



U.S. VOTE FOUNDATION AND OVERSEAS VOTE POLICY PERSPECTIVE

REFLECTIONS ON THE 2020 ELECTION DAY VOTER EXPERIENCE STUDY AND THE FOR THE PEOPLE ACT

EVERY CITIZEN IS A
VOTER

Preamble

The aftermath of the historic 2020 General Election has led to calls for reforms from across the political spectrum. Despite the unprecedented turnout and near universal, bi-partisan consensus among election officials that Election 2020 was the safest and most secure election in history, many of these “reforms” are not reforms at all. Rather, 165 restrictive voting bills have been proposed in state legislatures that are a continuation of practices that pretend to protect the integrity of the vote, but in fact attempt to enshrine voter suppression tactics that would limit, not extend, the franchise to the broadest number of American voters.

While some would see any criticism of these new efforts to limit voter access as a position motivated by partisanship, U.S. Vote Foundation (US Vote), as a non-partisan, 501c(3) organization, is not advocating on behalf of one party versus the other. Rather US Vote is advocating here on behalf of all voters, from any party, who wish to enjoy their right to vote free of barriers and obstacles.

The effort to promulgate these retrogressive “reforms” makes a mockery of the positive experiences and overall support for the successes of Election 2020 that are evident in the U.S. Vote Foundation and Overseas Vote *2020 Election Day Voter Experience Study* (US Vote Survey). This survey of over 15,000 voters from across the political spectrum, fielded between November 2 – 13, 2020, shows an electorate that embraced the expansion of vote-at-home, early voting, automatic voter registration and other well-established practices. These voters’ evident satisfaction with how they cast their votes endured despite the drumbeat of false election integrity narratives that culminated in the attempted insurrection of January 6, 2021.

The support for genuine reform and the attendant expansion of voting access that is evident in the US Vote Survey provides an important perspective on a growing movement – firmly and proudly bipartisan – that seeks to bring genuine reform to the US voting systems and their processes. These reforms seek to expand many of the voting practices that survey respondents praised in the runup to the record turnout in November and its complex and variegated outcomes – outcomes that on a nationwide basis favored no single party.

As such US Vote stands in support of the *For the People Act of 2021*. This act, H.R. 1 in the House of Representatives, would put into law a number of reforms that would codify at the national level a set of best practices that proved their mettle in the 2020 election cycle and were supported by a significant number of respondents to the US Vote Survey.

The US Vote Survey Points the Way to Electoral Reform

The *For the People Act of 2021* (FTP) proposes a set of reforms that together would help guarantee that the broad-based, bipartisan turnout that made Election 2020 the most successful election in modern history will continue in future elections.

The overwhelming success of Election 2020 was evident in responses to the US Vote Survey in terms of overall satisfaction with the election and its processes:

- **Satisfaction with personal voting experiences was high:** The vast majority of respondents (89%) indicated that they were satisfied with their overall voting experience. Of those respondents who did not vote, the majority (93%) said they would strongly consider voting in future elections.
- **Domestic absentee ballots arrived on time:** Virtually all domestic absentee voter respondents (99.5%) indicated that they received their ballot in time to vote, while 92% of overseas voters received their ballots in time.
- **Confidence in ballot counting was strong.** Most respondents (73%) were confident that their ballots would be counted as intended.

The general sense of success, however, was tempered by concerns about the integrity of the overall election process, with 85% of respondents from across the political spectrum voicing concerns about election integrity. While only 41% of respondents expressed a lack of faith in the electoral system, the juxtaposition of a high rate of satisfaction with individual experiences and a high rate of concern with overall election integrity help reinforce the fact that further reforms, despite the success of Election 2020, would be welcome by a bi-partisan majority of the electorate.

Delving more deeply in the US Vote Survey, it's clear that what made respondents' individual experiences so positive dovetails with some of the key reforms suggested in the *For the People Act of 2021*. Below are some highlights from the survey that showcase how respondents' experiences reinforce reforms proposed in the FTP.

Voters Favor Early Voting and Expanded Support for Provisional Ballots: Expanding access to these two voting processes is a key component of the FTP, and support for these provisions is evident in the US Vote Survey. The vast majority (90%) of respondents who voted in person using one of these methods reported that the processes went as expected, with both groups reporting high levels of overall satisfaction with their particular voting process, a clear endorsement of this part of the Act.

Voters Favor Vote-by-Mail: Voters who sent ballots by mail – either domestically or from overseas – constituted the majority (73%) of the respondents to the US Vote Survey, with the largest number (47%) consisting of overseas absentee/vote-by-mail voters. This is consistent with the origin of “U.S. Vote Foundation” as “Overseas Vote Foundation” and with the fact that voters using US Vote’s services are often there to use the foundation’s ballot request services.

Overseas voters had a high degree of satisfaction with their voting process (85%), though the fact that this was lower than the overall rate of 89% can be seen in the problems these voters had with aspects of the process. Printing is one such problem: Overseas voters struggle with instructions that fail to take into account the different paper and envelope sizes used outside the US and the formatting problems that this causes when printing ballots and ballot envelopes.

78% of domestic absentee ballot voters said they would likely vote this way again and 74% of these voters believe that this option should be universally available. Among voters who did not vote by mail, the option scored highly among early in-person voters (50% in favor) and was among the top three reforms favored by respondents who voted in-person at a polling place. It is clear from the US Vote Survey that vote-by-mail was a huge success with voters, and should be made universally available as per the intent of the FTP.

Voters Favor Permanent Paper Ballots: When presented with a list of potential ways in which the voting process could be improved, the option “permanent paper ballots with a verifiable paper trail” scored highest (30% of respondents selected this option) among voters who voted in-person at a polling place. Two other responses (always allow vote-by-mail and paper ballots) received a similar number of positive responses. This question allowed for more than one response, hence the top three responses all had similarly high scores.

Understandably, the “permanent paper ballots” option was less favored among voters who already vote using a paper ballot. Those voters gravitated to other reforms such as permanent vote-by-mail. The lack of interest in paper ballots was most likely due to the fact that these voters didn’t see the need to further emphasize the only method for voting available to them. As the two main vote-by-mail cohorts, domestic and overseas, were satisfied or highly satisfied with their overall voting experience, it can be assumed that these voters saw no need to call out paper ballots in a particular way.

It’s important to note that one option, internet voting – an insecure, unsafe option that US Vote has researched carefully and rejected – also scored highly in US Vote Survey. We believe this represents a lack of understanding of the complexities surrounding voting security and the inappropriateness of this option. These results also validate the need for further public education on voting safety and security and the myriad dangers of internet voting. Indeed, in addition to the popularity of paper ballots among voters, FTPA’s focus on permanent paper ballots has the added benefit of supporting the only means to truly hold secure, auditable elections.

Voters Favor Automatic Voter Registration. This reform, highlighted in the FTPA, was highly favored by all voting cohorts, with 50% of early-in person voters favoring this option and over 70% of domestic absentee voters in favor. Overseas voters also heavily favored (60%) a similar option, being granted “permanent” overseas absentee voter status. Voters who voted at a polling place placed this option among their top three choices, but as this question allowed for more than one response two other responses (always allow vote-by-mail and paper ballots) received a similar number of positive responses. The fact that this provision of the FTPA is so popular confirms the fact that the simplification of the voting process should be a key guiding principle for voting reform.

Overseas and Military Voters Favor Improvements in Access to Ballot Services. While the vast majority (80%) of overseas voters were satisfied with the voting process, the remaining 20% reported problems associated with the process of requesting and accessing a ballot (5%), how to print a ballot and its associated envelope (3%), and questions about which US address they should be using on their ballot request form (3%). These three particular issues are well-known to US Vote, as reflected in the high number of requests for help regarding these issues that are processed through the US Vote Help Desk every election. It is clear that these ballot services could use some refinements in order to improve the already high levels of satisfaction.

The FTPA also highlights the need for absentee ballots to be received by overseas and military voters 45 days prior to an election. This particular reform is largely in place already, and an overwhelming majority (92%) of respondents reported receiving their ballot in plenty of time to send it in. But strict adherence to the 45-day requirement was difficult during an election year in which logistical and political problems within the USPS delayed mail services to voters. While the vast majority of overseas voters received their ballot well before the election, the majority (89%) received their ballot within 3-4 weeks prior to Election Day, far short of the 45-day requirement.

Access to Voting for Individuals with Disabilities:

The call to improve access to voting for people with disabilities is an important part of the FTPA that US Vote supports wholeheartedly. While only a small number of respondents (2.3%) reported unexpected issues during their voting process, accessibility for people with disabilities was one of the issues that was brought up by respondents. Regardless of the relatively small number of respondents who reported issues with disability access, the legal and ethical imperative to support these voters is irrefutable.

Same Day Voter Registration: A very small, statistically insignificant number of respondents (43 out of 15,000) voted using a provisional ballot or through same day registration. While this reform is not directly supported by data in the US Vote Survey, expanding access to and ensuring safeguards for same day registration and the use of provisional ballots are reforms actively supported by US Vote.

Restoration of Voting Rights to Ex-Felons: While this issue was not explored in the US Vote Survey, services intended to help ex-felons exercise their right to vote were among the many services provided by US Vote during the 2020 election. The restoration of rights to ex-felons embodied in the FTPA is a reform actively supported by US Vote.

Conclusion: Reforming the Vote by Listening to the Voters

The US Vote Survey provides a unique backdrop to the debate surrounding the current push to reform election processes nationwide. It’s clear from US Vote’s research that the 165, and potentially more bills moving through state legislatures intending to restrict access to many of the services that make up the recommendations in the FTPA do not have voters’ best interests in mind, nor do they recognize the value these processes have in bringing voters to the polls and ensuring a voter turnout worthy of one of the world’s oldest and largest democracies. Basing policy on Jim Crow era notions of voter suppression and restricted access flies in the face of the bipartisan support for the relatively smooth and seamless voting experiences evident in the US Vote Survey. Indeed, most of those positive experiences were informed by the reforms featured in the FTPA, reforms that some state legislatures now seem to want to repeal.

Two reforms, interstate voter registration cross-checks and expanding voter registration information to high school students, were not mentioned in the US Vote survey but bear mentioning here. A well-run system for cross-checking voter registrations between states can ensure that state voting rolls are up-to-date and that voters who move from state to state don’t lose their right to vote through a bureaucratic mix-up. And expanding new voter outreach to high schools across the country would help bring more young people into the voting population and begin what is hopefully a lifelong interest in voting. US Vote firmly endorses both of these provisions.

Finally, an important voter service that was prominent in the US Vote Survey was not mentioned in the FTPA but bears mention here. The 2020 election was the debut for many states’ new ballot tracking services, and the respondents in the survey who voted by mail highlighted this option. US Vote believes that the use of the tracking services should become a priority as an important adjunct to the increase in the use of vote-by-mail.

It is hoped that this report will be the beginning of a more thorough look at voter attitudes and experiences through further analysis of the US Vote Election Day Voter Experience Study dataset. The survey database provides a wide range of data on the issues that mattered to voters in the 2020 election, and US Vote welcomes researchers to contact us regarding access to this dataset to include in their voting research projects.

See the full report here:

<https://www.usvotefoundation.org/2020-USVoteSurvey>

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