Lessons from the 2024 General Election

Four years after the very contentious 2020 presidential election, election officials faced another cycle with significant challenges. In many instances, local officials had to adjust to considerable changes to state and federal election law, and potential violence on Election Day was front of mind, given the assassination attempt on Donald Trump as well as some incidents in the early-vote period. Meanwhile, election-related disinformation flooded the information ecosystem. Even given all of these challenges, and the high political stakes for the future direction of the country, election officials at all levels rose to the occasion and conducted a technically smooth election with only minor scattered issues, allowing for the voices of more than 150 million Americans to be heard.

Lessons from Election Administration in 2024

A successfully conducted election requires the collaboration of tens of thousands of officials and volunteers at the state and local levels. The processes that they devise and implement are chiefly responsible for the success or failure of an election, and these processes in 2024 were largely resilient to the many challenges officials faced.

Better preparation accommodated large numbers of absentee/mail-in ballots. In 2020, the period it took to count absentee and mail-in ballots, especially in some key battleground states, became a major cause of confusion and concern. While, for example, Michigan took steps to change policy to speed up their processing of mail-in ballots, other states, like Pennsylvania, took measures to increase the efficiency of the count without significant changes to election law. Unfortunately, despite general improvements across the states, counting mail-in ballots can still take a significant amount of time in some places (see Arizona, for example). Delays in counting in states such as California lead to increased concerns – even if unfounded – about accuracy.

Many voters took advantage of early voting opportunities. According to early numbers collected by the University of Florida's Election Lab, mail-in voting rates decreased quite substantially in 2024 compared to 2020, but the number of in-person early voters increased. While the overall number of votes cast before election day was down from 2020 (64%), they were still much higher (54%) than in any presidential election not held during a pandemic.

No widespread cyber incidents directly impacted the voting process. In the lead-up to the election, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) announced that there was no indication of any kind of cyber intrusion that could compromise voter registration, voter access, or the accurate tallying of ballots. In other announcements, however, they did warn that Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks on election infrastructure could "hinder public access to election information" and that foreign actors were attempting to gain access to accounts associated with national political organizations, likely with the goal of fueling discord. Perhaps due to the diligence of the FBI and CISA in warding against these threats, neither of these types of attacks appear to have had any significant impact on the election.

Diligence and good policy overcame attempts to overwhelm officials with challenges and records requests. Based on unsubstantiated and false claims that the voter rolls were replete with dead voters, voters registered in other locations, and, most recently, noncitizens, some third-party organizations flooded election offices with expansive lists of falsely flagged, allegedly ineligible voters. While this certainly imposed significant administrative burdens on these local offices, due to a combination of good policy and diligence on the part of local officials, these burdens did not have a significant effect on the administering of the election, nor has any evidence emerged to back up requesters' concerns.

The strong, bipartisan response to Hurricane Helene limited the impact on voters. A little under six weeks before Election Day Hurricane Helene caused catastrophic damage to 25 North Carolina counties, where nearly 1.3 million voters reside. Working with the state elections board, the state legislature quickly implemented a series

of emergency measures, including allowing out-of-precinct polling locations, expanding options for both receiving and returning absentee ballots and the ability to adjust the hours of early polling locations.

Scattered election day bomb threats led to concerning, but manageable, disruptions. Several dozen polling places across Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania received bomb threats on Election Day, some requiring the evacuation of those sites. The FBI reported that these were all hoaxes that appeared to originate from Russian email domains. In most instances, the voting hours were extended in the affected polling locations and the impact to voters was minimal.

Other typical and ordinary disruptions did not constitute an election crisis. As with every election, 2024 saw a few regular and isolated issues that had minimal impacts on voters. These ranged from minor equipment issues (e.g. a voting machine wasn't scanning completed ballots in Cambria County, Pennsylvania) to election workers forgetting a key, and hours-long wait times in several states. Various redundancies and/or polling time extensions were utilized to respond to these incidents. The impact of these incidents deserves further study to determine their full impact on voters.

The biggest concerns regarding artificial intelligence did not come to pass. Throughout the election cycle, there were multiple fears about the ways that artificial intelligence could be used to subvert American elections – from deepfake videos to overwhelming election administration systems, to fake news stories designed to suppress turnout. While there were incidents of AI being used (including a robocall that spoofed President Biden's voice during the New Hampshire primary) in illegal and deceptive ways, the worst-case scenarios did not materialize.

Lessons from Canvassing and Certification in 2024

Canvassing and certifying the vote are key processes that ensure an accurate accounting of the outcome and also provide the public with confidence in those outcomes. Since the 2020 election, there have been many attempts to undermine and cast doubt on these processes. However, fears that the results would receive excessive and unfounded challenges, that defeated candidates would not concede, or that states or counties would refuse to certify, failed to materialize.

There were no significant disturbances to the canvassing process. In 2020 several significant disturbances at ballot counting locations across swing states (including Arizona, Michigan, and Pennsylvania), contributed to concerns that we might see similar disturbances in 2024. Because the outcome was known relatively quickly, these concerns did not come to fruition. However, in Pennsylvania, a very small number of local administrators initially accepted undated absentee ballots against a previous state high court decision, before being compelled to follow the court's ruling.

There were no serious calls for local officials to oppose certification after votes were cast in the general election. In several places (e.g., Michigan in 2020, Arizona in 2022, and Nevada in the 2024 primary) officials had previously failed to certify legitimate county-level results. After the 2024 general election, in the only similar instance of note, a small number of county board members in Colorado voted to not certify due to an isolated password issue, which had no impact on the outcome. This vote did not impede Colorado's timely certification of the results, and, in fact, there were no significant hurdles to certification in any state.

The losing presidential candidate quickly conceded. We can attribute the lack of significant disturbances to the canvassing and certification processes to the fact that, unlike in 2020, the losing presidential candidate accepted the outcome and quickly conceded to her opponent. The person best positioned to fuel conspiracies in an attempt to overturn the election clearly signaled her unwillingness to do so; as a result, the process that followed proceeded smoothly.

A joint session of Congress counted the electoral college votes without major incident. Given that neither candidate disputed the overall outcome of the election, we did not expect any issues when Congress counted the electoral votes on January 6, 2025. However, updates to federal law in the Electoral Count Reform Act (ECRA) also minimized the opportunity for a crisis on that date. Among other things, the ECRA clarified that the Vice President's role is "ministerial," that Congress should only consider the one, official slate of electors from each state, and that members of Congress may only object to electors on certain narrow grounds.

Lessons from the Post-Election Narratives

While free and fair elections and clear and accurate results are essential, the American people's confidence in the process is equally important. Prominent political and media figures who championed the post-2020 election conspiracy theories significantly undermined that necessary confidence. The lack of similar narratives emerging after 2024 may signal an opportunity to reinvigorate the public's trust in American elections.

Lawsuits filed pre-election failed to produce any evidence of fraud or unreliability of the results. Dozens of lawsuits were filed during the lead-up to the election, some of which had a low probability of succeeding. These lawsuits were designed to make it easier to challenge the results of the election or to undermine public trust in the results. These lawsuits did not produce evidence of election fraud or issues in the administration of the election and had no impact on the results of the election.

Scattered conspiracy theories about the 2024 election have failed to take root. Given Trump's victory, the dominant purveyors of election conspiracies on the right have been unsurprisingly quiet in the post-election period. Losing candidates in both major parties and in each of the competitive U.S. Senate races conceded to their opponents. Immediately following the election, a handful of false narratives emerged to cast the result as rigged or stolen, but they were without merit. Unlike after 2020, none of these conspiracies have gained any support from the top of the ticket or prominent party officials, nor have any media outlets seriously entertained their claims.

Early indications suggest that voters have more confidence in the 2024 results. The public's growing lack of confidence in our elections can be tied to the successful false election conspiracies over the last four years. In fact, in the lead-up to the 2024 election, one poll suggested that only 37% of Americans thought the result would be "honest and open." However – given that the losing candidate conceded and conspiracies have failed to take hold – early polls suggest that views may have shifted in the post-2024 election period. Voters have reported overall much higher levels of confidence in 2024 than in 2020, and, unlike in 2020, majorities of both Democratic and Republican voters report having confidence in the outcome.

Recommendations to Reduce the Risk of Crises in Future Elections

Pass legislation to protect election workers. The Task Force identified these protections as priorities in a paper published in 2023. In recent years, baseless misinformation has forced election workers to operate under threats and harassment. While the worst-case scenarios for election day violence did not occur, more must be done to keep election workers from living in fear. States should pass legislation to protect election workers' privacy, expand legal remedies, hold bad actors accountable, and adequately fund election infrastructure and personnel security.

Continue to align state deadlines and ensure compliance with the ECRA. In a 2023 paper, the Task Force recommended state compliance with the Electoral Count Reform Act (ECRA). The ECRA established a firm deadline (the second Wednesday of December) for states to complete the certification of their electoral votes. State certification of the 2024 general election proceeded with minimal controversy in part due to the margin of victory and because the losing candidate did not question the overall outcome. If future election results are contested, states that have processes aligned with the ECRA should be better prepared to resolve outstanding issues and still meet the federal deadline. Fourteen states have already updated their laws to align with the ECRA deadline, and we strongly encourage all remaining states to follow suit.

Continue and expand emergency preparedness measures. Preparedness and quick action minimized the impact on the election of both the devastation of Hurricane Helene and the numerous election day bomb threats. We encourage state and local election officials to continue – and where possible, expand – cooperation and coordination with other state and federal agencies to prepare for potential emergencies during an election season.

Adopt policies to efficiently process and count ballots. All states should pass laws allowing for mail ballots to be processed (authenticated and prepared for tabulation) upon receipt of the ballots. Delays in ballot processing contribute to delays in results. While the 2024 election was called just hours after polls closed, had the margin in key swing states been closer it likely could have taken days or weeks. Adopting pre-processing would reduce the country's wait for complete results, regardless of the margin – shortening the volatile period of post-election uncertainty. Giving officials more time to verify ballots enhances election integrity protections and provides voters with increased opportunities to be notified of – and subsequently cure – any defects.

In addition to the above recommendations, we would also reiterate many of the evergreen recommendations outlined in our previous "Lessons Learned" reports:

Recruit poll workers on an ongoing basis
- Improve USPS ballot returns
- Make sustained investments in public education about election mechanics
- Take measures to decrease long lines
- Take measures to decrease Secretary of State conflicts of interest
- Provide sufficient funding for election administration

Conclusions

Our states' election processes – and the individuals who implemented them in 2024 – once again demonstrated their resilience. Intensive preparation allowed election officials to head off many potential issues and minimize the impact of the unavoidable ones. These successes, however, should not make us complacent. In future elections – where margins may be tighter or losing candidates may not concede – the country will continue to depend on the preparedness of our election officials and the strength of the guardrails built to protect them and their crucial work.