

PENNSYLVANIA

Budget and Policy Center

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2020 Election Expectations: High Numbers of Mail-In Votes and the Blue Shift

As the November 3rd election grows closer, questions still swirl about the voting process, especially processes that are new for many Pennsylvanians. More than 66 million Americans have already voted early in this election, and many more will vote before Election Day.¹ An unprecedented number of Pennsylvanians have applied for mail-in ballots. This research brief serves to shed light on three specific issues: What happens to your mail-in ballot once it is mailed or dropped in a ballot box? What might election night look like? And when do we expect to know the election results? COVID-19 has changed a lot of our normal routine, so it is especially important that we adjust our expectations for election night accordingly.

Mail-In Ballots—Many More Are Expected

Governor Wolf signed an election reform bill into law in late October 2019 that widely expanded vote-by-mail options in Pennsylvania.² The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic has made this a more attractive option for many Pennsylvanians, who are now allowed to vote by mail for any reason. Almost 18 times as many Pennsylvanians voted by mail in the June 2 primary than voted by mail in the primary 4 years ago,³ and many more are expected to vote by mail in November. Over 3 million Pennsylvanians have requested mail-in ballots for the general election.⁴ This increased number of mail-in ballots presents a new logistic challenge for election staff, because the process of counting mail-in votes and ensuring ballots are from eligible voters is time consuming. Election

¹ <https://electproject.github.io/Early-Vote-2020G/index.html>.

² <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/governor-wolf-signs-election-reform-bill-including-new-mail-in-voting/>.

³ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893115504/swing-county-u-s-a-prepares-for-unprecedented-influx-of-ballots-by-mail>.

⁴ <https://electproject.github.io/Early-Vote-2020G/PA.html>.

security is of utmost importance, so it is crucial that nothing is rushed, no ballots are unfairly counted or voided, and that each and every eligible vote is tallied.

Processing mail-in ballots is a multistage procedure which legally cannot begin until 7 am on Election Day in Pennsylvania. Current law prohibits pre-canvassing, which is the preparation of envelopes for vote tallying, and it also prohibits the tallying of mail-in votes before Election Day.⁵ Starting at 7 am on November 3, each mail-in ballot's outside envelope and inner secrecy envelope will be opened, the ballot will be unfolded and smoothed down, the voter's eligibility will be confirmed, and then the ballot will be put through a scanner that records the vote.^{6, 7} These high-speed scanners are very sensitive, and if a ballot is rejected from the machine it will need to be hand processed. If a mail-in ballot is "naked," or not placed inside the inner secrecy envelope *and* the larger outside envelope, the ballot will be rejected.⁸ While the counting process starts on the morning of Election Day, a recent court ruling⁹ may allow mail-in ballots to be accepted up to three days after the election, provided they are at least postmarked by or before November 3.¹⁰ This ruling could guarantee that the vote count will continue after Election Day, although it is being challenged in court.¹¹

Pennsylvanians who requested mail-in ballots are urged to return them early by dropping them in the mailbox, using a designated ballot drop box, or returning them to their county board of election office.

Some counties have purchased high-speed envelope-opening machines to assist in processing mail-in ballots. But many counties have not. With or without these machines, the process is still time consuming. Some counties with smaller populations and fewer numbers of mail-in ballots expect to process all the mail-in ballots they've received on Election Day, but many do not. With an unprecedented number of mail-in ballots expected, Americans are urged to be patient as the results are tallied. Pennsylvania primary results took over six days to be called¹² and almost three weeks for all ballots to be tallied and certified.¹³ It is widely expected that the general election results will take longer to report, and that there will not be a clear winner on election night.

⁵ <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/politics/decision-2020/pa-election-officials-want-mail-in-ballots-counted-sooner/2512676/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/politics/decision-2020/heres-how-pa-is-preparing-for-the-presidential-election-in-november/2515837/>.

⁸ <http://www.pacourts.us/assets/opinions/Supreme/out/J-96-2020mo%20-%20104548450113066639.pdf?cb=1>

⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-donald-trump-campaigns-pennsylvania-elections-62bb4957766f436e27ed7de52921aab3>.

¹⁰ <http://www.pacourts.us/assets/opinions/Supreme/out/J-96-2020mo%20-%20104548450113066639.pdf?cb=1>.

¹¹ <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-pennsylvania-elections-courts-voting-2020-e88593330c5c5181752538eb5705bcad>.

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/elections/how-long-election-results-2020/>.

¹³ <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/politics/decision-2020/pa-election-officials-want-mail-in-ballots-counted-sooner/2512676/>.

Election Night and the Blue Shift

It was typical for Americans to wait weeks for election results before the transcontinental telegraph line connected the East and West Coasts of the United States in 1861.¹⁴ The United States didn't even have a set Election Day for the general election until 1848, which was the first time all states held their presidential elections simultaneously.¹⁵ Americans have recently grown used to having quick election results. Our primary and general election results are usually broadcast on election night or early the next morning. Higher numbers of mail-in ballots will delay this process, and it may take seven days or more to have a clear winner. It is widely expected that no official winner will be called on election night, the next day, or perhaps even days after the election.

On election night, Americans will tune in to their favorite news stations, open their preferred result-tracking websites, or scroll through their social media feeds as the vote counts roll in. Just as voters have their preferred methods of checking results, voters also have different preferred methods of casting a ballot. These preferences will shape how election night plays out.

More than twice the number of Democrats applied to vote by mail than Republicans in the June primary election,¹⁶ and that gap has widened for the general election. Biden supporters are much more likely to vote by mail than Trump supporters.¹⁷ With the projected number of mail-in votes higher than ever, this disparity in who votes by what method will likely cause an interesting event election night, which has been dubbed “the blue shift.” It is seen in election after election—when a Democratic candidate leads on election night, their lead widens as mailed and provisional ballots are tallied in subsequent days. If a Republican leads on election night, their lead shrinks. With more Americans voting by mail than ever before, this “blue shift” could be significant. It is certainly possible that in-person voting results show Republican candidates with a lead, but that lead might be diminished or completely gone as the mountain of mail-in ballots are processed. This is not a sign of election fraud, it is the result of every eligible voter's voice being heard.

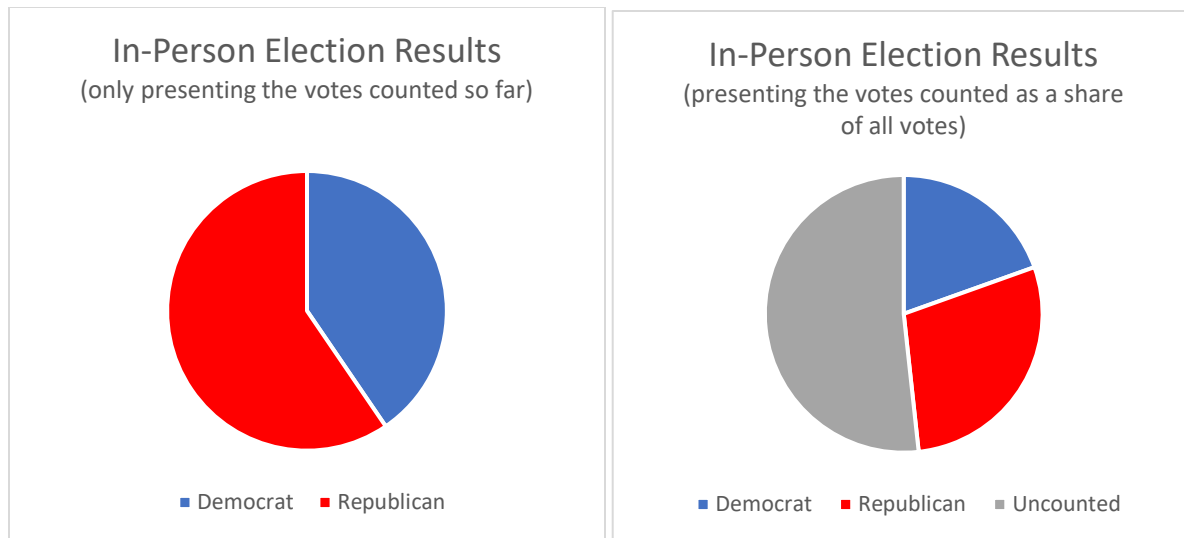
Take this example—late on election night, many votes will have already been counted. In-person voting results—which lean Republican—will be reported faster than mail-in votes—which lean Democratic and take longer to process. Below are two pie chart representations of ways to show the same hypothetical results of in-person voting:

¹⁴ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/western-union-completes-the-first-transcontinental-telegraph-line>.

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1848>.

¹⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pennsylvania-general-election-fears-primary-results-delay-mail-in-votes/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/26/biden-supporters-in-states-where-it-is-hardest-to-vote-by-mail-are-most-concerned-about-voting-this-fall/>.



Both charts show the same underlying data on the counted votes—that in-person vote tallies favor the Republican candidate. The left chart, however, does not show these votes in comparison to how many people’s votes there are *left to be counted* and can be misleading for people just tuning in to the news, glancing at an election tracker, or seeing the left chart come across their social media feeds.

Secretary of the Commonwealth Kathy Boockvar wants Pennsylvania to present results like the chart on the right, showing how many ballots still need to be counted and where they are from. Even if counties report data this way, there is no guarantee this will happen in Pennsylvania media coverage or national coverage. Boockvar also called on counties to report mail-in ballot counts along the way, rather than all at once. This would prevent a jarring instant swing in election results, which Americans aren’t used to.¹⁸

Americans should be wary of early pundit projections or candidates from any party claiming early victory, especially on election night. People might use this new delay in official election results to challenge election legitimacy either legally or in the public realm. This delay in results is expected and normal. We’ve shifted *how* many of us vote, so we must shift our expectations for election night.

Despite this delay being expected, experts still fear that people will use the slower-than-normal return to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election or even legally challenge states to stop counting ballots. President Trump has an especially large platform to do this, has done it in the past, and has hinted that he might in the future. In July, he tweeted about this topic, saying that we “Must know Election results on the night of the election, not days, months, or even years later!”¹⁹ During a 2018 Florida election, he

¹⁸ <https://www.mcall.com/news/elections/mc-nws-pa-election-count-could-take-days-boockvar-20200923-ecku2oggszgtjapk6oz4vllkpu-a-story.html>.

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1288933078287745024?lang=en>.

tweeted that we “Must go with Election night!” results, as the later-processed ballots threatened to erode the Republican edge.²⁰

Even if later ballots seem to swing overall results, it is not a sign of fraud or election illegitimacy. Counting ballots shows that our democracy is working. We have to count every eligible ballot that is cast—whether it’s mailed from a service member overseas, or from a voter who lined up early as the polls open on November 3.

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1061962869376540672?lang=en>