



Voting is our right, but it is also our duty as Americans

2020 Election Anxieties

The general election storming toward us on **November 3** will doubtless be one of the most critical collective decisions undertaken by our nation since the Civil War. At stake may well be the very survival of our system of government, deeply complicated by questions of leadership, foreign influence, internal corruption, civil rights and unrest – and it all takes place within the shadow of a deadly epidemic without a cure.

As such, the 2020 election is largely without precedent. Like **Y2K** (remember that?), this event could, despite all uncertainties, blow over harmlessly – or it might be a hugely destructive tempest in the making. We just do not know, and very likely will not know until it all is sorted out by next January, if then.

So this issue of the Portal looks at what might happen, what options are available for New Mexican voters, and finally, a glimpse of methods that might help in future elections.

The system under siege

Despite new fears driven by Covid-19, the greatest anxieties about the upcoming election stem directly from what happened last time. The Senate Intelligence Committee recently issued its final bipartisan report on the 2016 vote, confirming that foreign powers, particularly Russia, interfered. They used hacked emails and countless fake Facebook and Twitter accounts to spread disinformation, foment social unrest, and cast doubt on the electoral process.

Facebook still hasn't done much, and Twitter has timidly pointed out a few blatantly false posts. Yet judging by the nightly chaos, there is no doubt that foreign adversaries are at it again, now greatly aided by the pandemic leaving

everyone at home with little to do but look at their social media feeds all day long.

However, information that Russia's targeting Biden with lies about his mental health was actively concealed by the acting head of Homeland Security. Plus, the acting Director of National Intelligence flatly refused to brief Congress where officials could be confronted and questioned about foreign influence.

Other steps the administration has taken are also highly worrying, like sending infection data to Homeland Security instead of to the CDC, changing the CDC's own recommendations as to just who needs testing, pushing for reopening no matter what, and now possibly short-cutting scientific testing and approval for vaccines.

Is all this to falsely boast that the pandemic is under control immediately before the election, something that might aid the President? In any event, many states are now following their own doctors' advice rather than that provided by the feds, making this confused situation even worse.

The Post Office, more vital in this crisis than ever before, has also been targeted by the administration. It says it has stopped removing sorting machines and drop-boxes until after the election but refuses to replace them. Mail-in voting, which the President does himself despite disingenuous claims, is threatened, not by fake voters as he claims, but by mailing delays and deadlines.

The disadvantage of absentee voting is that laws often require that those ballots will not be counted until *after* all the ones cast in-person are tallied. Mailed ballots might not be added up for weeks, as has happened in previous close elections. However, they also have a far greater tendency to be tossed out completely, for every mailed ballot must be validated (usually by comparing signatures and making sure the form is properly filled out) *before* being counted.

Thus one scenario widely discussed is what happens if Trump quickly declares victory on the basis of the in-person vote, but absentee voting gives it weeks later to Vice President Biden. Could civil unrest explode into civil war?

Preparing for anything

As America's November destiny relentlessly approaches, it becomes more chillingly obvious that the election ahead looks more like a giant train wreck and less like a familiar civic ritual of our freedoms. Thus it is every citizen's duty to plan ahead on how she or he will vote, and to take the proper steps in a timely manner.

There are plenty of websites offering helpful advice, like NBC News' "**Plan Your Vote**" website (<https://nbcnews.to/3hOIPyh>). For citizens of New Mexico, the deadline to register online is Tuesday, **October 6** (at <https://bit.ly/3jBfwQe>) – 4 weeks before the election, although one can register at the local County Clerk's office until Halloween. That is also the last day for early in-person voting which begins on **October 17**. The day before trick or treats, Friday, **October 30**, is the final day you can request a ballot by mail, which must get to the polls by Election Day.

Our state's method for voting-by-mail is simply the system already developed for Absentee Voting. Absentee voting applications will be mailed out to all NM registered voters in Bernalillo County by **September 14**, or they can be requested online. The ballots themselves will be sent out to applicants starting **October 6**.

Note that all Absentee Voting Applications must be returned to the Clerk's office by **October 20**. In order to make sure this is enough time for voting by mail with the "upgrading" of the Postal Service, voters should plan on getting a ballot and mailing it in ASAP. To make sure that your vote is counted on Election Day, you may want to consider in-person voting. All voting sites are listed here: <https://bit.ly/3lFwgrg>.

If this seems complicated, it is a lot easier than in many other states where voting-by-mail, absentee or otherwise, can be much more difficult. Here, however, no photo ID, witness signature, nor any excuse for mailing it in is needed to vote. In fact, people may personally drop off their ballot at the polls if they want to at any time during the early voting period.

Hope for the future

It is probably a lot easier to wreck an election than to rig one so that a chosen candidate will inevitably win. For our external enemies, sowing discord, doubt, and dissension in the whole process is likely quite sufficient. Besides, the effort could easily blow up in their faces.

While the overall situation is clouded with enough questions to make for many a sleepless night, the situation is *not* hopeless. Even as the Russians and others have been working since 2016, so a lot of people here inside government have been quietly working to secure the vote.

It has long been rumored that President Obama was reluctant to do more to secure the election in 2016 because of concerns that the Russians might have hacked the North American power grid. It was widely feared that confronting their interference would trigger a massive shutdown, as the Russians once did to Ukraine.

Only selected areas need to be darkened to screw up voting and confuse the outcome. However, it is very likely that the US now has active hacking countermeasures in place. Official doctrine authorizes the military to actively fight cyberattacks, so there should be deterrents to that kind of conflict just as with nuclear arms.

Voting machines are still quite vulnerable to hacking, but awareness may also help prevent manipulation. Meanwhile, Microsoft is working on open-source voting machines. New means to make voting secure, like using blockchains to register voters, or auditing batches of mailed votes to quickly identify fake voting patterns, won't be available this election cycle but could help make future contests unassailable.

Our greatest security may lay in the basic decency of our citizenry. While foes spread posts of violent injustice, many ordinary people across the land joined peacefully together to reaffirm human worth. This should give hope to all of us.



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