



PENNSYLVANIA VOTER VIEWS ON 2020 ELECTION PROCESSES AND SECURITY

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A Report from the Muhlenberg Institute of Public Opinion

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INTRODUCTION

With less than 2 months remaining until Election Day, Pennsylvania is in the national spotlight as one of the key swing states that may decide the outcome of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. This election comes in the midst of an historic pandemic, threats of foreign interference in the election, and a number of significant changes in the ways that Pennsylvanians can cast their vote this fall. The confluence of Pennsylvania's key role in the election, and the interest and uncertainty that surrounds the voting process and rules in the Commonwealth, increases the importance of understanding the views and concerns that Pennsylvania voters maintain about their 2020 vote. To help provide insight into these views, the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion (MCIPO) has asked voters in Pennsylvania their perceptions of state preparedness for the 2020 election, and their primary concerns regarding election security and fairness in this cycle. These voter perceptions were gathered in surveys conducted in February and August of 2020, and serve as the data source for the following report.

SECTION ONE: VIEWS ON PENNSYLVANIA ELECTION PREPAREDNESS

As national, and even international attention towards the 2020 election in Pennsylvania grows, questions regarding the state's preparedness to conduct the much anticipated election are often asked. Is the Commonwealth prepared to provide a safe and secure election? Can Pennsylvania ensure accurate and timely delivery of election results? Perception of these matters is particularly important among Keystone State voters who will engage in this year's

election. What is their level of confidence in the state’s election preparedness, and what are their concerns about the voting process?

Over the course of 2020, views on Pennsylvania’s election preparedness have remained largely stable between February and August, with most Pennsylvania voters indicating the state is prepared to deliver a safe and secure election this November. A majority of respondents in both February (54%) and August (55%) reported that the state is prepared for the upcoming election, with only about 1 in 5 voters in February and August reporting the state is not prepared in terms of this role. Notably, about a quarter of voters in the Commonwealth, in both 2020 polls, are unsure of the state’s preparedness to deliver a safe and secure election later this year. (See Table One below.)

TABLE ONE

**Pennsylvania Voter Views on the
State’s Preparedness for the 2020 Election**

	FEBRUARY 2020	AUGUST 2020
Very Prepared	11%	8%
Prepared	43%	47%
Not Very Prepared	15%	14%
Not Prepared at All	3%	6%
Not Sure	28%	25%

Question: Now thinking about the presidential election in November, do you think that Pennsylvania is very prepared, prepared, not very prepared or not prepared at all to keep this November’s elections safe and secure?

While views on the preparedness of the state for the 2020 election are not dramatically different across partisan divides, there have been some modest changes between February and March. In particular, there was a 13-point drop (20% to 7%) between February and August in the number of Republicans who believe Pennsylvania is very prepared for the election, and a corresponding 8-point jump (1% to 9%) in the number of Republicans who think the state is “not prepared at all” for the November election. (See Table Two below.)

TABLE TWO

**Perceptions of State Election Preparedness
By Party Registration
(February-August 2020 Comparison)**

		Very Prepared	Prepared	Not Very Prepared	Not Prepared at All	Not Sure
Democrat	February	6%	50%	15%	3%	27%
	August	9%	47%	12%	2%	29%
Republican	February	20%	42%	12%	1%	25%
	August	7%	49%	16%	9%	20%

Question: *Now thinking about the presidential election in November, do you think that Pennsylvania is very prepared, prepared, not very prepared or not prepared at all to keep this November's elections safe and secure?*

SECTION TWO: VIEWS ON MAJOR THREATS TO ELECTION SECURITY AND LEGITIMACY

Since the 2016 presidential election, attention to election security has risen in the United States. Investigations of foreign interference in the 2016 elections, public debates over voter suppression, voting machinery malfunctions, and claims of voter fraud by high profile political figures has elevated the profile of election processes as the country moves towards the November election. Thus, measuring perceptions of voting security and legitimacy among Pennsylvania voters has become an increased priority for the MCIPO this year.

When Pennsylvanians were asked about threats to election security and legitimacy in February, responses were evenly distributed across three perceived threats: voting machines malfunctioning (22%), voter fraud (25%), and suppression of individuals from voting (21%). However, by August, the majority of responses were split between voter fraud (39%) and suppression of individuals from voting (30%). (See Table Three below.)

TABLE THREE

**Pennsylvania Voter Perceptions of Primary Threat to
Election Security and Legitimacy
(February - August Comparison)**

	FEBRUARY 2020	AUGUST 2020	% CHANGE
Foreign interference in the election	17%	14%	-3%-
Voting machines malfunctioning	22%	7%	-15%
Voter fraud	25%	39%	+14%
Suppression of individuals from voting	21%	30%	+9%
Other Factor (Vol)	15%	4%	-11%
Foreign interference in the election	17%	14%	-3%-

QUESTION: Which of the following do you consider to be the biggest threat to Pennsylvania having a safe, secure and accurate election in November? (ROTATE OPTIONS)

Partisanship has increasingly influenced views on major threats to election security and legitimacy over the course of 2020. In particular, the gap between Democrats and Republicans in terms of the biggest threat to the upcoming election has significantly grown between August and September. For Democrats, suppression of voters was most commonly identified as the biggest threat to election security and legitimacy in both February and April, but the percentage choosing this option rose from 29% to 49% over that six-month period. Among Republicans, voter fraud was identified as the major threat to the accuracy and legitimacy of this year's election in both the February and August polls, but nearly doubled from 36% in February to 68% in August. (See Table Four below.)

TABLE FOUR

**Pennsylvania Voter Perceptions of Primary Threat to Election Security and Legitimacy
By Party Registration Status
(February - August Comparison)**

		Foreign interference in the election	Voting machines malfunctioning	Voter Fraud	Suppression of Individuals from voting	Other Factor (Vol)	Not sure
Democrat	February	21%	20%	17%	29%	13%	0%
	August	19%	8%	14%	49%	3%	8%
Republican	February	10%	28%	36%	9%	15%	2%
	August	11%	4%	68%	9%	3%	5%

QUESTION: Which of the following do you consider to be the biggest threat to Pennsylvania having a safe, secure and accurate election in November? (ROTATE OPTIONS)

Over the course of the summer, debates around the security of voting by mail grew in intensity in Pennsylvania, and around the nation. President Trump has regularly claimed that large scale voting by mail increases the chances of fraud, and has argued that access to this means of voting should be limited. With this debate as a backdrop, we tested Pennsylvania voter perceptions of the impact of large-scale voting by mail on the likelihood of election fraud occurring. The results in Table Five show high levels of division among Pennsylvania voters on the impact of large-scale mail voting on election fraud, with 47% agreeing, and 46% disagreeing that if most Pennsylvanians vote by mail the chances of election fraud will be greater.

TABLE FIVE

**Level of Agreement with the Statement:
“There is a greater chance of election fraud if most Pennsylvanians vote by mail this year”
(August 2020)**

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	31%
Somewhat Agree	16%
Somewhat Disagree	18%
Strongly Disagree	28%

The partisan divides that permeate so much of electoral politics are on full display regarding the potential of fraud caused by large-scale mail voting. Keystone State Republicans overwhelmingly (75%) agree that substantial mail voting in the state increases the probability of election fraud, with a mere 4% strongly disagreeing with the claim. The state’s Democrats hold nearly opposite views on this matter, with 7 out of 10 either “somewhat” or “strongly”

disagreeing that if most Pennsylvanians vote by mail the risk of fraud rises, with only about 1 in 10 (11%) strongly agreeing with the claim. Registered independents are fairly divided on the matter with 48% agreeing, and 41% disagreeing that significant mail voting elevates the chances of election fraud. (See Table Six below.)

TABLE SIX

**Level of Agreement with the Statement:
 “There is a greater chance of election fraud if most Pennsylvanians vote by mail this year”
 By Party Registration Status
 (August 2020)**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not sure
Democrat	11%	13%	22%	47%	8%
Republican	58%	17%	17%	4%	4%
Independent	23%	25%	14%	27%	12%

SECTION THREE: VIEWS ON VOTER SAFETY

As individuals vote in the 2020 presidential election, they will do so in the midst of the largest pandemic to hit the United States since 1918. With Pennsylvanians adjusting to many aspects of their lives in response to COVID-19, voting in the 2020 election is also being impacted. In 2019, Pennsylvania adopted electoral reforms that expanded the ability of voters to vote by mail without having to meet the requirements for an absentee ballot. In the 2020 primary election in Pennsylvania, the confluence of the easier access to mail-in ballots, and the COVID-19 pandemic, helped increase mail-in ballots from 84,000 absentee ballots cast in the 2016 primary, to about 1.5 million this year.

As the general election nears, it’s valuable to get a measure of how safe Pennsylvanians feel voting in person, and how this view on safety may overlay with intended methods of voting. When asked in our August poll about their level of agreement with the statement, “As of today, I do not feel safe voting in person,” the majority of Pennsylvanians indicated that they somewhat disagree (31%) or strongly disagree (42%) with this claim. Only about a quarter (23%) of Pennsylvanians agreed that they did not feel safe voting in person. (See Table Seven below.)

TABLE SEVEN
Views on the Safety of Voting in Person
Level of Agreement with the statement:
“As of today, I do not feel safe voting in person.”
(August 2020)

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	5%
Somewhat Agree	18%
Somewhat Disagree	31%
Strongly Disagree	42%
Not Sure	3%

As seen throughout this report, views on voter safety have a partisan bent. When looking at the data for Democrat, Republican and independent voters, Republicans were most likely to “strongly disagree” that ‘they do not feel safe voting,” with 55% of GOP voters offering this response. Comparatively, only about 3 out of 10 (29%) Democrats, and under half (46%) of independents maintained the same view. (See Table Eight below.)

TABLE EIGHT
Views on the Safety of Voting in Person
Level of Agreement with the statement:
“As of today, I do not feel safe voting in person.”
(By Party Registration: August 2020)

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure
Democrat	9%	25%	31%	29%	6%
Republican	2%	10%	33%	55%	1%
Independent	4%	22%	28%	46%	0%

METHODOLOGY: *The results include in this report are based on data collected in Muhlenberg College/Morning Call surveys in February and August of 2020. The February survey was fielded between February 12-20, with 424 completed surveys among likely voters. The August survey was fielded between August 11-17 with 416 completed surveys among likely voters. All interviews were conducted by telephone (both cell and land lines). For full methodological details for these surveys, please go to the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion at: www.muhlenberg.edu/aboutus/polling/*

