Voter Attitudes Toward the 2020 Election

August 2020 Update

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Preface

This technical appendix provides descriptive statistics, regression analyses, and an overview of key results drawn from responses of 1,841 survey respondents regarding (1) their perceptions of the safety and integrity of elections in November 2020 and (2) their voting intentions. We consider how attitudes changed between May and August 2020 and which populations are more or less likely to have updated their expectations regarding both physical safety and whether their votes will be counted accurately, given the pandemic context. We also explore how respondents' expressed likelihood of voting and intended voting methods changed between May and August. The data used in this report come from a RAND Corporation American Life Panel survey conducted in August 2020.

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This report is part of RAND's Countering Truth Decay initiative, which is focused on restoring the role of facts, data, and analysis in U.S. political and civil discourse and the policymaking process. The original 2018 report, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, laid out a research agenda for studying and developing solutions to the Truth Decay challenge. Truth Decay worsens when individuals lose trust in institutions that could serve as sources of factual information. Legitimate and safe elections can be a first step toward building and maintaining a government that people trust. This report considers public perceptions of the safety and integrity of elections in pandemic conditions, and their views of local preparedness for the elections.

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Contents and Tables

Contents

Tables

What We Found

The reports related to this appendix draw on responses to a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,841 respondents from RAND's American Life Panel (ALP). The ALP is a longitudinal panel of respondents who are regularly asked to report on aspects of their well-being, demographics, voting activity, and health behavior. The panel of respondents was given an additional series of questions in both May and August 2020 regarding their voting activity and intentions, including the following:

- What is the percent chance that you will vote in the 2020 presidential election?
- Assuming you do vote, how do you expect to cast your ballot? (response options: in person, absentee, by mail [post], by mail [in person],[1] other)
- Assuming you do vote, when you think about voting in November 2020, do you feel that you will be safe from risks to your physical health stemming from COVID-19? (response options: yes, no, unsure)
- Assuming that you do vote, do you feel that your vote will be counted accurately in light of the current pandemic? (response options: yes, no, unsure)

For this analysis, we looked at how attitudes have or have not changed between May and August 2020. Even since August, there have been significant developments in the course of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and state and local planning for election administration (such as concerns about election security and the capacity of states to handle an influx of mail-in ballots) that could have further informed individual perceptions of election safety and election integrity along with intentions to vote. In this appendix, we compare the two snapshots, but difficulties exist in disentangling changes that have occurred in individual expectations over the period between the two surveys from the differences that derive from different contexts for each survey. In future reports, we will analyze an October 2020 survey and a post-election survey conducted in November and December 2020 to further explore how attitudes changed over time.

Table A.1 shows the descriptive statistics for our sample. The sample is disproportionately White/Caucasian (73.5 percent) and older (52 years of age, on average), so we use sample weights in all regression models and cross-tabulations. Our weights are also adjusted for political affiliation and voting history. For more on this, see Pollard and Baird, 2017; for more information on population weights used in this analysis, see our initial report on voter perceptions of the 2020 elections (Kavanagh, Gibson, and Hodgson, 2020).

[1] Mail-in ballots can be sent in via the postal service or delivered in person to balloting locations.

Table A.1. Unweighted Demographics of Sample (*N* = 1,841)

Characteristic	Female	Male	Totals
Mean age (standard deviation)	51 (14)	53 (13)	52 (2)
Race			
White/Caucasian	717 (72.4%)	636 (74.9%)	1,353 (73.5%)
American Indian or Alaska Native	53 (5.3%)	3 (0.4%)	56 (3.1%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	24 (2.4%)	37 (4.4%)	61 (3.3%)
Black or African American	132 (13.3%)	73 (8.6%)	205 (11.1%)
Other	65 (6.6%)	100 (11.8%)	165 (9%)
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic	774 (78%)	694 (81.6%)	1,468 (79.7%)
Hispanic	218 (22%)	156 (18.4%)	373 (20.3%)
Mean age (standard deviation)	51 (14)	53 (13)	52 (2)
Urban or rural status			
Rural or small town, population under 50,000	231 (23.3%)	158 (18.6%)	388 (21.1%)
Small to midsize city or large city, population of 50,000 or larger	759 (76.5%)	692 (81.4%)	1,451 (78.8%)

NOTE: Sample consists of respondents from our original May survey who also responded to the August survey. This table shows the descriptive statistics for our sample.

Perceptions of Integrity and Safety

Perceptions of safety were measured using the question "Do you feel that you will be safe from risks to your physical health stemming from COVID-19?"

Perceptions of election integrity were measured using the question "Do you feel that your vote will be counted accurately in light of the current pandemic?"

We used logistic regression analyses to determine factors associated with changing attitudes toward the safety and integrity of the November 2020 election. Respondents who responded "yes" to questions about integrity or safety were coded as "1," and other responses ("no" or "not sure") were coded "0." We created a dummy variable for each of the perception-of-safety and perception-of-integrity questions across respondents as dependent variables. We first determine which individual characteristics appear to be correlated with perceptions of integrity and safety in the August survey (Table A.2). We selected variables based on a forward stepwise AIC selection procedure, removing variables from the analysis that did not show significant impact on explaining the dependent variable of interest.[2] Empty cells in Table A.2 (and all other tables)

[2] AIC (Akaike information criterion) is a measure of regression fit that allows us to determine which variables are most strongly associated with the dependent variable.

represent cases where variables were "thrown out" of the analysis using this procedure. These variables were not found to be significant predictors and so do not feature prominently in the analysis.

We find a slight decrease in perceptions of safety (from 62 percent of respondents to 60 percent) and a slightly larger decrease in perceptions of integrity (from 59 percent of respondents to 54 percent). Both changes are statistically significant at the 0.05 level using a chi-square test. Our results for perception of integrity (which measures the percentage of respondents who expect that their vote will be accurately counted) are on par with responses to a similar survey question asked by the Pew Research Center in 2004, 2008, and 2016. Direct comparison is difficult because of different response options, but our 2020 results seem to indicate that respondent expectations that their votes will be counted accurately are slightly higher than those that Pew reported for its 2016 survey—but somewhat lower than those that Pew reported for 2004 and 2008. Our results on questions about expectations of accurate vote count and expectations of physical safety at the polls are also comparable in broad terms to Pew's 2020 results. However, once again, direct comparisons are difficult because Pew offered different response options and because Pew asked separate questions about the expected accuracy of the count of mail-in ballots and votes cast in person (Fingerhut, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2020).

Our analysis identified characteristics associated with greater and lower likelihood that a respondent would report perceptions of safety and that their vote would be accurately counted in November. Political affiliation of the respondent was the strongest predictor across the models. Republican respondents were more likely to report expecting that ballots would be counted correctly and more likely to say that the election would be safe; Democrats, independents, and the unaffiliated were more pessimistic about the physical safety of the November election in the context of COVID-19. Beyond political affiliation, Native American, Asian American, Black and African American, and Hispanic respondents were all less likely than White/Caucasian respondents to consider the election safe in the COVID-19 context. Perceptions of safety and integrity were positively associated in both models. Age and education mattered for perceptions of integrity but not safety—the older the respondent, the more likely they were to respond positively to the election integrity question; respondents with college degrees were more likely to express positive expectations about whether their vote would be counted than those without a degree.

Table A.2. Logistic Regression of Perceptions of Integrity and Safety (August 2020, *N* = 1,805)

Effect	Integrity Coefficient (standard error)	Safety Coefficient (standard error)
(Intercept)	–0.99 (0.5)*	–0.49 (0.18)**
Political affiliation (compared with Democrat)		
Independent	–0.87 (0.16)***	0.18 (0.15)
Not sure	–2.21 (0.21)***	–0.28 (0.18)
Other	–1.85 (0.27)***	–0.36 (0.24)
Republican	–0.98 (0.16)***	0.98 (0.15)***
Race (compared with White/Caucasian)		
American Indian or Alaska Native	–0.15 (0.47)	–2.16 (0.48)***
Asian or Pacific Islander	1.11 (0.33)***	–1.7 (0.32)***
Black or African American	–0.78 (0.19)***	–0.71 (0.17)***
Other	–0.58 (0.22)**	–0.54 (0.22)*
Region (compared with Northeast)		
Midwest	0.36 (0.18)*	0.47 (0.18)*
South	0.15 (0.16)	0.58 (0.15)***
West	–0.05 (0.17)	0.93 (0.18)***
Education (compared with no college degree)		
College degree	0.46 (0.13)***	
Postgraduate degree	0.03 (0.16)	
Age(sqrt)	0.21 (0.06)***	
Hispanic ethnicity		–0.58 (0.17)***
Perception that votes will be counted correctly	n.a.	0.92 (0.12)***
Voted in 2016, 2018, or both	–0.72 (0.28)*	
Perception that voting is safe	1.38 (0.12)***	n.a.
Male	0.38 (0.11)***	
Vote-by-mail option in state		–0.28 (0.14)
Null deviance	2,480	2,466
AIC	1,706	1,786

NOTES: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. n.a. = not applicable to this analysis. Empty cells represent cases where variables were deemed as not having significant impact and thrown out of the analysis.

To measure characteristics associated with the changes between May and August, we predicted the August response using a series of interaction effects; all independent variables were interacted with the May 2020 response, providing coefficient estimates of the effect of an independent variable on changing a response from May to August. This is a *model specification of change*, which produces coefficients that represent the association of a respondent characteristic with changing their response to the same question from May to August surveys; *positive interaction effects* represent the tendency for respondents to continue to say the election is safe in August if they said so in May; *positive main effects* represent the tendency for respondents to change their minds from "no" to "yes."

For example, the interaction effect for "age*May" is the effect for age for those who answered "yes" in the May 2020 survey. The main effect for "age" in this model is the age effect for those respondents who did not answer "yes" in May. This model estimates different coefficients for each group, determining which group is more likely to be influenced by age in changing their answer to the question between May and August. If the main effect is positive, then older respondents are more likely to switch from "no" to "yes"; if the interaction effect "age*May" is positive, it means that older adults who said "yes" in May are more likely than younger respondents to also answer "yes" in August. Results from both analyses are shown in Tables A.3 and A.4.

Table A.3. Effect Explanations for Logistic Regression for Changes in Perceptions of Integrity and Safety

Explanation	Effect	Example Coefficient	Example Interpretation
Change from "yes" in May to "no" in August	Negative interaction effect	$-\beta$(age*May response)	Of those who said "yes" in May, older respondents are more likely to respond "no" in August
Change from "no" in May to "yes" in August	Positive main effect	β(age)	Of those who said "no" in May, older respondents are more likely to respond "yes" in August
No change, "yes" in May to "yes" in August	Positive interaction effect	β(age*May response)	Of those who said "yes" in May, older respondents are more likely to respond "yes" in August
No change, "no" in May to "no" in August	Negative main effect	$-\beta$(age)	Of those who said "no" in May, older respondents are more likely to respond "no" in August

Notable results are as follows:

- Older respondents who responded that they did not feel safe in May were likely to say the same in August.
- Respondents with a postgraduate education were likely to change their perceptions from "unsafe" in May to "safe" in August.
- Political affiliation is not associated with changes in safety perception among those who did not perceive that the election would be safe when asked in May; however, Republicans were more likely to say the election would be safe in both periods. Other political affiliations did not show such persistence between the two periods.
- With the exception of Asian and Pacific Islander respondents, all non-White/Caucasian respondents were more likely than White/Caucasian respondents to say that they did not expect their votes to be accurately counted.
- Democrats seemed much more likely to change their minds from "no" to "yes" on the question of whether they thought their vote will be counted correctly.

Table A.4. Logistic Regression for Changes in Perceptions of Integrity and Safety (*N* = 1805)

Effect	Integrity Coefficient (standard error)	Safety Coefficient (standard error)
(Intercept)	0.75 (0.84)	–3 (0.86)***
Age(sqrt)	–0.01 (0.1)	0.3 (0.1)**
Education (compared with no college degree)		
College degree	0.24 (0.15)	0.32 (0.22)
Postgraduate degree	–0.17 (0.17)	0.91 (0.28)**
Political affiliation (compared with Democrat)		
Independent	–1.03 (0.28)***	0.14 (0.26)
Not sure	–2.71 (0.35)***	0.33 (0.26)
Other	–2.81 (0.56)***	–0.07 (0.36)
Republican	–0.91 (0.28)**	0.06 (0.28)
Voted in 2016, 2018, or both	–0.84 (0.34)*	–0.92 (0.36)*
Race (compared with White/Caucasian)		
American Indian or Alaska Native	–1.72 (1.37)	–2.09 (0.72)**
Asian or Pacific Islander	2.93 (0.67)***	–1.93 (0.6)**
Black or African American	–1.07 (0.34)**	–0.48 (0.28)
Other	–0.9 (0.36)*	–0.13 (0.32)
Region (compared with Northeast)		
Midwest	–1.11 (0.37)**	0.39 (0.29)
South	–0.18 (0.25)	0.18 (0.25)
West	–0.47 (0.3)	0.56 (0.26)*
Perception that voting is safe	–0.4 (0.15)**	2.29 (1.1)*
Hispanic ethnicity		0.31 (0.26)
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)	–1.35 (0.98)	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*age(sqrt)	0.3 (0.13)*	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*political affiliation (compared with Democrat)		
Independent	0.43 (0.35)	n.a.
Not sure	2.24 (0.53)***	n.a.
Other	1.89 (0.69)**	n.a.
Republican	–0.02 (0.34)	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*race (compared with White/Caucasian)		
American Indian or Alaska Native	4.06 (2.28)	n.a.
Asian or Pacific Islander	–2.86 (0.78)***	n.a.
Black or African American	0.31 (0.44)	n.a.
Other	0.87 (0.51)	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*region (compared with Northeast)		
Midwest	1.55 (0.45)***	n.a.
South	0.32 (0.35)	n.a.
West	0.69 (0.4)	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*male	–0.43 (0.26)	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*vote-by-mail option in state	0.66 (0.31)*	n.a.
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)		1.14 (0.2)***

Effect	Integrity Coefficient (standard error)	Safety Coefficient (standard error)
Perception that voting is safe (May)	1.32 (0.14)***	
Perception that voting is safe(May)*age(sqrt)	n.a.	–0.29 (0.13)*
Perception that voting is safe(May)*education (compared with no college degree)		
College degree	n.a.	–0.06 (0.3)
Postgraduate degree	n.a.	–1.28 (0.36)***
Perception that voting is safe (May)*Hispanic ethnicity	n.a.	–0.97 (0.39)*
Perception that voting is safe (May)*perception that votes will be counted correctly	n.a.	–0.76 (0.27)**
Perception that voting is safe (May)*political affiliation (compared with Democrat)	n.a.	
Independent	n.a.	–0.21 (0.34)
Not sure	n.a.	–0.23 (0.44)
Other	n.a.	0.08 (0.56)
Republican	n.a.	1.07 (0.37)**
Perception that voting is safe*voted in 2016, 2018, or both	n.a.	1.71 (0.53)**
Perception that voting is safe*race (compared with White/Caucasian)		
American Indian or Alaska Native	n.a.	0.81 (1.14)
Asian or Pacific Islander	n.a.	1.73 (0.84)*
Black or African American	n.a.	–0.07 (0.39)
Other	n.a.	–1.39 (0.46)**
Perception that voting is safe (May)*region (compared with Northeast)	n.a.	
Midwest	n.a.	0.25 (0.38)
South	n.a.	0.61 (0.33)
West	n.a.	0.94 (0.36)**
Male	0.57 (0.2)**	
Vote-by-mail option in state	–0.46 (0.24)	
Null deviance	2,480	2,466
AIC	1,500	1,587
N	1,789	1,786

NOTES: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. n.a. = not applicable to this analysis. Empty cells represent cases where variables were deemed as not having significant impact and thrown out of the analysis.

Intention to Vote

To determine the impact of perceptions of COVID-19 surrounding safety and integrity on intention to vote, we asked respondents to report at two different points in the year, May and August, about their expected chance of voting. Analyzing responses to the question, "What is the percent chance that you will vote in the 2020 presidential election," we applied ordinary least squares (OLS) to the changes in intention to vote from May to August, which was normally distributed according to a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test applied to the distribution of change

values.[3] We only consider those respondents who reported a change of 10 percent or more between May and August. It is worth noting that only 214 respondents in the sample had changes this large or larger in intention to vote. This suggests a good deal of stability across the two periods. Regression analyses were used to confirm whether the descriptive relationships were robust to the inclusion of other variables. For example, we measured whether the effect of political affiliation on perceptions of safety, integrity, and intention to vote was significant when including other respondent characteristics, such as age, race, and region of residence. To avoid overfitting, all models were input into a forward-selected stepwise AIC procedure to "throw out" variables that did not affect the dependent variable of interest above random chance.

Overall, we find a generally negative trend in intention to vote, all else considered. American Indian or Alaska Native and Asian American respondents lowered their intention to vote between May and August much more than White/Caucasian respondents. Midwesterners and Westerners were more likely than Northeasterners to shift to a higher intention to vote. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to shift in the positive direction; independents did not differ from Democrats in their shifting intentions. Males, more than females, were more likely to shift to a higher intention to vote. Those with a vote-by-mail option in their state were also more likely to shift in the positive direction.

Overall, those who changed their minds about safety between May and August were also more likely to shift their intention to vote in the positive direction; those who reported in both periods that they did not think the election would be safe had lower intention to vote and were more likely to report lower intention to vote in August.[4] Voters who reported that they expected the election to be physically safe in both periods had the highest intention to vote in both periods, although there was a slight downward trend among these respondents between the two periods. The negative trend in intention to vote for those who reported positive perceptions of election integrity in both May and August was no longer significant after controlling for political affiliation. Results are provided in Table A.5.

[3] We also tried a regression specification in which we predicted the intention to vote in August by interacting all variables with the intention to vote in May. Results were the same.

[4] Although the coefficient on the integrity term is negative (indicating that those who change their perception of whether their vote will be counted correctly also report a reduced intention to vote), the term is not statistically significant at traditional levels.

Table A.5. OLS Regression for Changes in Intention to Vote (*N* = 158)

Effect	Coefficient (standard error)
(Intercept)	–9.05 (12.4)
Intended percentage to vote (May)	–0.72 (0.09)***
Perception that voting is safe (August)	19.32 (8.83)*
Perception that voting is safe	38.65 (7.34)***
Perception that votes will be counted correctly	29.76 (8.34)***
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (August)	5.98 (9.93)
Race (compared with White/Caucasian)	
American Indian or Alaska Native	–31.72 (10.36)**
Asian or Pacific Islander	–18.66 (13.18)
Black or African American	7.46 (6.88)
Other	8.25 (9.36)
Male	12.72 (5.6)*
Vote-by-mail option in state	17.14 (7.79)*
Political affiliation (compared with Democrat)	
Republican	26.82 (8.57)**
Independent	–3.89 (8.83)
Other	0.88 (12.82)
Not sure	6.59 (9.11)
Region (compared with Northeast)	
South	–0.34 (7.73)
Midwest	38.33 (10.07)***
West	23.6 (9.8)*
Perception that voting is safe (May)*(August)	–43.58 (11.84)***
Perception that votes will be counted correctly (May)*(August)	–24.08 (13.49)
Null deviance	766,392
Residual deviance	1,659

NOTE: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Changes in Vote Method

Finally, we asked respondents about their intended voting method in the 2020 general election in both the May and August surveys. For this analysis, we focused on respondents who reported a greater-than-50-percent chance that they would vote in November, although we found that the results in terms of trends in intended voting method and characteristics associated with those changes were similar in the full and reduced samples.

In interpreting these results, it is useful to consider who is most likely to vote by mail. Those most likely to do so among our respondents tend to self-identify as Democrats, to have college

degrees, and to report that they do not think that voting in November 2020 will be physically safe. Asian or Pacific Islander respondents are also more likely than White/Caucasian respondents and respondents of other races to report that they will vote by mail.

The panel survey showed a small shift to mail-in voting in the aggregate and changes at the individual level. We ran two regression models: the change from voting in person to a mail-in method and from a mail-in method to voting in person to identify characteristics associated with changes in intended voting method. *Mail-in methods* here refer to any method that requires a mail-in ballot, including dropping off the ballot in person. Results are shown in Tables A.6 and A.7.

Key results are as follows:

- Recent voters (those who voted in 2016, 2018, or both) are less likely to switch from voting in person to a mail-in method.
- Republicans and independents are less likely than Democrats to switch to mail-in methods; those who identify as unaffiliated are more likely to switch from voting in person to a mail-in method.
- Older respondents are more likely to switch from voting in person to a mail-in method.
- American Indians and Alaska Natives are less likely to switch from voting in person to a mail-in method.
- Hispanic respondents are more likely than non-Hispanic respondents to switch to a mail-in method.

Table A.6. Logistic Regression Predicting Change to a Mail-In Method from May to August (*N* = 693)

Effect	Coefficient (standard error)
(Intercept)	–1.4 (0.88)
Voted in 2016, 2018, or both	–1.51 (0.44)***
Perception that voting is safe	–1.35 (0.21)***
Political affiliation (compared with Democrat)	
Republican	–1.55 (0.3)***
Independent	–0.82 (0.26)**
Other	1.61 (0.41)***
Not sure	–0.9 (0.34)**
Race (compared with White/Caucasian)	
American Indian or Alaska Native	–1.88 (0.53)***
Asian or Pacific Islander	1.22 (0.88)
Black or African American	0.28 (0.31)
Other	0.37 (0.32)
Age(sqrt)	0.43 (0.11)***
Vote-by-mail option in state	–1 (0.24)***
Region (compared with Northeast)	
South	0.01 (0.26)
Midwest	–0.7 (0.34)*
West	–0.41 (0.35)
Hispanic ethnicity	1.5 (0.3)***
Null deviance	979
Residual deviance	627

NOTE: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A.7. Logistic Regression Predicting Change to In-Person Voting from May to August (*N* = 990)

Effect	Coefficient (standard error)
Intercept	–1.92 (0.38)***
Race (compared with White/Caucasian)	
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.95 (1)
Asian or Pacific Islander	0.28 (0.73)
Black or African American	1.75 (0.43)***
Other	1.98 (0.49)***
Vote-by-mail option in state	1.08 (0.38)**
Political affiliation (compared with Democrat)	
Republican	1.38 (0.35)***
Independent	–0.21 (0.46)
Other	0.1 (0.72)
Not sure	0.74 (0.55)
Region (compared with Northeast)	
South	–1.05 (0.43)*
Midwest	–0.27 (0.46)
West	–1.24 (0.45)**
Null deviance	422
Residual deviance	312

NOTE: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

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