
5. Domestic absentee/vote-by-mail in the US;
6. Overseas absentee/vote-by-mail from abroad;
7. Military absentee/vote-by-mail;
8. Did not vote.

Email invitations were sent to voters on the US Vote and Overseas Vote email list beginning on November 2, 2020. American Citizens Abroad also emailed out the survey invitation and some organizations in the Military Vote Coalition also notified their members of the survey. Potential respondents could also participate in the survey by visiting the US Vote website.

The survey had a completion rate of 84% and generated 15,495 responses by the time the survey closed on November 13, 2020. The average time spent on the survey was approximately 8 minutes. It is important to note that while the survey is not a random sample, US Vote includes a large membership base that allows for a large number of voters to be surveyed.

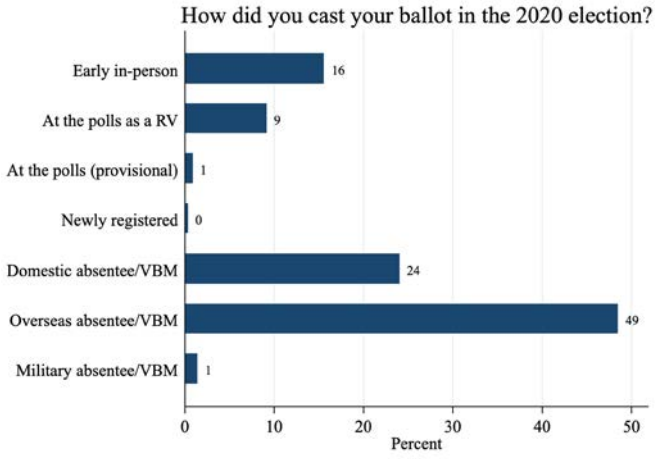
Of the 15,495 respondents, over 97% reported that they were registered to vote and over 81% indicated that registering to vote was easy or very easy. In addition, about 98% of respondents reported that they had high or very high motivation to vote in the 2020 election, with approximately 94% of all respondents reporting that they had indeed cast a ballot.

When asked how voters originally intended to vote, we see that the vast majority (73%) were planning to vote by mail/absentee from the outset.

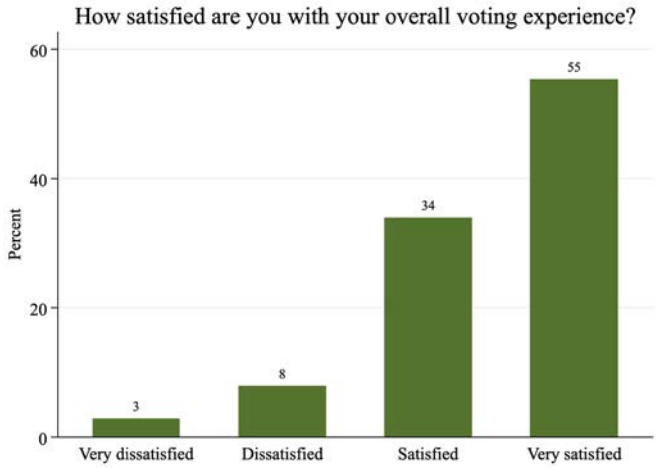


In the survey sample, when asked how they ultimately cast their ballot, **a plurality of respondents (49%) identified as overseas absentee/vote-by-mail from abroad. The next largest group included those who identified as domestic absentee/vote-by-mail in the US (24%)**, followed by early in-person voters (16%), and those who reported voting at the polls as registered voters on Election Day (9%).

Very few respondents reported voting via military absentee/vote-by-mail (1.5%), at the polls with a provisional ballot (1%), or as newly registered and voting on Election Day (<0.5%). The survey reached a significant number of first-time voters (1,057) which accounted for 9 percent of the survey population.



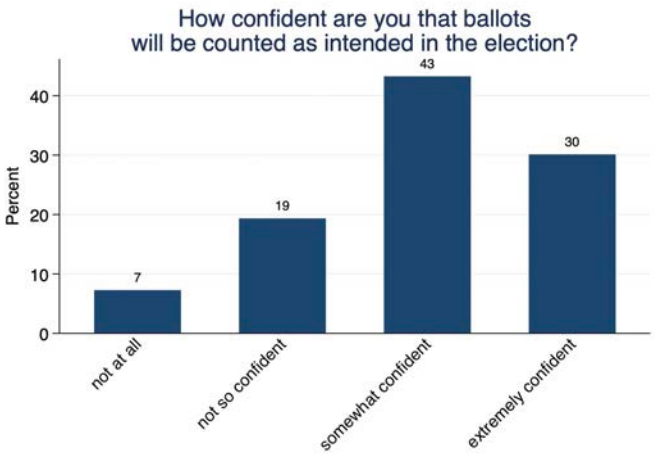
Overall, most respondents were satisfied (34%) or very satisfied (55%) with the overall voting experience. In contrast, less than 10% of respondents were dissatisfied with the experience.



If you could describe your voting experience in one word, what would it be?

SUPPORT FOR THE US ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Confidence in the Ballot-counting Process in the 2020 US Election



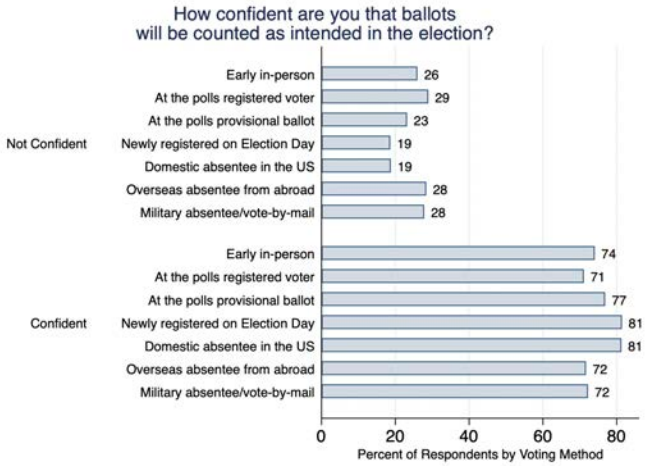
Overall Confidence:

While many Americans were anxious as the ballot-counting process got underway, the results of the survey indicate that confidence in the voting process was high among most groups. Most voters were confident that votes would be counted as intended; about 73% of respondents were extremely or somewhat confident. Still, a sizable portion of respondents (27%) expressed that they are not so confident or not confident at all that ballots would be counted as intended.

Variations in Confidence by Voting Method:

There are some differences among respondents when we break this down by the type of voting method.

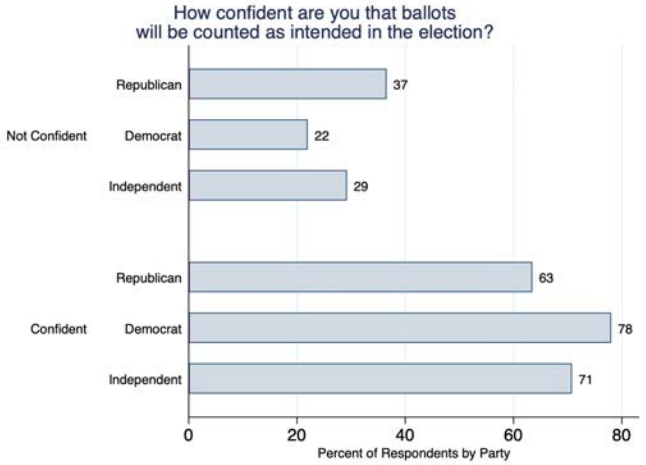
- **Voters with the highest amount of confidence ballots would be counted as intended were those who registered and voted on Election Day (81%) and those who voted by mail domestically (81%).**
- Those who voted by provisional ballot at their polling place (77%), voted early in-person (74%), and at the polling place as a registered voter (71%) were somewhat less confident ballots would be counted as intended.
- Similarly, about 72% of military absentee/vote-by-mail voters and nearly 72% of overseas absentee voters expressed confidence ballots would be counted as intended.



In spite of these positive trends, **nearly 20-30% of respondents from each voting-method category indicated that they were not confident that ballots would be counted as intended.**

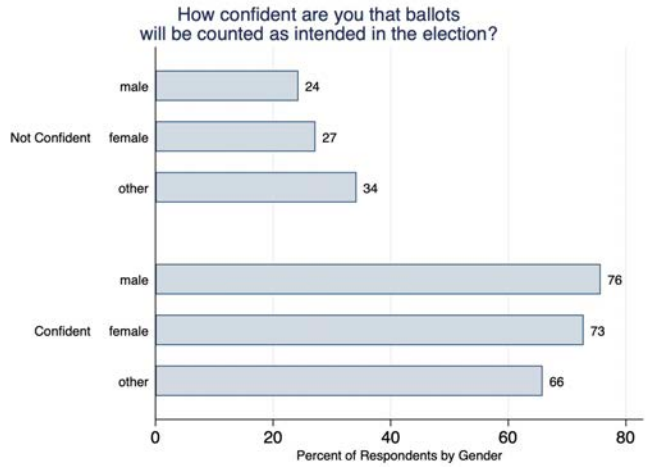
Variations in Confidence by Political Party:

Partisanship seemed to have an important connection with ballot confidence, too. The results indicate that Democrats expressed the highest amount of confidence (78%) votes would be counted as intended, while Republicans expressed less confidence (63%).
In addition, respondents that identified as Independent seemed quite confident that votes would be counted as intended (71%). Overall, concerns over the vote count ranged from a low of about 22% for Democrats, to around 29% for Independents, and a high of about 37% for Republicans.



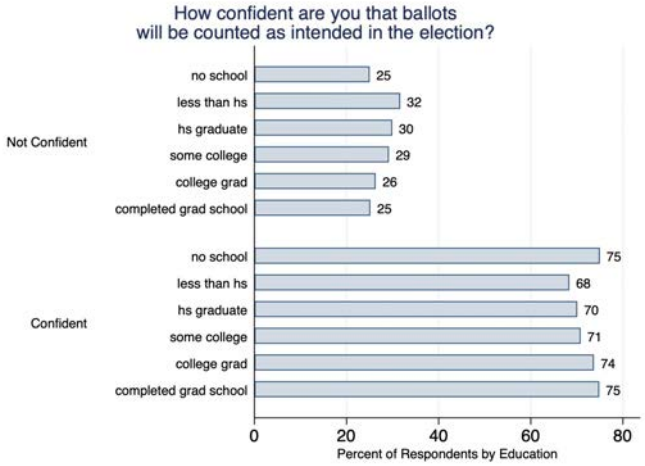
Variations in Confidence by Gender:

The survey shows small differences between men and women, as men express slightly higher confidence (76%) than women (73%) that ballots will be counted as intended. While both gender groups express a good deal of confidence in the vote count, respondents in both groups express some doubt in the process. For instance, about 24% of men are not confident, while about 27% of women are not confident in the process.



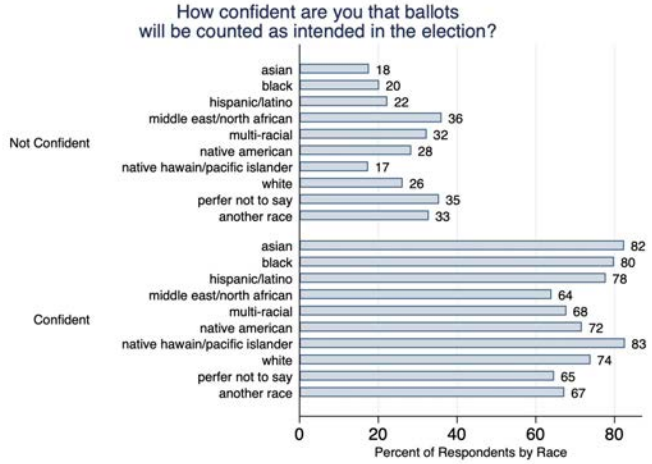
Variations in Confidence by Education Level:

Finally, education is another cleavage that helped define the American electorate. The US Vote survey finds small differences across education levels in terms of ballot confidence. About 75% of those who completed graduate school, about 74% of those that graduated from college and about 71% with some college education express confidence that ballots will be counted as intended. T**hose who graduated high school (70%) or who have less than a high school education (68%) express slightly less confidence**.



Variations in Confidence by Race and Ethnicity:

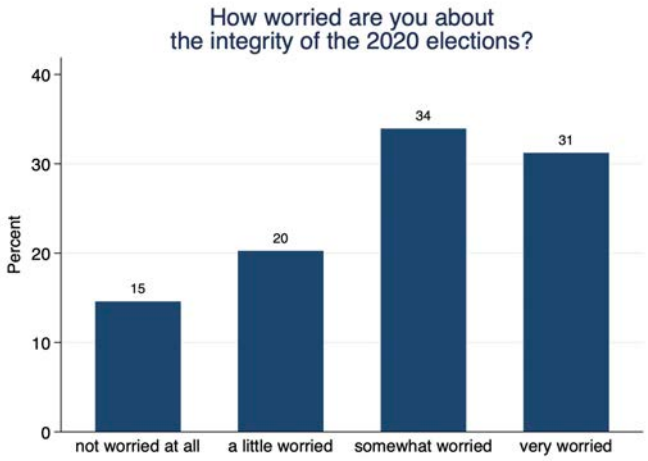
The 2020 election also highlighted the important cleavages among different racial and ethnic groups in the country. These differences emerge in confidence in the vote count as well. Overall, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders (83%) and Asian Americans (82%) express the highest level of confidence followed by Black (80%) and Hispanic Americans (78%). **White Americans express lower confidence (74%) than all other racial groups**.



Concern over the Integrity of the 2020 US Election

Overall Concern:

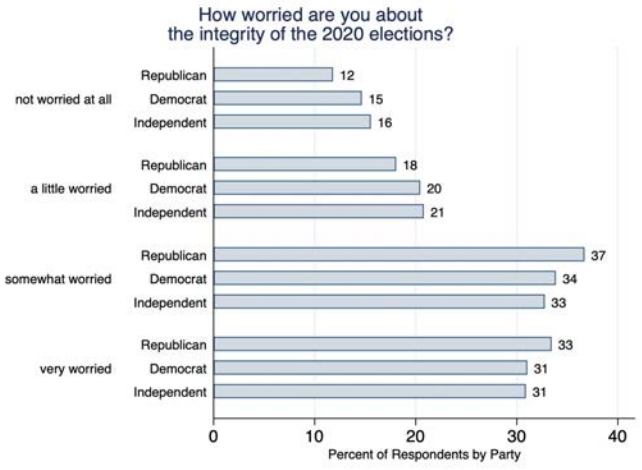
Since 2016, Americans have become increasingly concerned with the integrity of US elections. These concerns are evident in the 2020 elections as well. **The overwhelming number of respondents (85%) reported some degree of worry about the integrity of the 2020 elections**. At the extremes, nearly a third of respondents (31%) reported being very worried while a minority (15%) reported not being worried at all. Overall, these data are a troubling indicator for American elections and democracy.



Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Voting Method:

When we explore this concern by the method of voting, we see that a majority of respondents in all groups are at least a little worried about election integrity. **Over 80 percent of respondents in each group reported being worried about the integrity of US elections**.

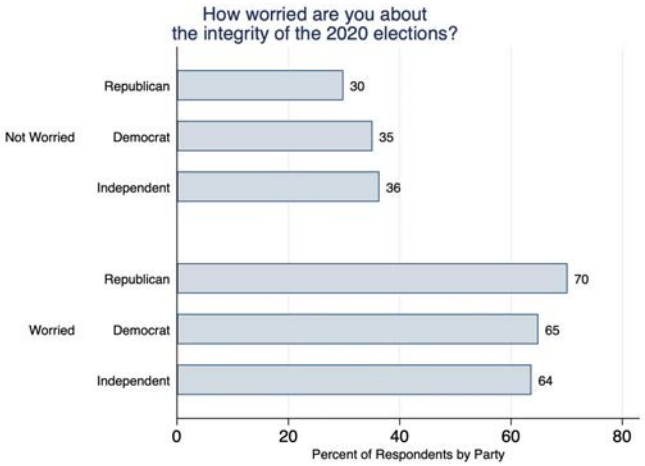
However, those who identified as newly registered and voted on Election Day and those who voted as registered voters on Election Day were even more worried about election integrity (88%, respectively), as were those who identified as early in-person voters and military absentee voters (87%, respectively). In contrast, **domestic absentee voters expressed the least concern with about 82% of these respondents reporting being worried about the integrity of the election**.



Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Political Party:

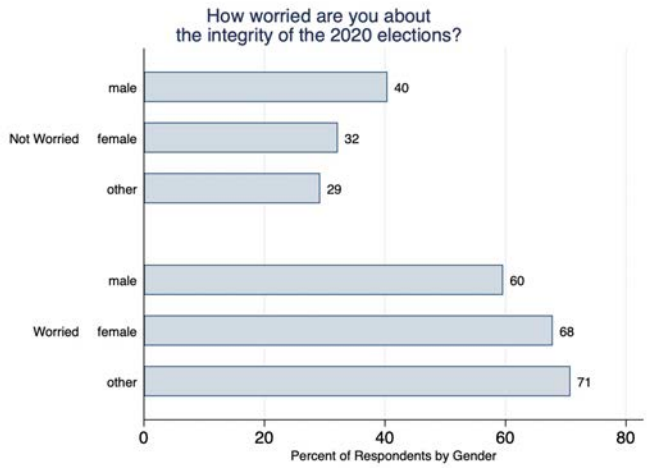
Partisanship is often framed as a key driver of the different perceptions of electoral integrity on issues such as voter fraud; however, these data indicate that there are no substantial differences between partisans on this issue. A majority of those identifying as Republicans (88%), Democrats (85%), and Independents (84%) report being worried about the integrity of the 2020 elections.

These statistics are alarming, and these data suggest that election integrity is an issue that transcends partisanship.



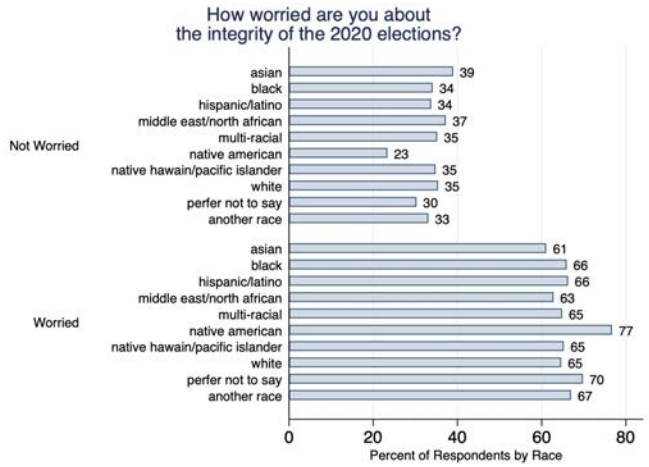
Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Gender:

The results of the survey indicate that both men and women are worried about electoral integrity, but there are substantial differences between the two. **About 87% of women report being worried about the integrity of the 2020 elections, while only about 82% of men are**. While a majority of both gender groups indicate that they are worried about the integrity of elections, some respondents are not worried about election integrity; 13% of women are not worried, while about 18% of men are not worried about the integrity of the 2020 elections.



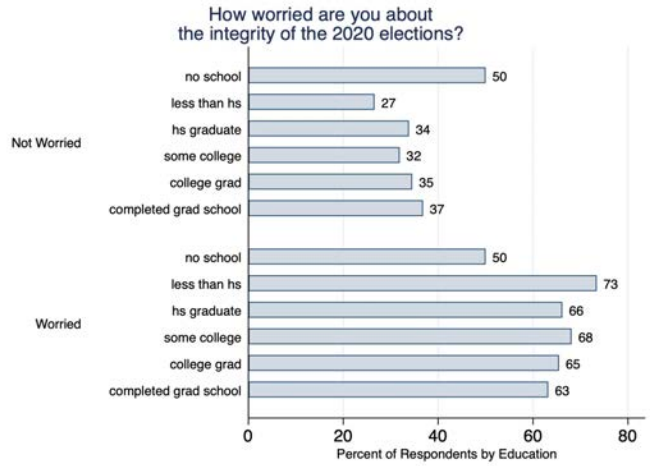
Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Race and Ethnicity:

Racial and ethnic cleavages are typically important indicators of political behavior and political attitudes in US elections. Based on the data of this study, however, there is a **consistent pattern of concern regarding electoral integrity across racial and ethnic groups**. A majority of respondents in each racial or ethnic group reports being worried about the integrity of the 2020 elections, with those preferring not to identify by race (90%), multi-racial respondents (89%), Native American or Alaska Native (87%), and Hispanic or Latinos (86%) were most worried.

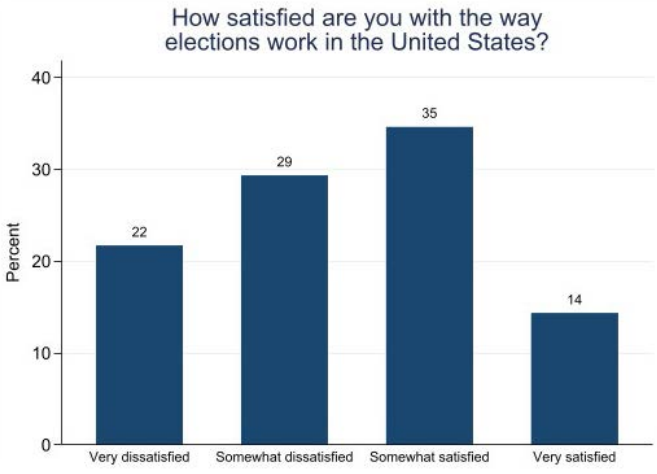


Variations in Concern regarding Election Integrity by Education Level:

As with race and ethnicity, the data indicate that **respondents across all education groups are worried about the integrity of elections**. Of note, the gap between those with high education and low-levels of education does not substantially differ. About 83% of those with an advanced degree reported being worried about the integrity of elections, which is similar to those with a college degree (86%), those with some college (87%), and those with a high school education (88%).



Satisfaction with the US Electoral Process



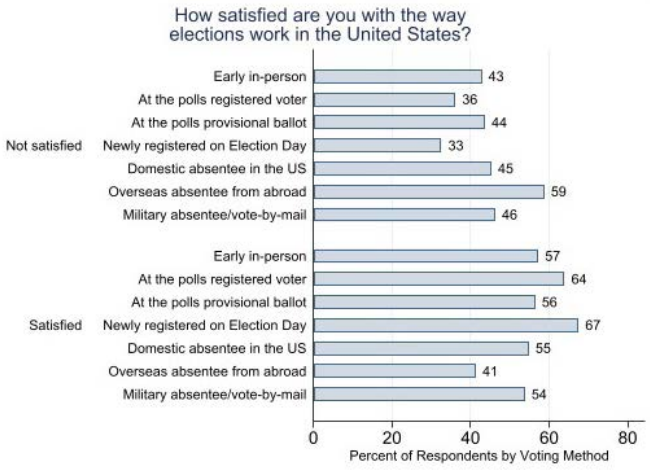
Overall Satisfaction:

Given the concerns over the integrity of the 2020 elections, it is critical to explore whether voters are satisfied with the way elections work in the United States. The results of the survey indicate that **a slight majority of respondents (51%) are dissatisfied with the way**

elections work in the United States, whereas a minority of respondents (49%) are satisfied. While most respondents fall into the somewhat satisfied (35%) and somewhat dissatisfied (30%) categories, the overall levels of dissatisfaction with the way US elections work are disturbing.

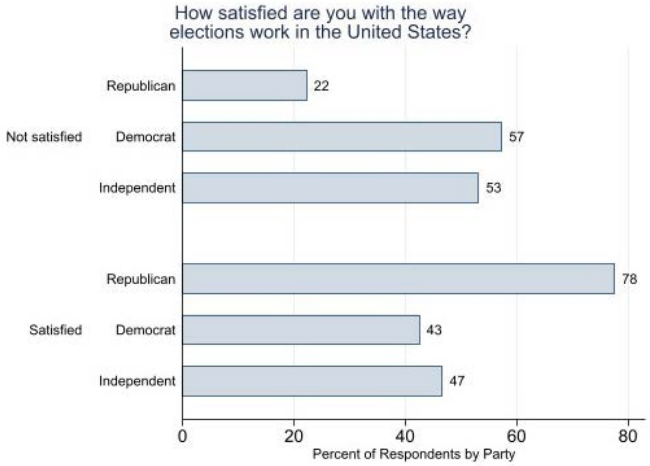
Variations in Satisfaction by Voting Method:

Respondents vary in their levels of satisfaction with the way elections work in the United States based on the method of casting a ballot. The data indicate that those who were newly registered and voted on Election Day (67%) and those who voted at the polling place as a registered voter (64%) have the highest levels of satisfaction with the electoral process. **In contrast, a majority of those who reported casting an overseas absentee ballot were very or somewhat dissatisfied (59%) with this process suggesting that overseas voters are not satisfied with the way that elections work**.



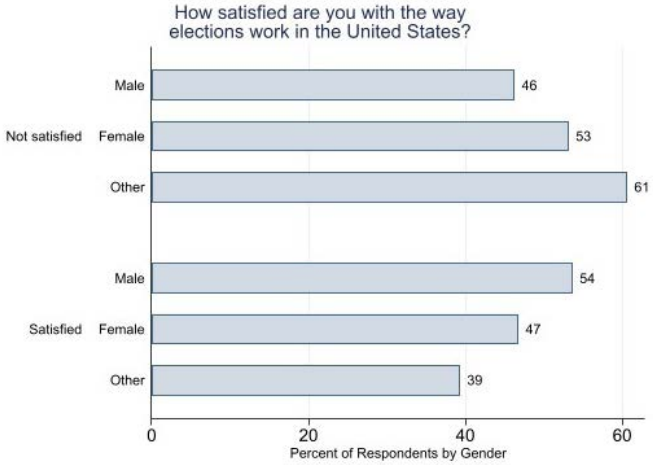
Variations in Satisfaction by Political Party:

Partisanship also seems to be an important factor with respondents' satisfaction with the way elections work. **The vast majority of Republicans (77%) are satisfied with the electoral process, while a majority of Democrats (57%) and a majority of Independents (53%) are not**.



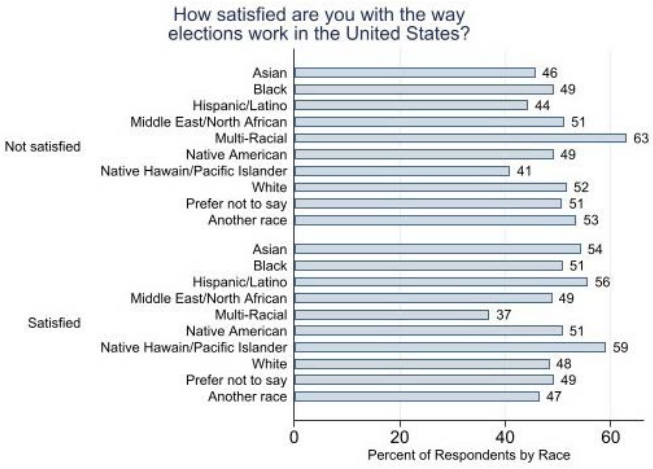
Variations in Satisfaction by Gender:

There seem to be important differences among men and women, too. While a slight majority of men (54%) report satisfaction with the way elections work, a majority of women (53%) are not satisfied. In fact, only about **47% of female respondents reported that they were satisfied with the way elections work in the US, suggesting a significant gender divide on this issue**.



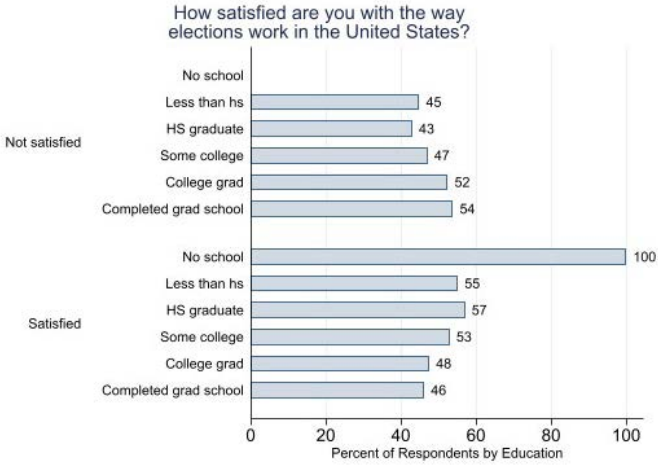
Variations in Satisfaction by Race and Ethnicity:

We observe a similar pattern when examining race by satisfaction with the way elections work in the US. **A majority of those identifying as multi-racial or multi-ethnic express majority dissatisfaction (63%) as do bare majorities of whites (52%), Middle Eastern/North African respondents (51%), and those preferring not to say (51%)**. In contrast, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (59%), Latinos (56%), Asian Americans (54%), and Black and Native Americans (51%, respectively) express majority satisfaction.



Variations in Satisfaction by Education Level:

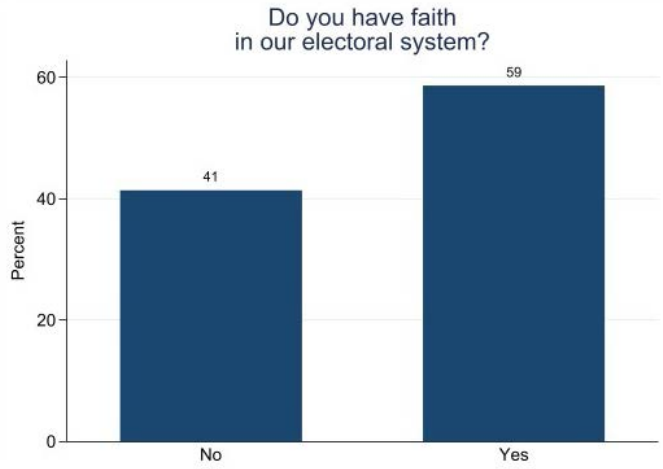
Finally, we see that **those with a college education or higher express the most dissatisfaction** (52-54%) while those without a college education range from 43 to 47% dissatisfied.



Faith in the US Electoral System

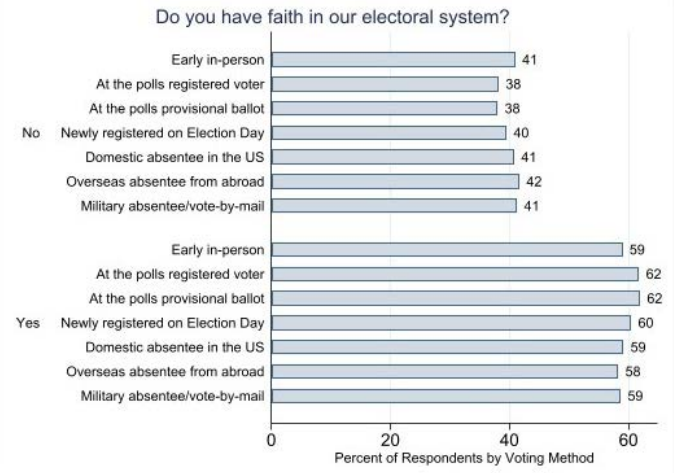
Overall Faith in the Electoral System:

It is also critical to explore whether voters have faith in the electoral system. The results of the survey indicate that **a majority of respondents reported having faith in the US electoral system (59%), but a sizable minority (41%) do not**. While further analysis is warranted, the large number of respondents with no faith in the electoral system is deeply troubling.



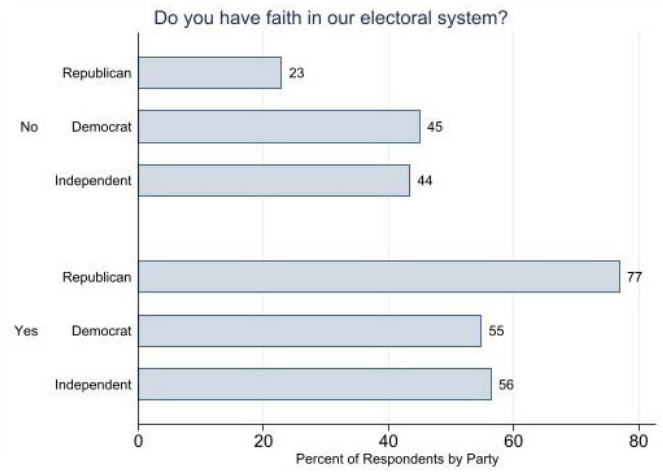
Faith in the Electoral System by Voting Method:

Across all type of voting method groups, a majority of respondents indicated that they had faith in the US electoral system. **Faith in the electoral system is highest for those who voted in person**, including those who voted at the polling place as registered voters on Election Day (62%), those who voted at the polling place with a provisional ballot (62%), and those who were newly registered and voted on (60%).



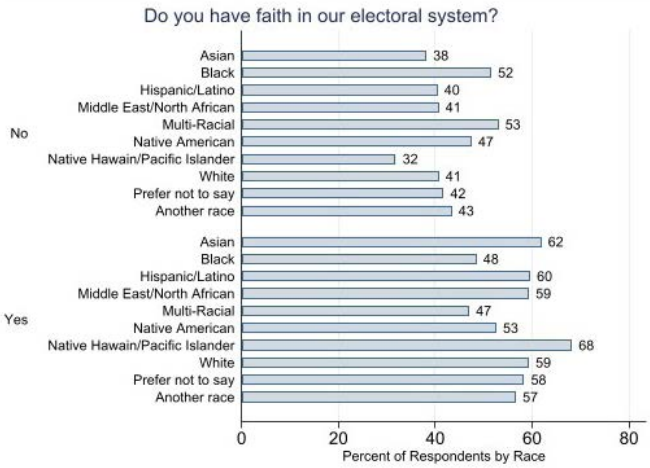
Faith in the Electoral System by Political Party:

Partisanship seems to be a driving factor in explaining faith in the US electoral system, according to these data. **A sizable majority of Republicans (77%) expressed faith in the US electoral system**, while a slight majority of Democrats (55%) and Independents (56%) expressed faith in the system. On the other hand, a sizable number of Independents (44%) and Democrats (45%) do not have faith in the system.



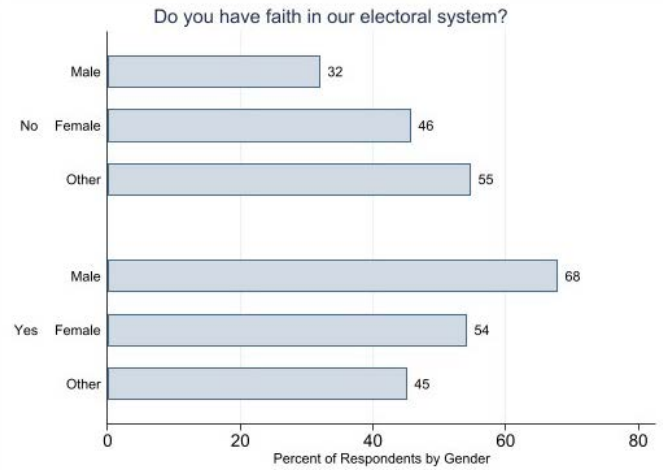
Faith in the Electoral System by Race and Ethnicity:

There are also clear differences when it comes to race and ethnicity. **A majority from multi-racial or multi-ethnic backgrounds (53%) and a majority of Black Americans (52%) do not have faith in the electoral system.** A majority of native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders (68%), Asians (62%), Hispanic (60%), Middle Eastern/North Africans (59%), and whites (59%) do have faith. However, what is striking about these numbers, is that a sizable portion of each group does not have faith in the electoral system.



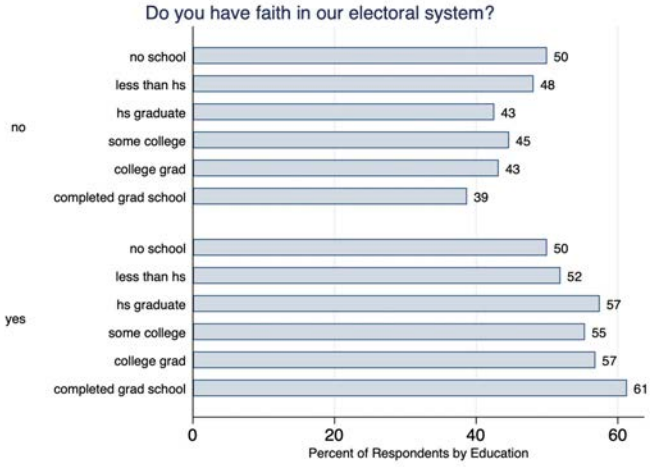
Faith in the Electoral System by Gender:

The data on gender show large differences between men and women, as **men express more faith (68%) than women (54%) in the electoral system**. It is also interesting to note that nearly half of female respondents (46%) do not have faith in the system.



Faith in the Electoral System by Education Level:

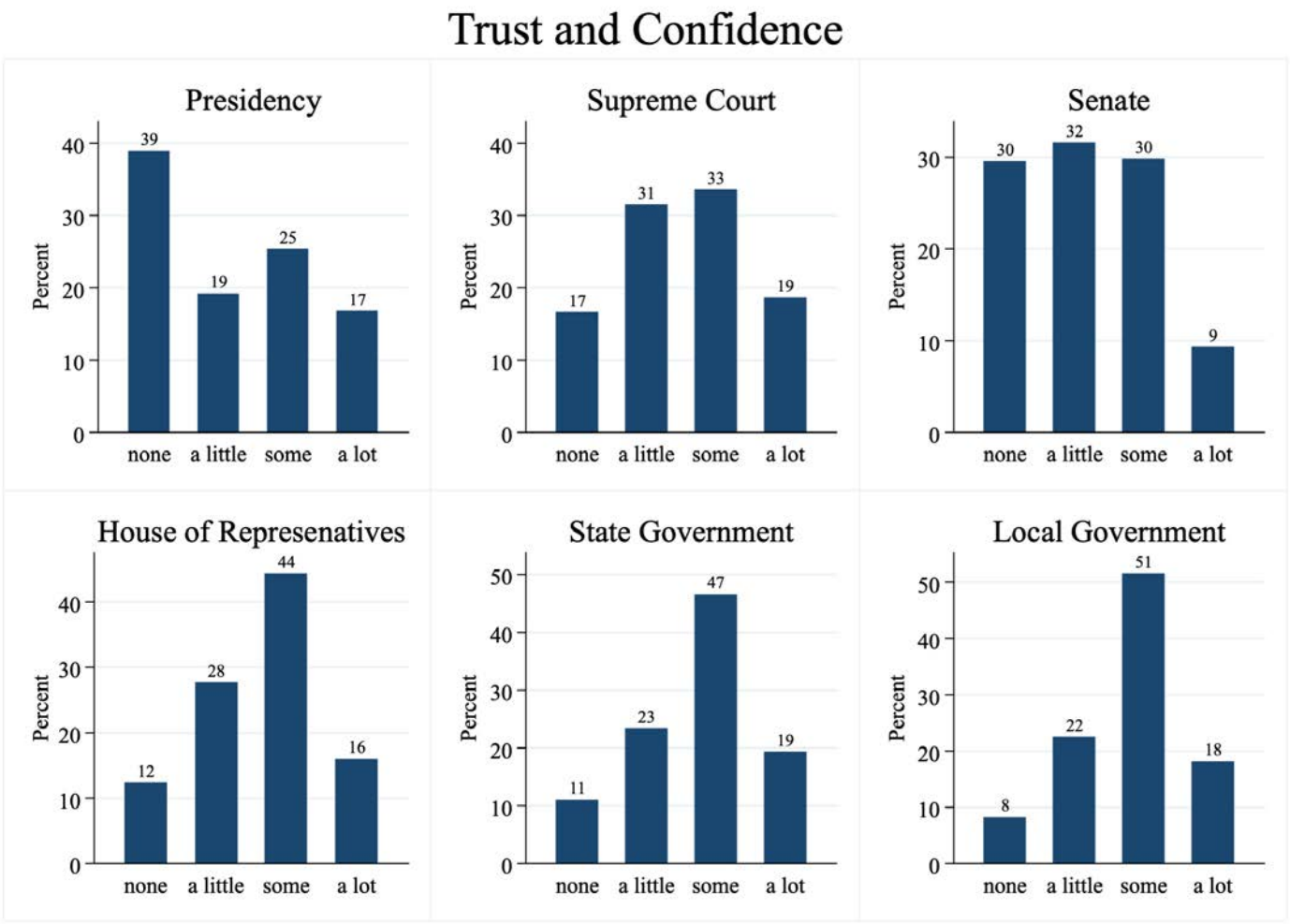
We observe differences by level of education on these questions as well. In terms of faith in the electoral system in the US, we see that **those with more education tend to have more faith in the system but these differences are not too large.** For instance, those who completed graduate school have about 61% faith, while those with a high school education have about 57% faith.



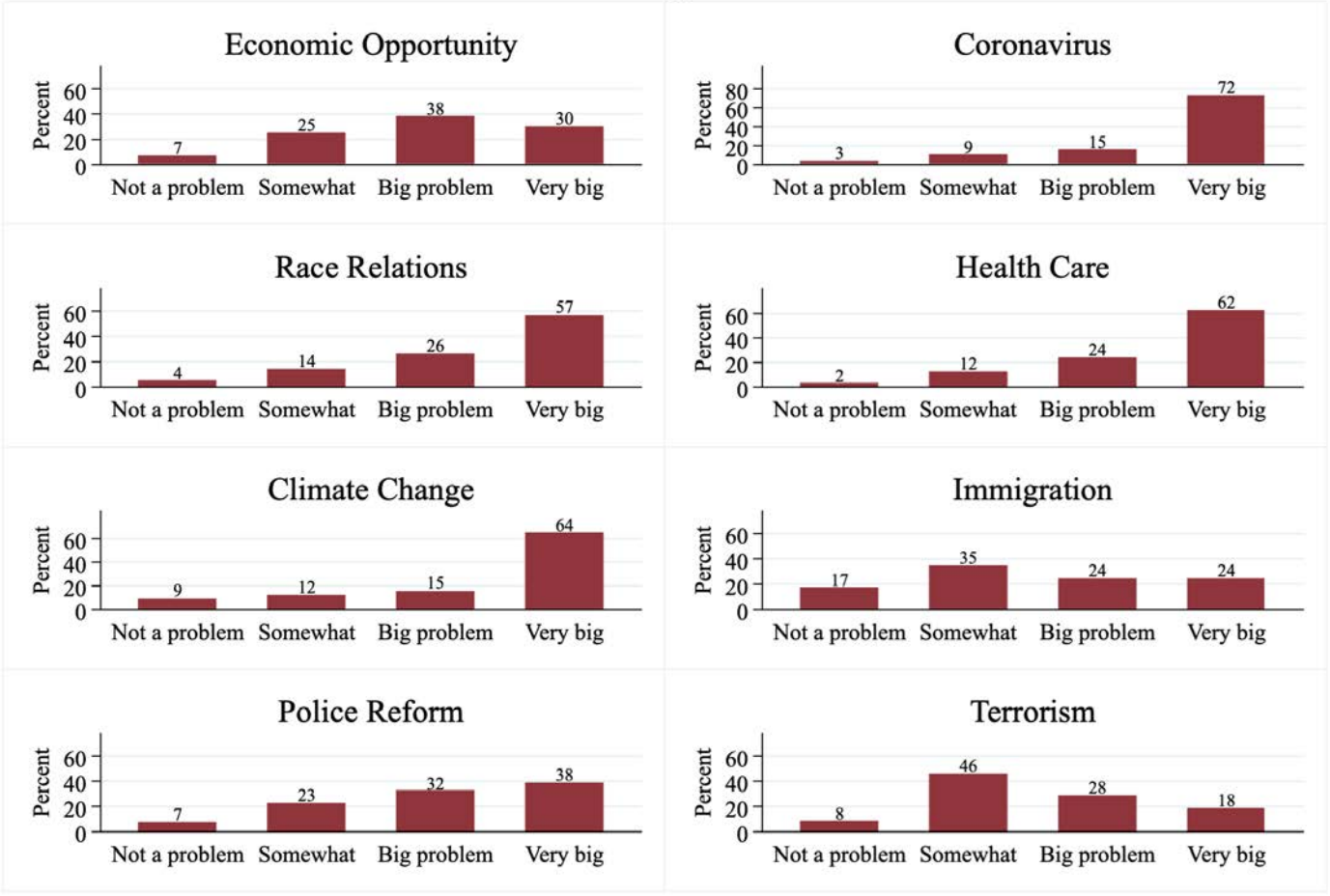
CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS AND PROBLEMS FACING THE NATION

The survey also asked respondents their level of trust and confidence in governmental institutions as well as state and local government. Overall, few expressed "a lot" of confidence in any institution or level of government. When combining "some" and "a lot" of trust and confidence, local and state governments receive the highest marks, followed by the House of Representatives. While there is mixed trust and confidence for the Senate and Supreme Court, **the Presidency receives the lowest level of trust in confidence of all institutions**.

The survey also asked respondents about different issues facing the nation and the degree to which each issue is a problem for the nation. **The coronavirus was identified as the largest problem (72%)**, followed by climate change (64%), health care (62%), and race relations (57%).

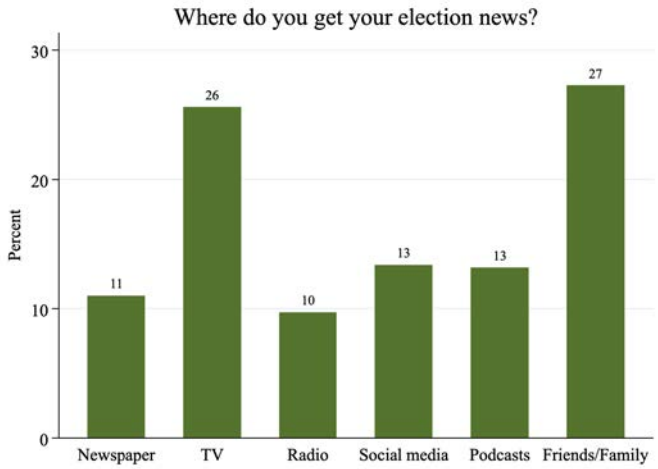


Issues Facing the Nation



When asked about interest in local and national politics, **75% indicate "a lot" of interest in national affairs**, while 25% indicated the same for local affairs.

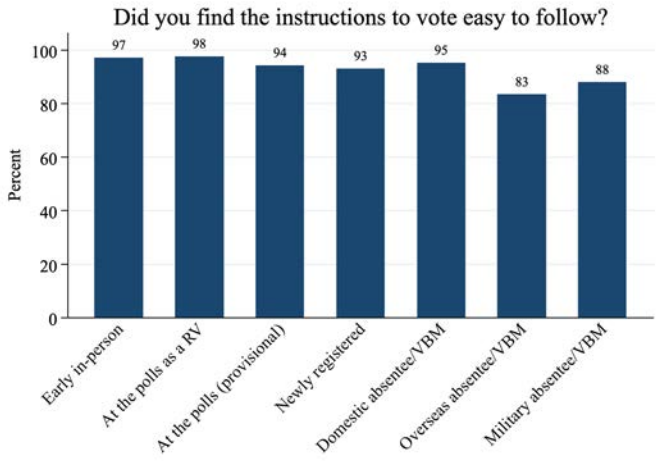
When asked where respondents get their **election news** (with an option to select all that apply), the most common answers were **friends and family (27%)** and television (26%).



ANALYSIS OF TRENDS BASED ON VOTING METHOD

Across all types of voting, most voters report a seamless process. The vast majority do not report problems and most found the instructions on their ballot easy to follow.

Of note, overseas voters, whether living abroad or serving in the military report the instructions to be somewhat less easy to follow than domestic voters. Improvements in this area may be very possible for local election officials to tackle in the short term to increase overseas and military voter success.



Early in-person voting

Early in-person voters constituted the third-largest group of voters in this study. There were 2,247 respondents that identified as early in-person voters, which is about 16% of all respondents in the study.

For those that voted early in-person, about **25% chose this form of voting because they wanted to be sure that their ballots would be counted, (a concept not considered in previous years)**, while 22% did so out of convenience or preference, and 15% did so to avoid long lines on Election Day.

In addition, about 98% of early in-person voters reported finding their voting site easily and about 92% of these voters expressed satisfaction with their wait time. Only 8% of those voting early in-person reported waiting longer than an hour to vote and most (78%) waited less than 30 minutes. The overwhelming majority of these voters reported that nothing unexpected happened at the polling place (91%).

The vast majority of early in-person voters experienced no problems (70%) and of the remainder, 21% sought help from a poll worker while 3% sought help from an election official or family and friend respectively. **Finally, about 56% of early voters say they would consider using the same voting method in the next election while 35% would consider a new method such as mail-in voting.**

At the polling place as a registered voter

There were 1,320 respondents that identified as having voted at the polls as a registered voter on Election Day. This is about 9% of all respondents in the study.

For those that voted at the polling place as a registered voter, 93% expressed satisfaction with their wait time. 9% of registered voters reported waiting longer than an hour to vote, however, most (79%) waited less than 30 minutes. While the majority of those voting at the polls as a registered voter did not encounter a problem (70%), the remaining 30% reported having some issue.

To resolve their issues, about 24% sought help from a poll worker while the remainder sought help from an election official. **62% of in-person registered voters say they would consider using the same voting method in the next election while a significant 31% would consider a new method such as mail-in voting.**

At the polling place with a provisional ballot

Less than 1% of respondents (129 respondents) indicated that they voted at the polling place with a provisional ballot.

For those that voted at the polling place using a provisional ballot, 95% expressed satisfaction with their wait time. 80% of those voting by provisional ballot waited less than 30 minutes. 33% of those using provisional ballots say they would consider using the same voting method in the next election while 55% would consider a new method such as mail in-voting.

Newly registered and voted on Election Day

Only 51 respondents indicated that they were newly registered and voted on Election Day, which is about 0.35% of all respondents in the study.

For those that voted as newly registered on Election Day, 88% expressed satisfaction with their wait time. Only 12% of newly registered voters reported waiting longer than an hour to vote and most (65%) waited less than 30 minutes. **A notable 47% of newly registered voters say they would consider using the same voting method in the next election while 46% would consider a new method such as mail-in voting**.

Domestic absentee/vote-by-mail in the US

Domestic absentee voters constituted the **second-largest group of voters in the study**. There were 3,461 respondents that identified as domestic absentee voters, which is about 24% of all respondents.

Why they Voted Absentee

When asked about why these voters chose to vote absentee (with an option to select all that apply), the most common response was the "**Coronavirus Pandemic**" (1,819 responses or 57%). This was followed by "Convenience" (1,297 responses or 14%), "Health reasons" (611 responses or 6%), and "Age-related reasons" (364 responses 5.5%).

How they Requested their Ballot

A majority of these voters (1,955 respondents, about 59%) reported applying for an absentee ballot through their "**State or local website**," while other respondents reported another method (<10% for each category) or "Other" (454 respondents, about 14%).

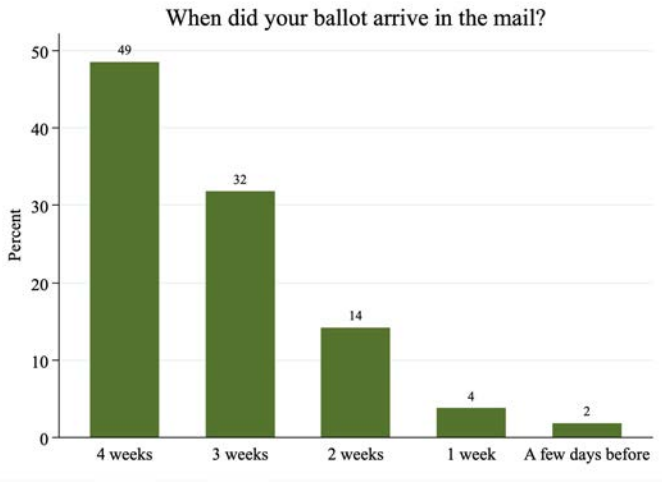
Problems with the Process

In addition, the **vast majority of domestic absentee voters (2,985 respondents, 93%) reported not having any problems *requesting* a ballot or *receiving* a ballot (3,029 respondents, 93%)**, though 6% (205 respondents) did indicate that their ballot arrived later than expected. Of those that responded to problems regarding their absentee voting experience, most (194 respondents, 63%) contacted a local election official for help.

Time to Vote

Almost all domestic absentee/vote-by-mail voters reported receiving their ballot in time to return it as 99.5% report receiving their ballot in plenty of time. This should be consider a major success as many states had never dealt with such a ramped up increase in absentee ballot volume.

When we examine the time by which ballots arrived, we see that 48% (1,588 respondents) received their ballot 4 weeks before Election Day, 31% (1,040 respondents) received their ballot 3 weeks before, 14% (464 respondents) received their ballot 2 weeks before, and 5.5% (181 respondents) received their ballot 1 week or less before Election Day.



Ballot Instructions

In addition, over 95% of respondents indicated that the instructions that accompanied their absentee ballot were easy to follow (3,173 respondents). Related to this, about 82% of these types of voters did not seek help with the voting process (2,052 respondents), whereas 9% reported asking a friend or family (235 respondents) and 6% reported asking an election official (146 respondents).

Ballot Return

A small majority of domestic absentee voters returned their ballot via "US Mail" (54%, 1,820 respondents). The second most frequent return method was "Official Drop Box" (32%, 1,082 respondents).

Ballot Tracking

Once they returned their ballot, most domestic absentee voters (67%, 2,243 respondents) checked their ballot status using an online ballot tracking service from their state or municipality; something that states should consider a dramatic success. While about 33% (1,091 respondents) did not use this type of service, the 67% that did surely relieved the local election offices from calls and questions.

Reforms and Improvements

When asked about suggestions to make the domestic absentee/vote-by-mail experience better, about 38% of domestic absentee voters reported that we should always be allowed to vote-by-mail (1,111 respondents). Others reported that we should have "internet or email voting" (23%, 676 respondents) (which oddly flies in the face of the concerns about election integrity that 85% of voters voiced), "automatic voter registration" (21%, 599 respondents), or that we "should only have paper ballots with a verifiable paper trail" (18%, 512 respondents).

Finally, **nearly 65% of domestic absentee voters (2,046 respondents) reported that they would use the same voting method in the next election**, while about 35% (1,115 respondents) reported that they would vote in person or that they were not sure about how they would vote next time around.

OVERSEAS ABSENTEE/VOTE-BY-MAIL FROM ABROAD

Overseas absentee voters constituted the largest group of voters in the study. There were 6,986 respondents that identified as overseas absentee voters, which is about 49% of all respondents.

Ballot Request

Overseas voters largely requested their ballots through:

- A state or local website (30%)
- The Overseas Vote website (26%)
- A federal website (7.5%)

This group of voters also reports few problems receiving their ballot as 80% had no issues requesting their ballots. The top problems for requesting a ballot were:

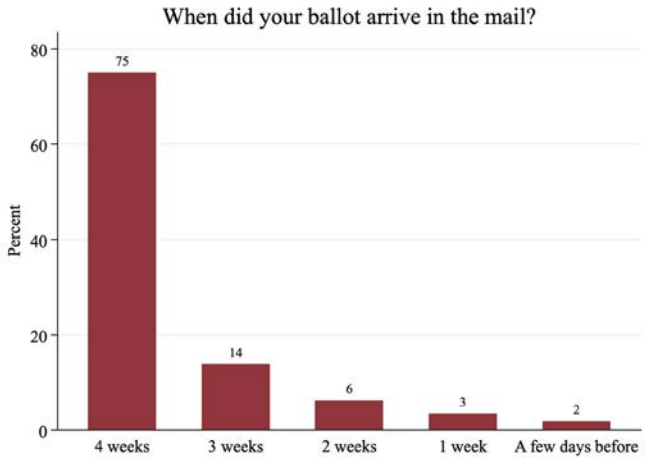
- Problems accessing the form (5%)
- Some were unsure which address to list (3%)
- Others had printing problems (3%)

Ballot Receipt

How overseas voters received their ballot:

- 80% via electronic means; comprising email (66%) and website downloaded (14%)
- 15% received the ballot through postal mail

An overwhelming majority report receiving their ballot in plenty of time (92%). As with domestic absentee, the vast majority of overseas voters report receiving their ballot well before the election with 89% receiving their ballot 3-4 weeks before Election Day.



Ballot Return

In contrast to blank ballot receipt, which was largely online, most overseas voters (66%) report returning their ballots on paper:

- via postal mail (49%), express mail (13%), or diplomatic post (4%)
- email ballot return was just 18%

While over half the states allow online ballot return, overseas voters opted strongly for paper methods.

Ballot Tracking

Upon returning their ballot, 55% of overseas voters report checking their ballot status through a state or local website.

Overseas absentee voters indicated support for the following reforms: internet/email voting (60%), permanent absentee overseas (18%), paper ballots only (11%), the ability to use FWAB and other options (4%), and standardized deadlines across all states (3%).

Problems

When encountering a problem, overseas voters listed election officials (15%), friends or family (9%), and the US Vote Help Desk (4%) as the most prominent sources of help.

Those voting overseas via absentee/vote-by-mail generally reported few problems voting. In total, 80% report no issues in requesting their ballot while 81% report no issues in receiving their ballot. However, a stubborn 20% had issues, and that is of concern.

Focus on Printing Problems

While 81% reported no problems receiving their ballot, the main problems in terms of receiving the ballot for overseas voters were largely experienced by voters who received online ballots that required printing:

- printing problems (6%) and
- confusion over the correct paper size (5%) – which could also be considered part of the printing process.

These printing and paper size issues require a few deliberate actions by election officials to resolve:

- Improve ballot request instructions to inform the voters who request online ballots that they will need to print them
- Include in the instructions that the ballot file should be opened in Adobe Reader (not a browser) and when printing, they should select “Print to Fit”
- Inform voters in the instructions that ballots cannot and will not be rejected based on the size or weight of the paper they are printed on or the envelope they are sent in (this is codified in the Uniformed and Overseas Absentee Voting Act)
- Test the instructions with actual voters and adjust as needed

> *We need clearer instructions on how to print a return envelope.*
>
> — Overseas Vote-By-Mail Voter

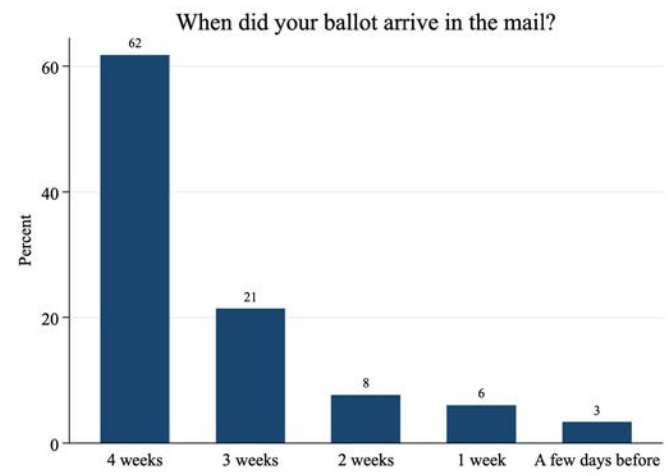
> *Can we get printing instructions for ballots arriving in Europe by email because of different paper sizes between US and Europe?*
>
> — Overseas Vote-By-Mail Voter

MILITARY VOTERS

Military absentee/vote-by-mail

Only 208 respondents indicated that they voted military absentee/vote-by-mail, which is about 1.44% of all respondents in the study.

Of those in this category, most reported few problems voting. In total, 79% report no issues in requesting their ballot while 82% report no issues in receiving their ballot. The most common problem for absentee/vote-by-mail from abroad were printing problems (5%) while others report receiving the ballot later than expected (7%). As with domestic absentee, the vast majority of military absentee voters report receiving their ballot well before the election with 83% receiving their ballot 3-4 weeks before Election Day.



Respondents associated with the military

Turning our attention strictly to respondents associated with the military: 6% of respondents that identified with the military (857 respondents), approximately 39% identified as uniformed services members, about 30% identified as the spouse of a service member, and about 15% identified as a dependent of a uniformed services member. The remaining 16% or so identified as civilians working for the U.S. armed forces.

For those associated with the military, the data indicate that over 90% reported voting in the 2020 election, and that over 90% of these respondents indicated high or very high motivation to vote. Across all groups associated with the military, over 90% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their voting experience (ranging from 90-92%).

In addition, the most common form of casting a ballot for uniformed service members was via military absentee (28%), while early in-person was most common among spouses (27%), and domestic absentee was most common for dependents (28%). For civilians working for the military, overseas absentee was most common (45%).

In terms of their experience with the voting process, approximately 92% of those respondents associated with the military reported that the instructions to vote were easy to follow; in addition, about 88% of those who voted via military absentee reported that the instructions were easy to follow. Of the few voters associated with the military that voted in person at a polling place (103 respondents), approximately 87% reported waiting 1 hour or less to vote.

A majority of those identifying as associated with the military (58%) reported that they would vote through the same method, while about 37% reported that they would choose another method, and about 5% were not sure. Finally, most of those who voted via military absentee reported no problems (82%), but a few reported that their ballot took longer to arrive than expected (7%) and a few reported having printing problems (5%).

NON-VOTERS

The survey also captured some who did not vote in the 2020 election, a small 6% of the total sample (897 respondents total).

- The most common reason for not voting was a ballot not being received (46%) while 4% report receiving their ballot too late to vote.
- Other top reasons given were missing the absentee deadline (6%), losing motivation to vote (6%), or a feeling that their vote did not matter (5%).
- Of those not voting, 93% said they would strongly consider voting in future elections.

While non-voters constituted approximately 6% of the sample population (897 respondents), this group is particularly interesting because about 93% of these respondents indicated that they were interested in voting and would strongly consider voting in future elections. What is more, one of the most common reasons for not voting among respondents in this group had to do with ballot problems, including the fact that ballots were not received (46%) or that they received their ballots too late (4%).

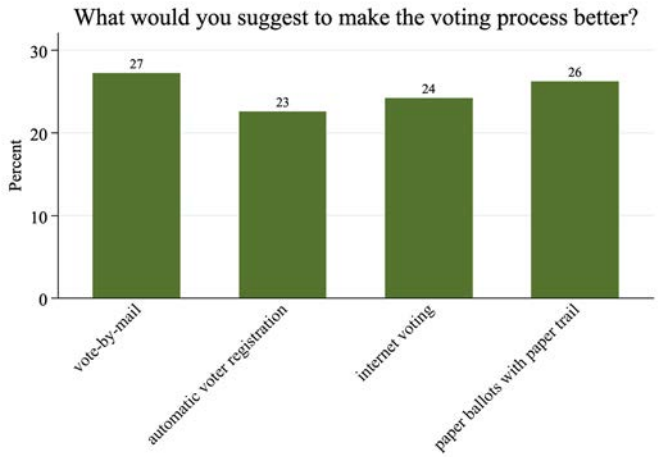
These findings suggest that non-voters may have faced some additional challenges to participating in the 2020 elections, but that they may participate in future elections with some additional help.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the 2020 Election Day Voter Experience Survey provide valuable insights into the experiences of voters associated with US Vote and its Overseas Vote initiative. Indeed, the data gleaned from this study will provide US Vote with key data to formulate important policy recommendations for the voting process in future US elections. Based on the data and trends analyzed in this report, the authors make the following recommendations.

The data gleaned from this study indicate that most people are eager to vote and do, in fact, vote; however, many voters have specific ideas for how to improve the voting process. The survey asked voters what they would suggest making the voting process better (universal vote by mail, automatic registration, internet voting, paper ballots with a paper trail) and each option received almost identical support with about one-quarter choosing each option.

About 27% of the sample would like to see the adoption of universal vote-by-mail, while about 26% chose favor of the use of paper ballots with a paper trail to maintain election integrity. In addition, approximately 24% of respondents chose internet voting, whereas around 23% chose the adoption of automatic voter registration.



A strong juxtaposition appeared in voter sentiment. A majority of respondents expressed faith in the US electoral system, confidence that their ballots will be counted as intended, and are satisfied with their overall personal voting experience; however, in contrast, a majority of the respondents in this study indicated that they were dissatisfied with the way elections worked in the US and a majority of respondents were worried about the integrity of US elections.

Appendix 1

Voters' suggestions on reform

The need to further refine the underlying processes of voting was noted by survey respondents, despite their largely positive experiences. The fact that four of the most popular suggestions– vote-by-mail, automatic voter registration, early voting, and paper ballots – are standard procedures in many states, points to the need to expand existing reforms to make them more universal.

The survey offered respondents the option to suggest, in an open-ended response, ways in which the voting experience could be improved. Several interesting suggestions emerged that clearly depended on whether the respondent voted in-person or by mail.

In-person voter suggestions

Among in-person voters (early voters, previously registered, provisional, and newly registered), the top suggestions stood in complete contrast: 1) make early voting universally available; 2) require ID at the polls in order to vote; and 3) limit all voting to in-person only.

The latter two suggestions appeared at slightly over 1% of the total number of respondents. While these totals do not indicate that these opinions are widely held, the fact that they are held at all indicates the need for further voter education on these subjects, considering the overwhelming success of the November election and the clear absence of fraudulent or elicit voting.

> *There should be more early voting… especially in places like New York City. There's no excuse for there to be such long lines.*
>
> — Early Voter

Early voter suggestions

The respondents who used the open-ended option to recommend early voting reflected the sentiment that this method of voting should have broader adoption: "[Early] Voting should be nation-wide, it should be a week long, and it shouldn't be as restrictive as some places make it," was a typical response. Other respondents called out specific states – their home states – that could also benefit from this option: Alabama, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania were among the specific states mentioned.

> "*[Early] Voting should be nation-wide, it should be a week long, and it shouldn't be as restrictive as some places make it*."
>
> — Registered Voter (polling place)

Mail voter suggestions

Among the respondents who voted by mail, two suggestions stood out: provide ballot tracking services and improve overall voter services. The first suggestion is again the expansion of something that already exists in a majority of states and was proven to be well-received in the General Election. The suggestion to improve voter services, particularly in light of the large number of respondents who reported that their personal voting experience was positive, is a recognition that despite the overall success of the recent election, respondents believe that improvements are needed overall and that more voter services is an important path to improvement.

> *We should be able to track if ballots are counted no matter the county or state.*
>
> — Domestic Vote-by-mail Voter

The overall category of "improving voting services" offered some notable suggestions, including "clearly written propositions" and other ideas that pertain to the quality of the information available to voters from their local voting authorities either prior to the election or as part of the actual voting process. Other suggestions in this regard include "Comprehensive and consistent candidate information for EVERYONE on the ballot, not just presidential candidates, "instructions could be more simple," and "a unified place for information."

US Vote and other voter outreach organizations, states and some local jurisdictions provide some or all of these services through, however, such comments points to the need for ongoing and increased outreach among voters to build their awareness of available voter services.

> *Comprehensive and consistent candidate information for EVERYONE on the ballot, not just presidential candidates, "instructions could be more simple,"*
>
> — Domestic Vote-by-mail Voter

More importantly, one of the issues that surfaced across the country was the confusion generated by the mailing of ballot request forms from partisan organizations, some of which were mislabeled or otherwise misdirected or confused voters. Increased action should be taken by states and local voting authorities to identify themselves as the most credible and available source and directly fill these gaps with voters rather than leaving room for third party interference and confusion. The National Association of Secretaries of State launched a concerted and well-conceived effort in this vein, one which US Vote applauds, through their #TrustedInfo2020 campaign, which aims to inform the public that Local Election Officials are the best source for voting information.

Other noteworthy suggestions include "do away with the security envelope," "tell us how much postage to put on the envelope," "less complexity across and within states," and "I would like more information on the judgeships."

In-person voter suggestions

Finally, a small but noteworthy number of respondents reported overall "confusion" at the polls as well as specific issues like improper electioneering, COVID-related safety, and access for people with disabilities. Collectively, these issues speak to the need for better communication on the part of both voters and election officials about how to deal with these issues should they come up in future elections.

> *They could not find my information, so I had to submit an affidavit. When I contacted BOE my information and registration was on record, but the polling site still could not find me.*
>
> — Registered Voter (polling place)

US Vote Comment

The issues regarding negative perceptions about voting, despite the record turnout and universal consensus that this election was safe, secure, and successful, point to a significant problem that must be addressed by the election community moving forward. If voters have largely positive personal experiences with voting, but are dissatisfied with how elections work, this indicates either large-scale systemic or structural problems that undermine confidence, or it is due to the unfortunate fact that many voters have succumbed to concerted disinformation campaigns on social media and other outlets intended to taint the overall voting process.

It is likely that disinformation played a significant role in these perception problems, though the reality of problems with postal mail delivery and individual states acting to limit drop boxes and implement other voter suppression tactics also played a role. Either reason justifies further research and program development around ensuring that voters have a clear, unbiased understanding of how safe and secure elections are across the country.

Appendix 2

Overseas and Military Voting Reform Recommendations

Overseas voter respondents to the US Vote Survey indicated a higher rate of dissatisfaction (15%) with their voting experience, almost three times higher than their domestic absentee voter counterparts. When overseas voters were asked how to improve their experience, a significant majority (60%) indicated support for internet/email voting, with 18% suggesting that overseas voters be designated as permanent absentee voters, 11% suggesting offering access to FWAB more broadly (4%), and standardized deadlines across all states (3%).

The US Vote survey highlights the fact that overseas and military voting is ripe for improvement. Processes involved with overseas voting can be more complex than domestic vote-at-home experiences, therefore it is not surprising that printing ballots and ballot envelopes and other aspect of the process came up for reconsideration.

However, the most commonly proposed solution – internet/email voting is a seriously flawed solution that US Vote formally opposes based on security and privacy concerns. It is important that efforts to buttress confidence in existing processes be joined by efforts to help the general public understand the lack of security surrounding internet voting.

US Vote suggests consideration of the following reforms:

- Automatic registration for uniformed services members
- 45-day combined voter registration/ballot request/ballot form
- Standardized election dates and deadlines for federal elections
- Inform citizens of their voting rights overseas
- Provide better guidance on how to print ballots and envelopes

Automatic registration for uniformed services members

Automatic voter registration reform is particularly needed for military voters. Rather than uniformed service members being automatically registered to vote upon enlistment, every uniformed services member must repeatedly register and request a ballot, year after year while serving our country. US Vote recommends this process be changed to establish automatic registration for enlisted service members with the clear possibility to opt-out, if desired. All registered uniformed services members should automatically receive their ballots for every election in which they are eligible.

45-day combined process for registration, ballot request and ballot casting

The complexities of voting abroad are exacerbated by the separation of the processes of registration, ballot request, and ballot submission into what often amounts to three separate interactions with an election official in the US. This complexity is unnecessary, and has the potential effect of disenfranchising a voter should the separate transmission of any these documents fail to take place within the proscribed deadlines.

It is possible to alleviate this time-consuming process for voters that would like to take advantage of the franchise within a shorter time before the election. US Vote recommends that a single combined form, which could function as a combined voter registration/ ballot request/ballot for use across all states should be made available to overseas voters as of 45 days prior to the election, when overseas and military ballots are made available. This would dramatically expedite the overseas and military voting process and administration and bring many new voters into the franchise while eliminating another risk that a voter may not be able to exercise their right to vote.

Standardized deadlines for federal elections

In a similar vein, the processes of registration and requesting a ballot varies across states and have become increasingly complicated to follow. A deadline may be different depending on whether an application or ballot is sent by mail, email, fax or delivered in-person, with no correlation from one state to the next. This is the kind of non-uniformity that confuses voters. US Vote recommends one single set of federal voting deadlines for all overseas and military voters across all states.

Inform citizens of their voting rights overseas

The U.S. State Department should inform US citizens regarding their overseas voting rights upon the issuance of each new or replacement passport. Inclusion of a one-page flyer with each passport summarizing both voting rights and other pertinent overseas citizen information would be a low-cost measure to improve overseas voter participation. U.S. Citizens should travel abroad knowing they carry with them their right to vote.

Provide better guidance on how to print ballots and envelopes

The problems related to printing ballot requests, ballots, and envelopes is one that has been endemic to overseas and military voting for many years and one that can be easily solved without legislation.

Rather than an insecure, unproven solution – internet voting – that presents more problems than it resolves, US Vote recommends that overseas voters be better informed on options for ballot receipt. It should be crystal clear to overseas and military voters that requesting a ballot to be delivered online versus on paper by post, and returning such a ballot implies that they will print such a ballot. Presently, this requirement is not clear. Voters misunderstand that their choice to receive their ballot online does not imply that they will vote online.

This printing issue creates tremendous uncertainty for voters. Concern that the ballot will be rejected if the printing is improperly done, or the envelope improperly labeled. When receiving a ballot for printing, overseas and military voters should be informed in the instructions that their ballot cannot be rejected based on the size or weight of the paper or the envelopes used.

Paper for voters in countries outside of North America is “A4”, which is slightly narrower and longer than a standard 8-1/2 by 11 inch sheet of paper. The paper-size problem can be resolved simply, with better communications and instructions about how to open the file in the correct program and shrink it to fit the available paper. Informing voters of how to do this is an important goal for US Vote and other voter services organizations.

It is highly recommended that US election administrators cease to request that overseas voters print and fold their own envelopes. Rather, they should provide a label/s for printing and instructions to affix the label to an envelope in the standard mailing size of the country where the voters resides.

It may be that many of the voters struggling to print their online ballots would fare better if they request their ballot on paper by post, as it arrives printed and with a return envelope. To have faith in this process on paper, the US Postal Service will need better funding and support to execute its mission.

Appendix 3

Survey Demographics

GROUP	PERCENT OF SURVEY	GROUP	PERCENT OF SURVEY
Gender		**Race**	
Female	62	Asian	4
Male	35	Black	4
Other	3	Hispanic/Latino	4.6
Occupation		Multi-Racial	3
Military	6	White	72
Student	10	**Education**	
Age		College graduate	77
18-29	13.6	Less than college	23
30-45	20.3	**Income**	
46-64	28	Under 35k	22
Over 65	38	35k-75k	43
Party ID		Above 75k	48
Republican	13.5		
Democrat	49.6		
Independent	36.7		

U.S. VOTE FOUNDATION
4325 Old Glebe Road
Arlington, VA 22207 USA

info@usvotefoundation.org