



Managing Voters' Expectations for Election Results

As the presidential election approaches, the news is saturated with alarming stories about potential crises on the horizon. President Trump is stoking fears about the integrity of the election: sowing distrust of absentee ballots, questioning election officials, and suggesting that any votes counted after Election Day would be invalid. This presents a challenge for voting rights advocates; they must balance the dual task of maintaining voters' confidence in the integrity of an election we know is facing real threats, and engaging voters to reject partisan efforts to invalidate legitimate votes.

A central part of this effort involves setting realistic expectations for the time it will take election officials to count votes and certify a winner in the days following Election Day.

Trump is and will continue to falsely claim that the ballot counting period following Election Day is evidence of an election rigged against him. The most effective way to overcome such rhetoric is to (a) preemptively set voters' expectations for the timeline of election results, and (b) counter Trump's claims with a message emphasizing that every eligible voter should have their voice heard and their vote counted. This means that it is going to take longer to count the votes and verify a winner in this year's election — and that's okay.

To understand how to shift voters' expectations for election results and their confidence in the counting process, Voting Rights Lab and The Leadership Conference commissioned an online survey conducted by Strategies 360 to test the best explanations and messaging to prepare voters for a potentially extended and contested election period.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** Many voters expect officially-certified election results in an unrealistically short period of time, especially younger voters, voters of color, and irregular voters.
- 2** A longer-than-expected wait for results breeds distrust in the election: half of voters believe a 7 to 10 day ballot counting period would make it hard for them to trust the final results.

- 3 Simple and concise explanations for why it may take officials some time to count all the ballots shift voters' expectations to a more realistic timeline AND boost their trust in the accuracy of final results. We are able to move a full two-thirds of voters who expect results on election night to expect results later.
- 4 The explanation voters find most compelling focuses on more people voting absentee due to coronavirus and absentee ballots taking longer to count because of security measures to verify the accuracy of those ballots. Additionally, it's useful to highlight that some states can't even start counting absentee ballots until after polls have closed on election night and that election officials will be working with reduced staff due to coronavirus.
- 5 Additional messaging emphasizing a nonpartisan message of 'counting every vote to make sure everyone's voice is heard' most effectively counters a Trumpian message sowing distrust of election results and calling the election rigged, and is most effective when it precedes Trump's message.

EXISTING EXPECTATIONS FOR NOVEMBER

Just about everything is different in 2020, and the November election will be no exception. It is undoubtedly going to take longer for election officials to count the votes and verify a winner in this year's election — yet, many voters are entirely unaware of this fact.

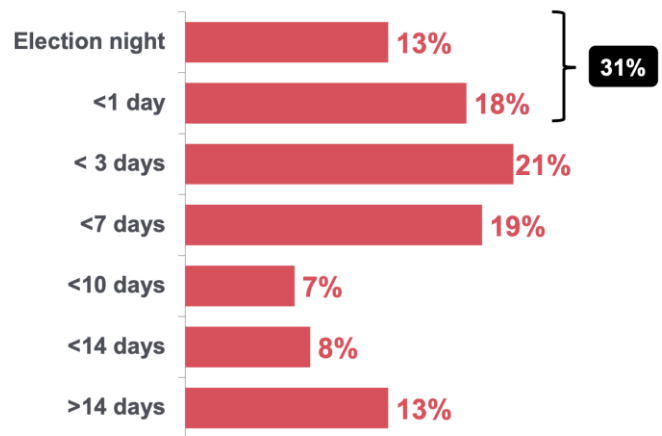
Only about half of voters nationally (54%) have heard or read something about how it might take election officials longer to count ballots this year than it has in the past, including just 49% of voters under 35 and 47% of voters of color. As it stands, a 62% majority of voters expect to have a clear sense of which presidential candidate is going to win within three days of the election, and a 52% majority expect the vote counting to be finished and an official winner to be declared within 3 days of the election, a highly unrealistic expectation. Only 28% expect it to take over a week for officially certified results.

Voters across partisan, demographic, and geographic lines hold unrealistic expectations. 52% of Biden voters and 54% of Trump voters expect official results within 3 days, as do 61% of voters under the age of 35 and 59% of voters of color. Voters who don't vote in most or all elections also tend to have unrealistic expectations here (57% within 3 days).

Voters organically believe that the large number of absentee ballots (58%), delays in the USPS delivering absentee ballots (53%), and COVID-related staffing challenges (47%) are the most likely factors to contribute to a 7-10 day wait for results. However, 47% of voters, driven primarily by Trump voters, think that fraud may play a part in the longer timeframe.

Voters are split on whether they think Joe Biden (51%) or Donald Trump (49%) will win. Expectations closely track vote intention, with 89% of Biden voters expecting Biden to win and 94% of Trump voters expecting Trump to win.

When do you expect that election officials will finish counting votes and officially certify a winner in the presidential election?



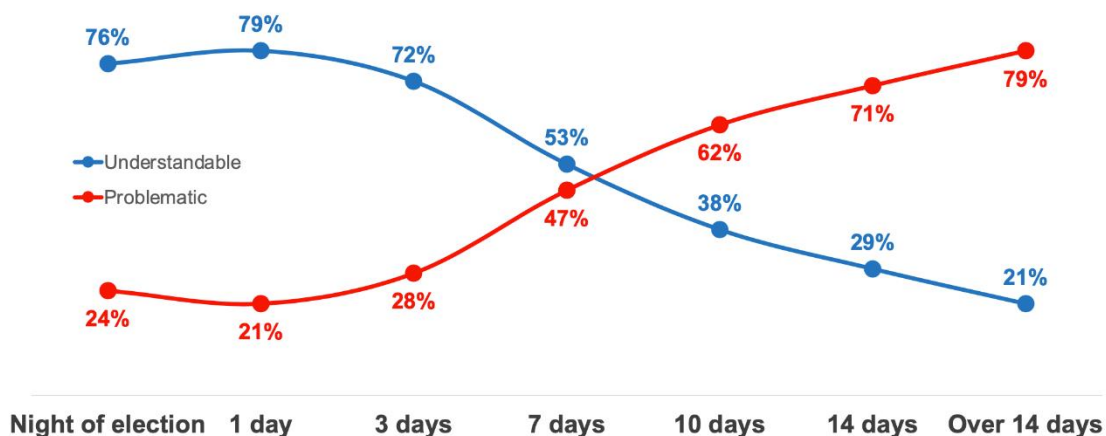
EXPECTATIONS IMPACT VOTER CONFIDENCE

Unrealistic expectations from voters about the timing of election results have the potential to breed distrust and concerns of malfeasance. Therefore, managing voter expectations for results is critical to building voter confidence.

Voters divide over whether a seven to ten day ballot counting period is cause for confidence or concern. Just over half of voters believe that a 7 to 10 day ballot counting period “shows that election officials are making sure every vote gets counted and it gives me confidence that the results will be accurate,” while 46% say that it “shows that something problematic is happening and the delay makes me worried that the results will not be accurate.”

The longer it takes to get results, the more voters would find it problematic. A majority of voters find it understandable that election officials would need several days after polls close to finish tallying the votes. But after seven days, fewer than 50% of voters find it understandable that election officials would need that much time to finish counting ballots.

Would you find it understandable or problematic if it takes election officials this length of time to finish counting ballots?



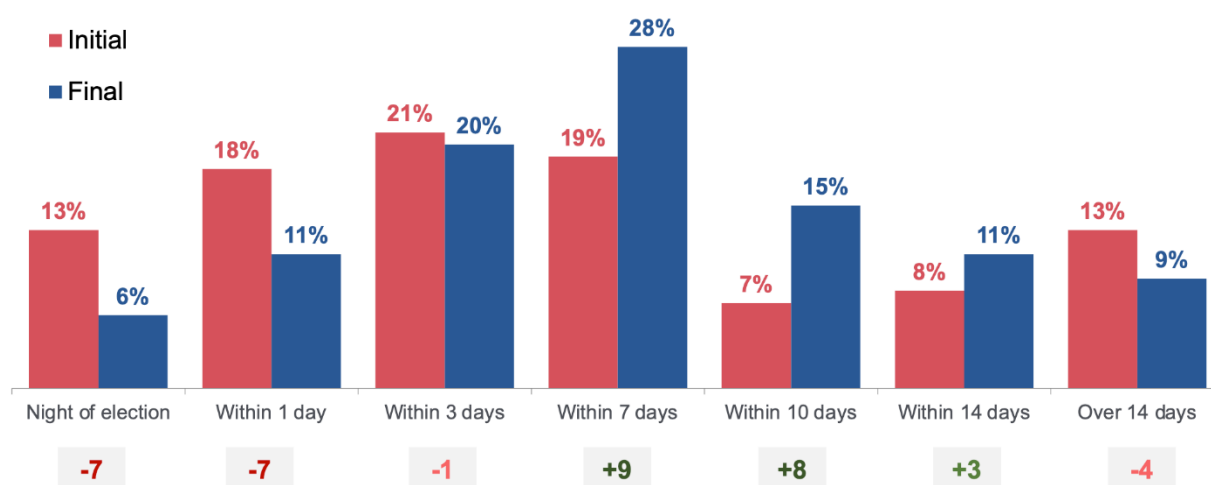
EXPLANATIONS AND MESSAGING SHIFTS BOTH EXPECTATIONS AND VOTER CONFIDENCE

The good news here is that these expectations are movable. A simple, factual, and concise explanation of why it will take longer this year can substantially shift when voters expect to see election results. In all, 39% of voters shift their expectations later.

Explanations can successfully shift voter expectations. The proportion of voters expecting official results within a day of the election drops 14 points. A full two thirds (66%) of voters who initially expected results on election night shift to expecting results later. Whereas at first, 31% initially expected officially certified results within a day of the election, that drops to 17% (comprised of mostly far-right conservatives) after messaging. Whereas over half of voters (52%) initially thought we'd have certified results within 3 days, that drops to 38% after messaging, a 14-point shift. There are disproportionate shifts among many of the groups whose expectations were most unrealistic to begin with, including voters under 35

(51% of whom shift their expectations), voters of color (42%), and irregular voters (48%). After messaging, voters are most likely to expect results “within 7 days of Election Day.”

When do you expect that election officials will finish counting votes and officially certify a winner in the presidential election?



Messaging can also shift voter confidence. After explanations and messaging, voters are less likely to think it is okay if votes are done being counted within a day of the election, but more likely than before to say it is understandable if it takes 3 days, 7 days, 10 days, 14 days, or even more than 14 days to count votes. Initially, 53% of voters thought it was understandable for vote counting to take 7 days, and that jumps 10 points (63%) after messaging. Meanwhile, 5% fewer people believe a one-day counting period is understandable, suggesting that voters would be wary of a partisan effort to shut down the counting too early. And while voters were almost evenly divided between feeling confident or worried about a 7-10 day ballot counting period initially, after messaging, 63% say it would give them confidence in the election results, including a majority of Republicans, while only 37% would be worried about a 7-10 day ballot counting period.

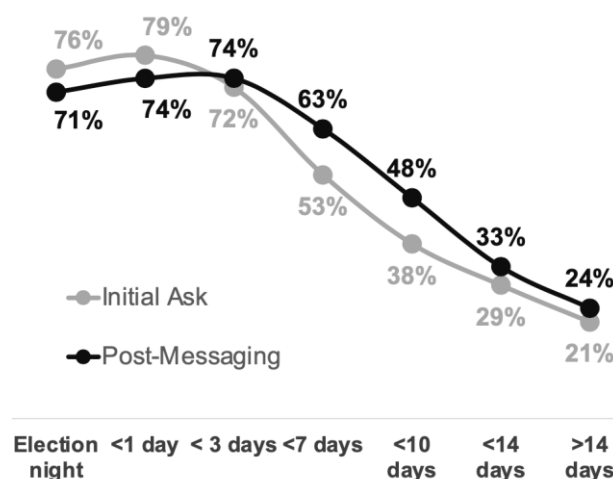
It's critical to inoculate voters with this information as soon as possible. In addition to explanations about the reasons for a 7-10 day ballot counting period, we also presented voters with Trump's opposition messaging, which centered around fraudulent ballots and Democrats planning to rig and steal the election, as well as our own counter-messaging about counting every vote, coronavirus, and Trump meddling in democracy. Voters who heard our explanations *before* the messaging debate showed larger movement in their expectations for election results and found our explanations more convincing. This data emphasizes the importance of getting our message out as early as possible to preempt Trump's attempts to undermine confidence.

MESSAGING GUIDANCE

We tested several different explanations for a 7-10 day ballot counting period as well as three different core messages.

The explanations included increased numbers of absentee ballots, USPS delays, coronavirus staffing challenges, extra security measures, and early election results historically being projections as opposed to real certified results. The explanation focusing on absentee ballots did best across the board, with the emphasis on security measures performing particularly well with Republicans. Voters recognize that coronavirus compounds these challenges for a longer ballot counting period. Of the three core messages about counting every vote, the impact of coronavirus on the election, and a partisan message about Trump meddling in democracy, the core message about hearing everyone's voice by counting every vote was clearly the most effective across party lines. We have used the results from this poll to refine a key central message and narrative below.

% understandable if it takes election officials this length of time to finish counting ballots?



% saying that message explains why it may take election officials 7-10 days to finish counting votes and certify a winner	Overall	Biden Voters	Trump Voters	VOC	Youth
[ABSENTEE] "The increase in absentee ballots explains why it may take election officials time to count all the votes and officially declare a winner..."	75	87	62	81	82
[SECURITY] "Officials use this time after polls close to doublecheck that every eligible ballot has been verified and counted..."	72	81	63	75	77
[COVID] "Coronavirus is going to make the process of counting all the votes and declaring a winner take longer than normal..."	69	83	53	76	76
[NORMAL] "The time it will take for officials to announce the actual results is a normal part of the process..."	65	76	53	70	71
[USPS] "The United States Postal Service (USPS) recently implemented changes that have impacted the speed of mail delivery..."	65	77	52	71	78

Central Message

Every eligible voter should have their voice heard and their vote counted. But due to coronavirus and health concerns, more people will be voting absentee than ever before and absentee ballots take longer to count because of security measures to verify the accuracy of those ballots. Some states can't even start counting absentee ballots until after polls have closed on election night. Plus, due to coronavirus, election officials will be working with reduced staff. We need to be patient so election officials can take the time to make sure every eligible vote is counted accurately.

Narrative

Just about everything is different in 2020, and the November election will be no exception. One of the biggest differences is that there may not be a clear winner on election night.

It's natural to feel on edge right now, especially given the importance of this election. But one of our most important rights as Americans is the right to vote, and election officials have a duty to ensure that every eligible vote is counted.

We have to count every ballot that is cast — from members of the military who send in their vote from overseas, to people with pre-existing conditions voting absentee because of coronavirus, to people who vote on Election Day.

*In response to the coronavirus pandemic, many states are allowing more voters to use absentee ballots than in past elections. **It takes election officials longer to verify and count absentee ballots** than votes cast by electronic voting machines because they need extra time to double check that those ballots have been verified and counted before announcing a result. What's more, in some states, by law election officials can't even start processing these ballots until after polls have closed on Election Day.*

Coronavirus is also going to make the process of counting all the votes and declaring a winner take longer than normal. Just like many workplaces, election officials are being careful to stay socially distanced and are sometimes working with reduced staff or fewer resources.

No one in the media or in either party should rush to make any announcements about who has won the election until all the votes have been counted, even if that takes a week or so to complete. Every eligible voter should have their voice heard and their vote counted. When election officials take the time to count and verify every ballot, that's a sign that our democracy is working.

METHODOLOGY

Strategies 360 conducted two national surveys of registered voters:

- September 9-16, 2020: n1500 registered voters (MoE +/- 2.5), with substantial oversamples of voters of color (unweighted n=992, MoE +/- 3.1%) and voters under the age of 35 (unweighted n=1014, MoE +/- 3.1%)
- September 18-22, 2020: n800 registered voters (MoE +/- 3.5%), with oversamples of voters of color and voters under the age of 35