

To: POL 106, US Politics and Civic Cultures
From: Dr. Crothers
Re: Voting in the 2020 election
Date: September 24, 2020

Many, if not all, of you are facing the prospect of voting in your first presidential election. Presidential election years are always tense in some way or other. This one is much, much stranger than most.

Because it is a strange year, and because so many of you are entering the voting system for the first time ever, I am writing this note to comment on, and hopefully reassure you about, how voting works in America. There is a lot of very, very bad “information” being hyped up online, in the media, and from the White House. I am writing to let you know what the facts of the matter are rather than the amplified claims of conspiracy theorists seeking to undermine the election for their narrow partisan interests.

On mail-in voting

As you probably know, there has been a great deal of commotion recently claiming that mail-in ballots are dangerous, fraudulent, and a risk to democracy. Unfortunately, a great many of these comments have come out of President Trump’s mouth as well as from his Twitter feed. As a few examples, let me offer the following. (There are LOTS of these; this is only a sample.)

- “Unsolicited Ballots are uncontrollable, totally open to ELECTION INTERFERENCE by foreign countries, and will lead to massive chaos and confusion!” (September 15, 2020). <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-election-2020-ap-fact-check-elections-voting-fraud-and-irregularities-8c5db90960815f91f39fe115579570b4>
- “They’re sending out tens of millions of ballots to everybody, people that didn’t expect them. People are getting inundated with ballots, they’ll be showered with ballots.” (September 18, 2020). <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-calls-mail-in-voting-a-scam-says-democrats-are-teeing-up-a-mess>
- “There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent. Mail boxes will be robbed, ballots will be forged & even illegally printed out & fraudulently signed. The Governor of California is sending Ballots to millions of people, anyone.....living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there, will get one. That will be followed up with professionals telling all of these people, many of whom have never even thought of voting before, how, and for whom, to vote. This will be a Rigged Election. No way!” May 20, 2020
<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1265255845358645254>

These claims are false. They are utterly, completely, absolutely, demonstrably false.

- Ballots ARE NOT sent willy-nilly to whoever for whatever reasons.
- There are states that are sending out ballots in conformity with existing state laws. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-80-million-unsolicited-ball/fact-check-clarifying-trumps-80-million-unsolicited-ballots-claim-idUSKBN2622SZ>
- Other states, like Illinois, require mail-in ballot applications: (<https://abc7chicago.com/politics/how-to-request-an-illinois-mail-in-ballot/6378131/>). This is done in accord with state law, and ballots that are returned by mail are subject to checks just like other ballots.
- In case you don't know, several states have been doing all mail-in voting for many years. Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington have been conducting their elections by mail for multiple election cycles. They do not have problems with systematic mail-in voting fraud.

Importantly, there is NO evidence that foreign powers or others are trying to steal or have stolen ballots, marked them, and turned them in. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/ridiculous-claim-trump-pushes-baseless-conspiracy-about-foreign-interference-mail-n1231722>

For your reference, there have been several academic and journalistic investigations examining whether there is systematic voting fraud in mail-in elections — including one by the Trump administration. There is no evidence of such fraud. (Occasionally there are specific cases of fraud, but there is no evidence of systematic voting fraud by mail-in voting.) You can find an excellent reference guide to these studies here: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/resources-voter-fraud-claims> Not even the Trump administration has found systematic mail-in voting fraud.

By the way, if you or anyone you know has voted absentee, such votes are conducted by mail — and have been for decades. Mail-in voting is not new, new-fangled, or a departure from US electoral norms and practices.

Ballots cast by mail are legitimate, safe, and important. If you plan to vote by mail, your vote is valid, as are those of your fellow citizens who vote by mail. There is no systematic mail-in voting fraud in the United States.

That said, there ARE RISKS in mail-in voting. In particular, at least two come to mind: the postal service's delivery problems that were widely reported earlier this summer, and politically motivated claims that counting mail-in ballots, many of which will not be counted until after the November 3 election, is somehow itself a fraudulent act.

- *The issue with delays in the postal service's delivery of ballots are simple:* all states have deadlines that indicate when the election authority has to receive ballots in order for them to count. (In Alaska, for example, that deadline is 10 days after the election. In Illinois,

it's 14 days.) If the mail is too slow, some ballots might not be counted. That's why the postal delivery issue matters so much.

- ***The issue with the politically motivated claims of fraud are more nuanced, and more subtle.*** Precisely because various states accept ballots after the election date – to accommodate delays in mail delivery, for example – it is entirely possible that the outcome of the presidential election will not be decided on November 3. We might not know the outcome for a week. (I know – crazy, huh?) This is mostly because so-called “swing states” – the ones where the presidential election is close – are ALSO likely to be the ones where all the absentee and mail-in ballots really, really need to be counted. Unfortunately, it is quite possible that numerous groups and actors will amp up the tensions during this period by claiming that ballots are being counted illegally, that illegal ballots are being counted, etc. Some claims seem likely to come from the Trump campaign; many others may well emerge from Russian internet trolls seeking to promote maximum chaos in the United States by exploiting the weaknesses in our election system and the social and political tensions that inflame our society.

Notably, neither of these concerns has anything to do with the security of mail-in ballots. Instead, they are the result of our haphazard voting system, as well as of politically motivated responses to it.

ALL claims to the contrary are lies. Repetition does not make them true.

On in-person voting

While it has been forgotten in the current environment, in which there are incessant claims that mail-in voting is inherently fraudulent, we should note that President Trump and his supporters used to claim that in-person voting was also fraudulent. (Again, these are only a few of the many examples):

- “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 27, 2016
<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/802972944532209664>
- “Look forward to seeing final results of VoteStand. Gregg Phillips and crew say at least 3,000,000 votes were illegal. We must do better!” — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) January 27, 2017
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/824968416486387713?lang=en>
- "In many places, like California, the same person votes many times — you've probably heard about that.... They always like to say 'oh that's a conspiracy theory' — not a conspiracy theory folks. Millions and millions of people."
<https://www.npr.org/2018/04/05/599868312/fact-check-trump-repeats-voter-fraud-claim->

[about-california](#)

- “Serious voter fraud in Virginia, New Hampshire and California - so why isn't the media reporting on this? Serious bias - big problem!” — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) November 28, 2016
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/803033642545115140?lang=en>

These claims are false. They are utterly, completely, absolutely, demonstrably false.

- One recent study found only 31 cases of in-person voting fraud in a period of 14 years: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/06/a-comprehensive-investigation-of-voter-impersonation-finds-31-credible-incidents-out-of-one-billion-ballots-cast/?arc404=true>
- The study previously referenced, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/resources-voter-fraud-claims>, also addresses in-person voting fraud if you'd like to explore further for yourselves.
- And, as was the case with mail-in voting, even a Trump administration investigation of alleged in-person voting fraud found no systematic in-person voter fraud in the United States. <https://apnews.com/article/f5f6a73b2af546ee97816bb35e82c18d>

In-person voting fraud happens extremely rarely. It does not happen anywhere near the level President Trump claims.

That said, there ARE risks of in-person voting. At least two come to mind: a reduction in polling places nationwide, and the way delays in voting may stimulate political fights on election night.

There are fewer polling places and fewer poll workers this year than there usually are as fewer people have volunteered to work at polling stations for fear of COVID-19. This may slow voting on election day and may lead to reduced early voting in many places. It is entirely possible that there will be long lines on election day as more people try to vote in fewer locations.

Lines and technical issues at the polling places may also lead to delays in reporting election results since not everyone will necessarily be done voting at the “closing” time for polls.

Unfortunately, it may well be the case that people begin claiming such voting delays are the result of corruption or other problems. Even worse, it may well be the case that such claims are generated not only by candidates and their campaigns, but by Russian internet trolls as well – again, seeking to exploit the weaknesses of our election system and the divisions that exist in the United States today.

Notably, neither of these concerns is related to the security of in-person ballots. Instead, they are the result of our haphazard voting system — as well as our sometimes politically

motivated response to it.

ALL claims to the contrary are lies. Repetition does not make them true.

Final thoughts

I have been teaching this class in one form or another since 1988. This means I have taught this class, in one form or another, during eight presidential election cycles. 2020 is my ninth such cycle. I have never posted a comment like this to any of my previous classes.

To be clear:

Mail-in voting is safe. It is not prone to corruption or fraud. If you want to vote by mail, please do so, preferably as early as you feel comfortable in order to guarantee your vote has time to be delivered to the appropriate location for counting.

In-person voting is safe. It is not prone to corruption or fraud. If you wish to vote in-person, be assured that your vote will count and that no secret, corrupt storehouse of fraudulent ballots exists that will wipe out its value or importance.

Personally, I plan to vote in-person but early. I plan to do this to reduce pressure on the voting system. I will miss the energy and excitement of voting on election day, but I think it is important to not overtax the voting system on election day proper. But that's my choice. Others are perfectly valid — and each is fundamentally safe, secure and appropriate.

We're going to have to be patient and thoughtful on election night. I wish I could offer you better news, but between the problems inherent in our election system, the added stress of COVID-19, and the ways that President Trump has sought to delegitimize our elections system as such, this is going to be a long election night – indeed, at least a long election week.

I realize many of you may have people in your lives who will challenge or reject the points I have raised in this memo. They may insist that all the journalists and academics who have investigated these issues for decades are lying, or are biased, or are manipulating the truth to serve a partisan agenda. Unfortunately, I can't offer you any way to reassure such people. If someone is dead set on believing that thousands of people who have studied issues for decades are lying about their work, that person is not interested in engaging in a discussion of the facts and the evidence. They are seeking only to confirm their existing point of view. No convincing is possible because nothing can shake their conviction that they are right, and all the professional analysts are wrong. That's sad, but there is nothing anyone can do about it, at least in the short term.

Instead, I would encourage you to think about the issue this way: If someone claims that mail-in voting is inherently fraudulent, they are telling you, or at least implying, that you shouldn't vote

by mail. If someone claims that in-person voting is inherently fraudulent, they are telling you, or at least implying, that you shouldn't vote in-person.

In other words, they're suggesting you just shouldn't vote.

Don't listen to them. Failure to vote will NOT fix the problems I have outlined. Neither will just hoping these problems go away. Instead, if you can, you should vote for the candidates you prefer by whatever means you find most appropriate and most convenient.

Vote.