



Polling-backed Guidance on Messaging Election Results

As the presidential election approaches, voters across party lines fear that it may bring about unprecedented chaos, disruption, and discord. New research conducted in mid-September demonstrates that the way in which *the way the election is covered in the press* heavily influences these attitudes.

The study, commissioned by Voting Rights Lab and The Leadership Conference Education Fund and conducted by Strategies 360,¹ indicates that three concepts are particularly important for news organizations to convey:

- 1** *Voters' existing expectations for official election results are unrealistic; the media has a role to play in advance of the election in properly setting voters' expectations for how long it will take for the vote tallying to be completed;*
- 2** *Voters take their cues from the news media on Election Day itself, meaning that preemptive projections, an undue focus on voting problems, or a failure to mention the number of ballots yet to be counted can undermine voters' confidence in the integrity of the election as a whole;*
- 3** *In the days following Election Day, voters again take direction from the media as to whether they should be concerned or not by the period of time it takes election officials to finish counting ballots. The press' ability to accurately portray this process and avoid false conspiracy theories is crucial to maintaining voters' confidence and patience.*

The memo below highlights key data from the research at each stage.

¹ Strategies 360 conducted an online survey of national registered voters from September 9-16, 2020. It included a base of 1500 voters nationally (margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ at the 95% confidence level), an oversample of African American and Latino voters, for a combined total of 992 interviews (margin of error: $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level), and an oversample of voters under the age of 35, for a combined total of 1014 interviews (margin of error: $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level). This memo also cites a supplemental survey of national registered voters conducted September 18-22, 2020 with a base sample of 800 voters nationally (margin of error: $\pm 3.5\%$ at the 95% confidence level) and oversamples of voters of color and voters under the age of 35, and two Qualitative Discussion Boards ("QualBoards") conducted September 21-24th, 2020; one among center-right Trump voters, and one among base Democratic voters.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS BEFORE THE ELECTION

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. In fact, 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.

However, these expectations are movable. A simple, factual, and concise explanation of why it will take longer this year can substantially shift what voters expect:

- *Due to coronavirus and health concerns, more people will be voting absentee than ever before. 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. Voters need to be patient so election officials can take the time to make sure every eligible vote is counted accurately.*

When voters hear explanations for why it will take longer for election officials to count ballots this year, their expectations shift. 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. What is clear is that voters' expectations are not set in stone; when presented with this information ahead of time, their expectations move.

One helpful approach here is to move away from the “Election Day” frame in general. Rather than Election Day, it will be an “election season.” It is crucial not to frame this as a problem or issue but instead the normal expectation for our democratic process functioning in this environment. One option is to frame November 3 as the “voting deadline” for people to submit their ballots, and a “ballot counting period” of up to 7 to 10 days following the deadline.

COVERING ELECTION DAY

Americans overwhelmingly turn to the press for their election night coverage: 91% of voters report that they go to television, newspaper, or internet news sources to check election results. More than 3-in-4 voters (79%) say they follow the election results closely.

The first thing voters look for in news reports is coverage of how the election unfolded: Did things go smoothly, or were things chaotic? Were there long lines? Machine malfunctions? Etc. The press provides a valuable service in reporting on problems, holding bad actors accountable, and providing a comprehensive picture of the voting process. However, from focus group conversations among voters both on the right and on the left, it is clear that their confidence in the election's integrity hinges on the impressions they get from this Election Day coverage.

People interpret reports of problems as being far more widespread than newscasters may intend. It is crucial for the press to accurately report on any problems observed on Election Day, but we urge media organizations to make crystal clear the breadth (or lack thereof) of any problems; overstating minor issues or giving off the impression of 'total chaos' reinforces voters' worst fears about the election.

- **Democratic voter:** *"I think [my reaction to reports of voting issues] depends on the true scope of the problem. Are these just pockets of problems being reported to gain viewership or was the problem really that prevalent?"*
- **Republican voter:** *"My reaction to [reports of voting issues] is surprise that my local news would be so negative with their reporting and almost turning the viewers who have not voted yet off from going to the polls to cast their ballots."*
- **Democratic voter:** *"[Hearing reports of voting issues] makes me feel scared and frustrated and fatigued. Mostly fatigued."*
- **Republican voter:** *"If I see any news reports of the chaos, then [my sense of calm] would go out the window and I would think, 'Trump was right.'"*

Secondly, it is important that media organizations be cautious with projections on Election Day and clearly note the existence of additional legitimate ballots which have yet to be counted. Voters endorse the idea of newsrooms being more cautious in their election night

predictions: A plurality of voters (44%), including a majority of Republicans (57%), believe the news media is too eager to predict who is going to win on Election Day.

One approach that may help is to cover the results in terms of a “percent of total votes counted” instead of precincts reporting. Due to the massive increase in absentee ballots, precinct-based reporting will not give voters a full view of the progress of vote counting.

Finally, where appropriate, election analysts may want to preemptively discuss the so-called “red mirage,” referring to the potential for the vote tally to shift toward Democratic candidates as more votes are counted, due to partisan differences in how people are likely to vote this year. Setting voters’ expectations in advance that this may happen helps offset voters’ concerns about partisan manipulation of the results if the vote tally trends away from their preferred candidate.

IN THE DAYS AFTER ELECTION DAY

Voters divide almost evenly on the question of whether a period of 7 to 10 days — during which election officials finish counting votes and declare a winner — would give them confidence in the accuracy of the results or give them concerns that the results would not be accurate.

Given the internal and external threats to the election, concerns about this election may be justified. However, it is essential that the media treat the idea of a period of ballot counting as appropriate and understandable, not a cause of concern in and of itself. This period of uncertainty could create an opportunity for individuals to breed distrust and sow discord in the process in order to undermine the validity of the results. That scenario could elicit a contested election. Therefore, voters should get the message that **every eligible voter must 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.**

Eighty (80) percent of voters agree with that concept, including large majorities from both parties. Such a statement makes 64% of voters more confident in the accuracy of results through a 7 to 10-day ballot-counting period, including a majority from both parties. Simply put, this message of reassurance helps manage voters’ expectations and preserve their

VOTING RIGHTS LAB



confidence in the legitimacy of the election. **Counting every vote is not a partisan issue.** It should not be framed as such.

Local election officials can be effective messengers. Voters want to hear from them more than national pundits, partisan representatives, or even elected officials like governors or secretaries of state. They are most reassured by local election officials who can speak to the vote tallying process, the security and transparency measures involved, and the legitimacy of election results. 63% of voters said they'd trust local officials regarding how long it should take to finish counting votes and officially certify a winner. Ask them how many votes are counted, how many remain, and when they will be providing updates. Share that information with voters and uplift election official expertise in your coverage.