



How We Voted in 2020: A First Look at the Survey of the Performance of American Elections.

Charles Stewart III¹

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The Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ) provides information about how Americans experience voting in the most recent federal election. Conducted in every presidential election since 2008, the SPAЕ is the only national survey of election administration that focuses on the process of voting, and provides insights into the performance of elections in the individual states.

In 2020, 18,200 registered voters responded to the survey, which was administered by YouGov. Two hundred respondents each were interviewed in 40 states plus the District of Columbia. 1000 additional interviews were conducted in the states of Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The 2020 SPAЕ was supported, in part, through the generosity of the Democracy Fund.

This document provides an initial look into some of the findings from the survey. A more detailed report, along with a release of the data set, will follow in February 2021.

Voting by Mail

The biggest issue for election administration in 2020 was the pivot to voting by mail throughout the country in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying importance of de-densifying in-person voting. This need led many states to increase opportunities for voting by mail, ranging from expanding the accepted reasons voters could

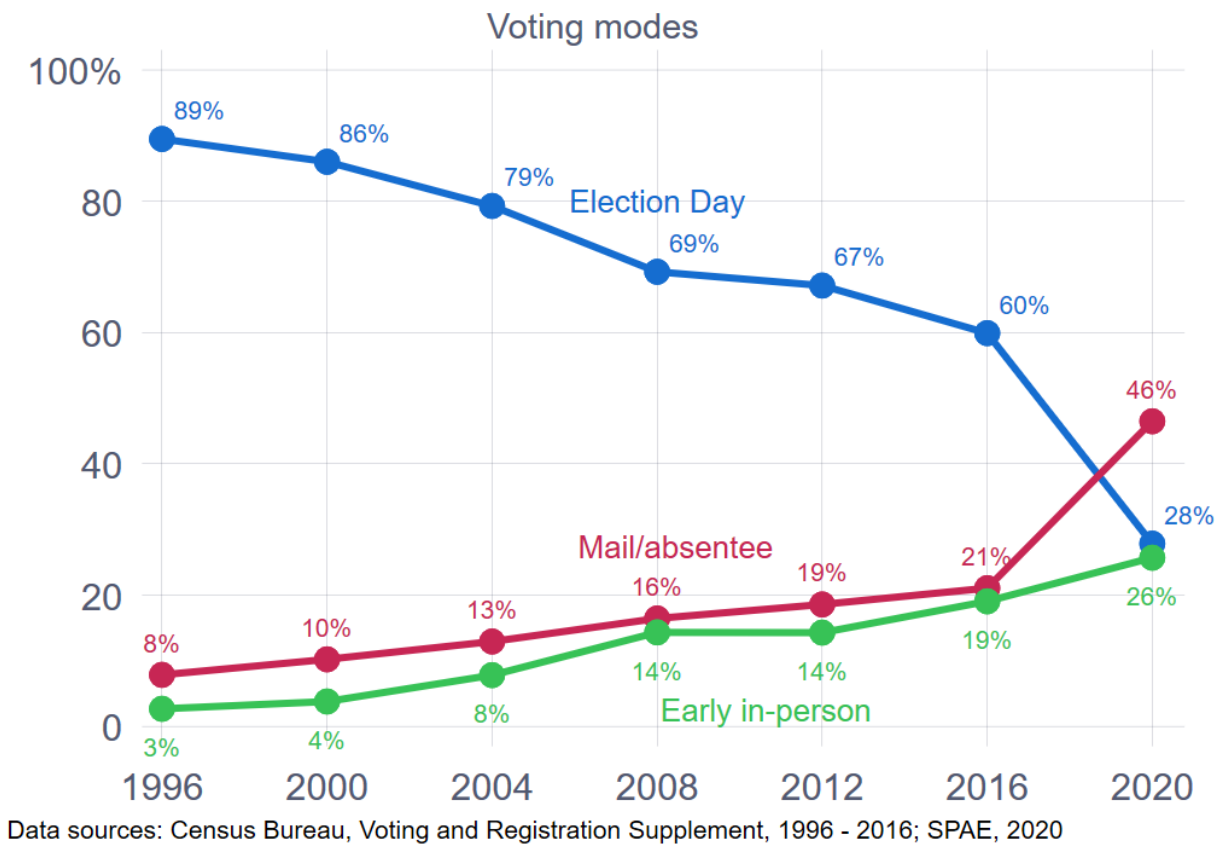
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list for requesting a mail ballot, to mailing ballots to all registered voters. As a consequence of these changes, the rate of voting by mail in 2020 doubled from 2016.

Mail ballot usage

In the 20 years prior to 2016, the percentage of voters casting ballots in person on Election Day has gradually declined, falling from 89% in 1996 to 60% in 2016. In that same period, rates of voting by mail and voting early in-person in early steadily increased. In response to the exigencies of the 2020 election, the fraction of voters casting ballots by mail more than doubled from 2016, to 46%. Meanwhile, the number of voters casting ballots on Election Day declined by half, from 60% to 28% in 2020. The percentage of voters casting ballots early in-person also grew, although not nearly as dramatically as voting by mail.

In the end, roughly half of Americans cast their ballots by mail in 2020, with a quarter casting ballots on Election Day and another quarter casting them early in-person.



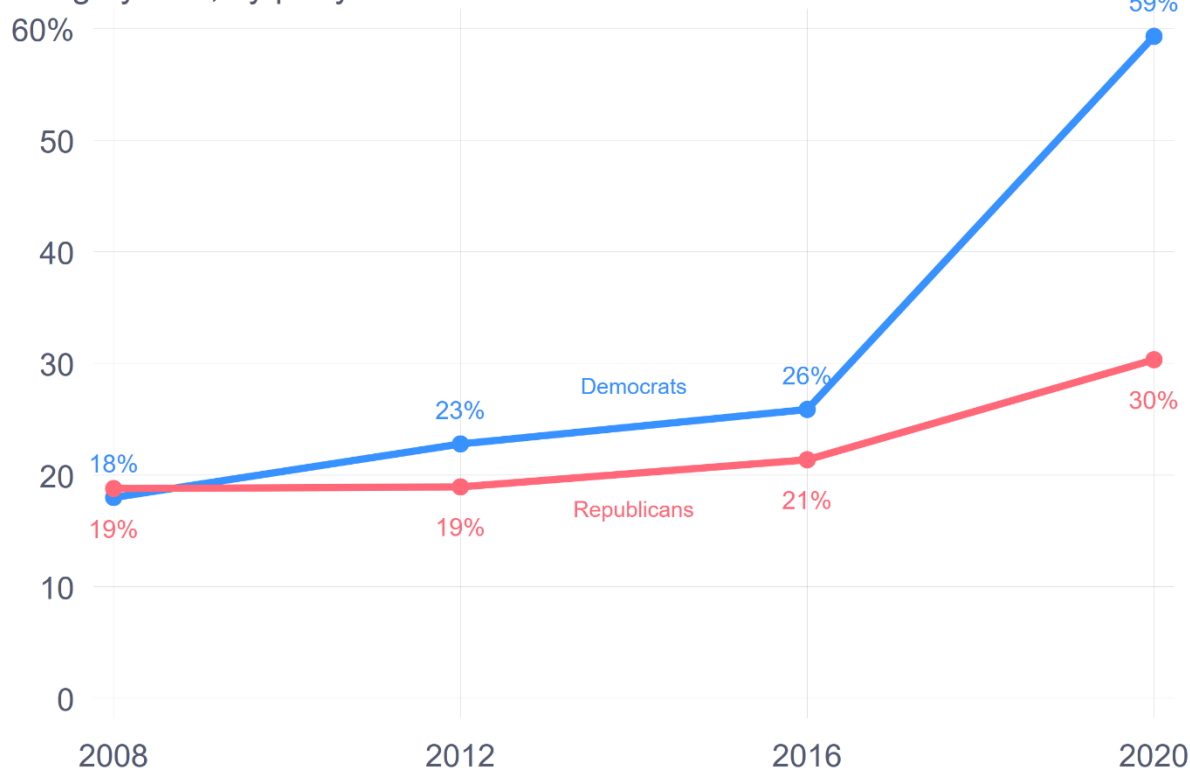
The transition from voting in-person to voting by mail proceeds at different paces across the states. As the following two graphs show, however, every state saw at least some increase in

to embrace the opportunity to vote by mail, either because of political reasons or out of a desire to manage voting safely during the pandemic. Whatever the reason for these differences in the approach to voting by mail, the fact is that Democrats and Republicans used the mails at significantly different rates in 2020.

As the following graph shows, between 2008 and 2016 Democrats were slightly more likely to vote by mail than Republicans. However, this difference is primarily an artifact of which states had chosen to conduct their elections entirely by mail.

Looking at 2020, the partisan difference in voting by mail increases substantially. The number of Democrats voting by mail more than doubled, while the number of Republicans utilizing vote by mail increased by “only” 50% compared to 2016. In total, nearly 60% Democrats cast their ballots by mail in 2020, compared to just 30% for Republicans.

Voting by mail, by party



Data source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections

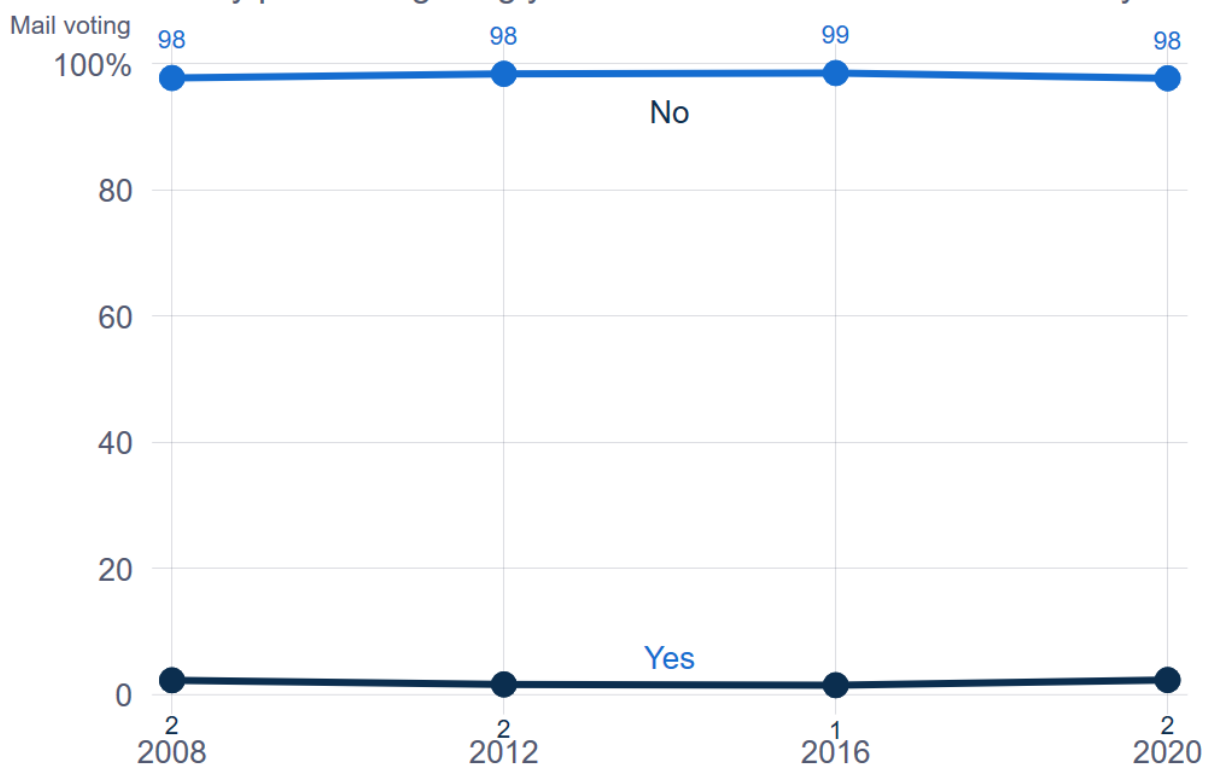
The experience of voting by mail

A core feature of the SPAE is that it asks voters directly about their experience voting. With respect to voting by mail, the SPAE includes three key questions, which are reflected in the following graphs. In every iteration of the survey, mail voters have been asked whether they

had any problems getting their absentee or mail ballots sent to them, if they had any problems marking their ballot, and how easy it was to follow all the instructions necessary to cast their ballot and return it to be counted.

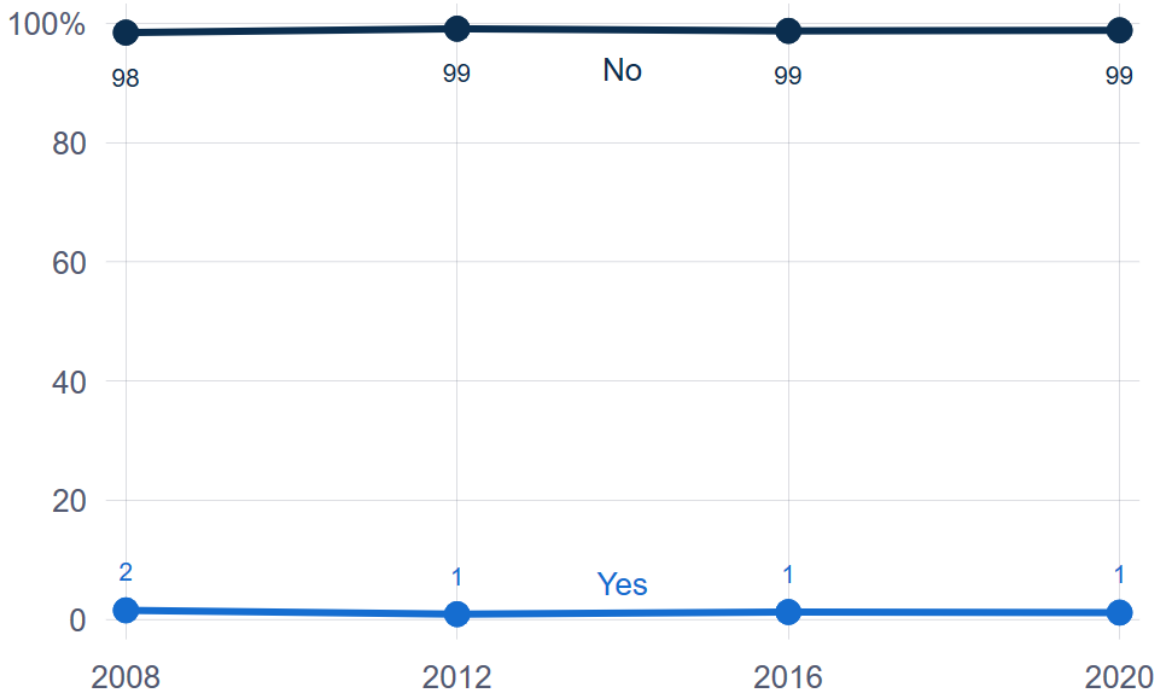
As the graphs below show, the experience of mail voters in 2020 was similar to prior years. Ninety-eight percent of mail voters stated there were no problems in getting their absentee or mail ballot sent to them, 99% stated they encountered no problems marking or completing their ballot, and 81% said it was easy to follow all the instructions necessary to cast their ballot and return it. In the end, 73% of voters by mail said they were very confident that their vote was counted as intended.

Were there any problems getting your absentee or mail-in ballot sent to you?



Did you encounter any problems marking or completing your ballot that may have interfered with your ability to cast your vote as intended?

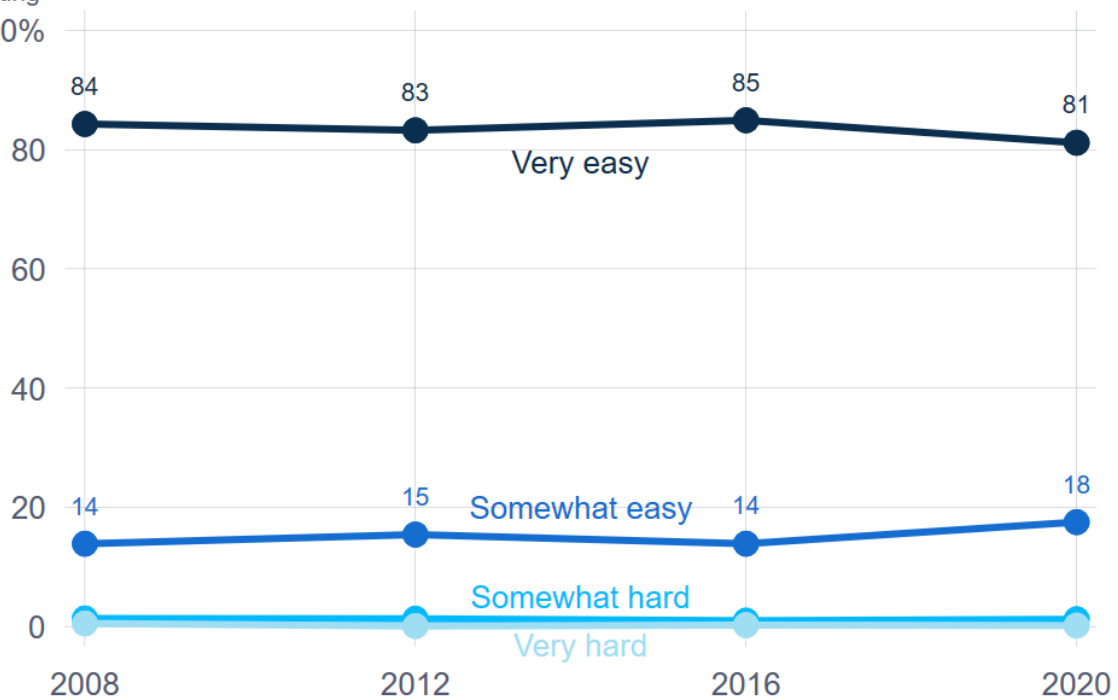
Mail voting



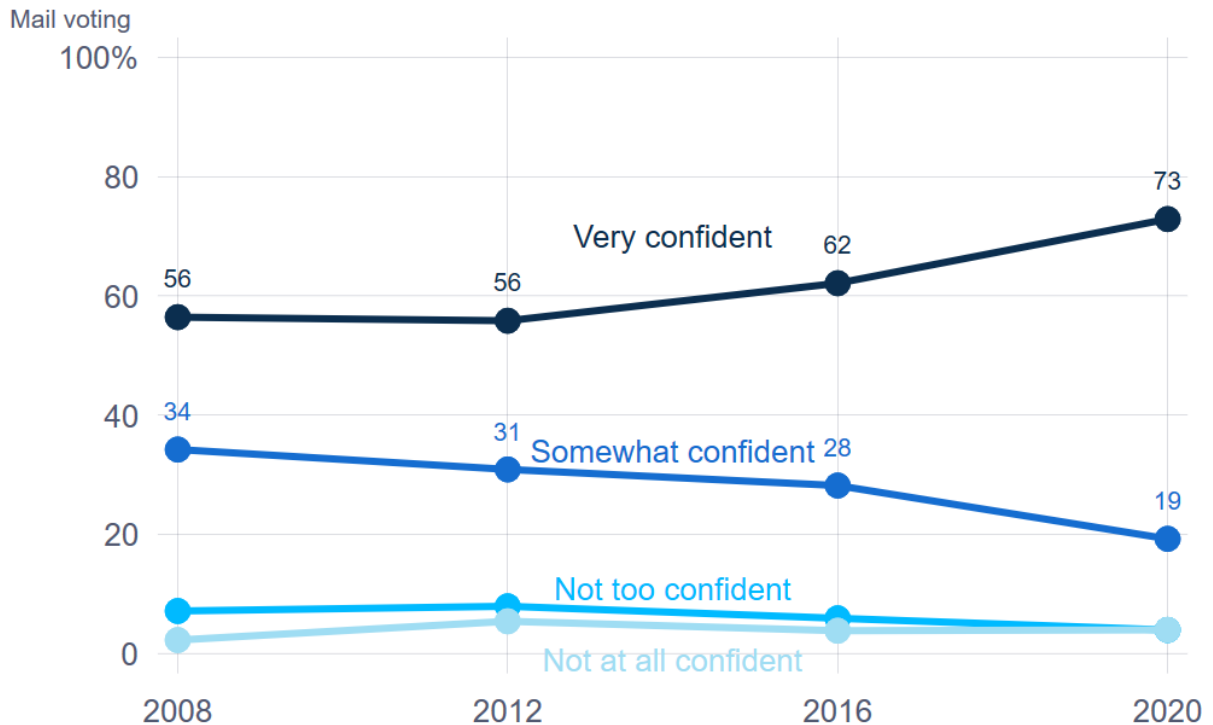
Overall, how easy was it to follow all the instructions necessary to cast your ballot and return it to be counted.

Mail voting

100%

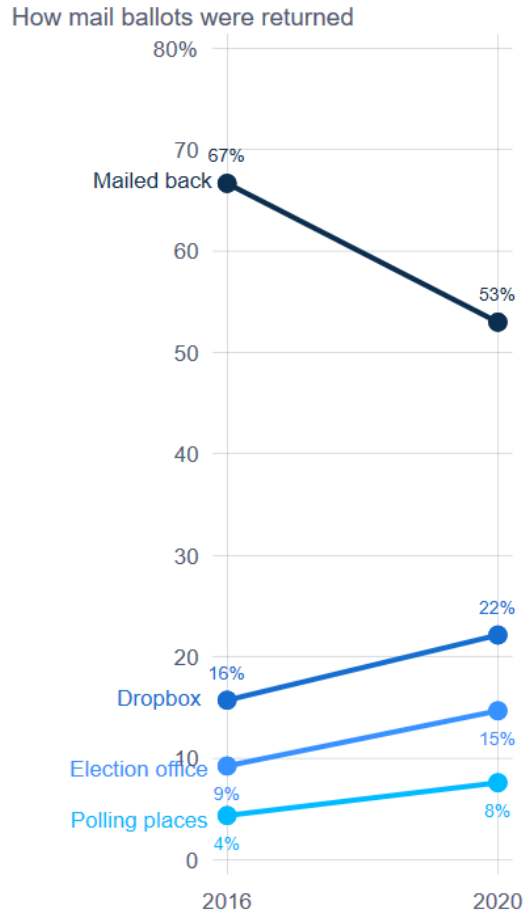


How confident are you that your vote in the General Election was counted as you intended?



Returning mail ballots

An important issue that arose in the months leading up to the general election was how best to return mail ballots. Historically, experience in vote by mail states had suggested that the most secure and convenient way for voters to return their mail ballots was through drop boxes provided by the election authority. In addition, controversy arose over the capacity of the United States Postal Service to deliver mail ballots in time to be counted in November. Election administrators responded by expanding opportunities to return ballots through



modes other than the mail, and voters took them up on those opportunities. As the accompanying graph shows, nearly half the mail ballots 2020 were returned in person.

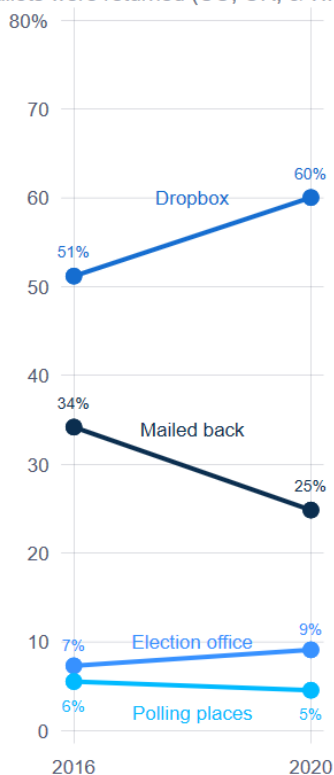
In 2016, two thirds of all mail ballots were returned through the Postal Service. In 2020, that rate fell to 53%. Instead of mailing their ballots in 2020, voters were more likely to return their mail ballots through drop boxes, to election offices, and to polling places themselves. In the case of drop boxes particularly, the percentage of mail ballots returned to them rose from 16% in 2016 to 22% in 2020.

Of course, most of the country was new to the experience of voting by mail. It is instructive to compare how voters returned their ballots in the more long-standing vote-by-mail states of Colorado, Oregon, and Washington to the rest of the nation; the next two graphs show how

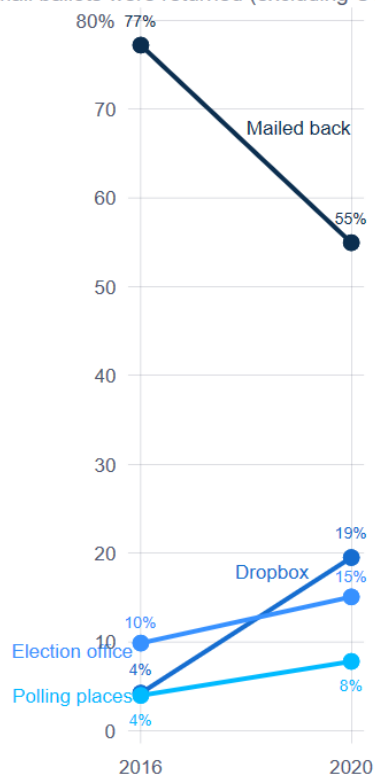
voters in those three states returned their ballots compared to voters in the other states and D.C.

In the more established vote-by-mail states, the percentage of voters returning ballots through drop boxes did increase, jumping from roughly half in 2016 to three-fifths in 2020, while the fraction of voters returning their ballots by mail fell from a third to a quarter.

How mail ballots were returned (CO, OR, & WA)



How mail ballots were returned (excluding CO, OR, & WA)



Changes were even more dramatic in the states that were newer to voting by mail. The fraction of voters returning their ballots by mail in these states plummeted from 77% in 2016 to 55% in 2020. Returns to all three alternative methods increased, but the increased reliance on drop boxes was particularly pronounced. The percentage of voters in these states who returned their ballots by mail increased fivefold, from 4% in 2016 to 19% in 2020.

The future of voting by mail

Whether voters who relied on the mail to vote in 2020 were doing so as a one-time emergency measure, or were embarking on a more permanent change in election behavior, is an important topic for election administration. Respondents to the SPAE who voted by mail were asked whether they typically had voted by mail in the past and whether they would vote by mail again. Among all mail voters, roughly half said they had voted by mail before, with Republicans being slightly more likely to be experienced mail voters than Democrats.

On the issue of voting by mail in the future, 60% of all mail voters said they were very likely to vote by mail in the future, while 21% said they were somewhat likely. Democrats were much more likely to say they would vote by mail the future, compared to Republicans. These results suggest that the shift to voting by mail in 2020 will have permanent

repercussions for the administration of elections in the US, but there may still be a slight decline in mail voting in the near future

	Typically voted by mail before?	Will vote by mail again
All mail voters	51% yes	60% very likely 21% somewhat likely
Democrats	49% yes	65% very likely 23% somewhat likely
Republicans	57% yes	49% very likely 19% somewhat likely

Voting In-Person

Although the most notable issue in election administration in 2020 was the expansion of voting by mail, voting in-person was equally important. Roughly half of U.S. voters ended up voting in-person; of those, half voted on Election Day, and the other half during the early voting period.

The challenge of voting in-person in 2020 can be split into three categories: people, places, and things. That is, responding to the demand for voting in-person was strained by the potential lack of poll workers, polling places, and provisions necessary to carry out voting. If voting by mail had not been so successful, the in-person voting system would have been under a perhaps-insurmountable strain. In the end, voters who cast their ballots in-person reported that their experiences were very similar to in-person voters in the past.

The in-person voting experience

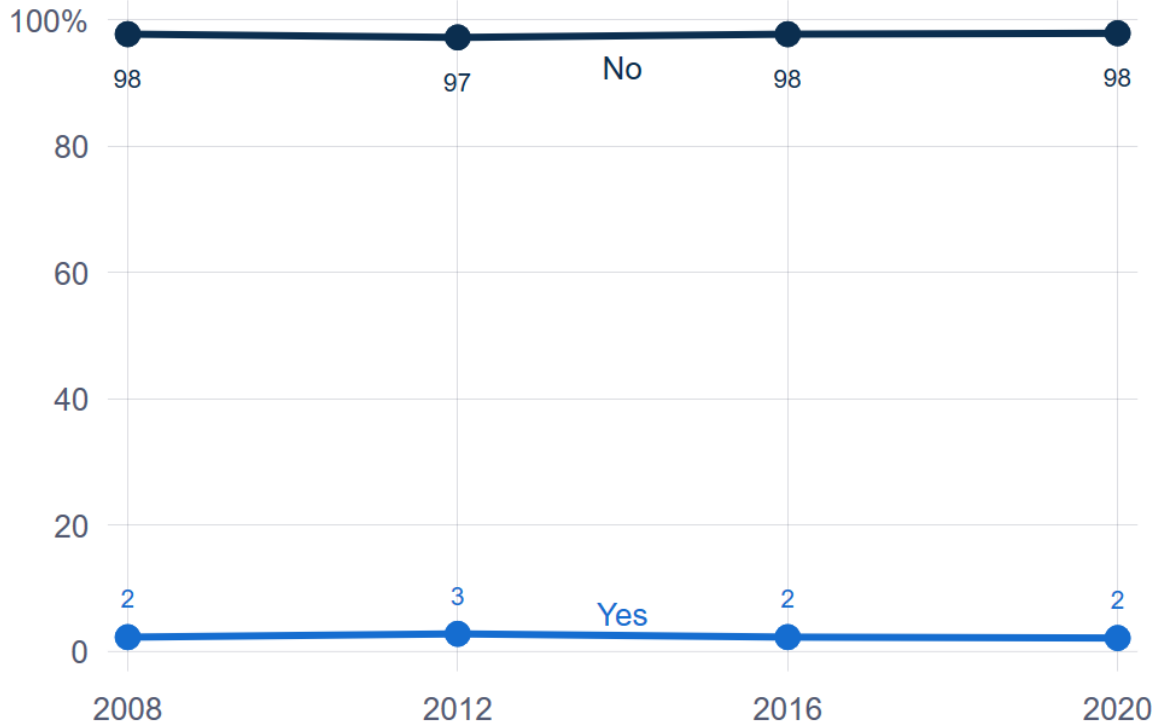
The SPAE asks in-person voters about problems they had with voter registration and voting equipment, how well things were run the polling place, and the job performance of poll workers. As with mail voting, in-person voters reported very similar experiences to past years, as well as overall positive experiences voting. Among those who voted on Election Day, for instance, 98% said they had no problems with registration when they tried to vote, 97% did not encounter any problems with the voting equipment, 80% said the polling place was very well-run, and 66% said the performance of the poll workers at the polling place was excellent. These statistics are virtually identical to the past three presidential elections.

In addition, 58% of the Election Day voters said that they were very confident that their ballot was counted as intended, with another 28% saying they were somewhat confident. The

percentage of Election Day voters who were very confident that their vote was counted as intended was down quite a bit from 2016, and is in distinct contrast with the increased confidence among those who voted by mail. As we will see below, this may largely be due to differences in the partisan composition of the in-person and vote by mail electorates.

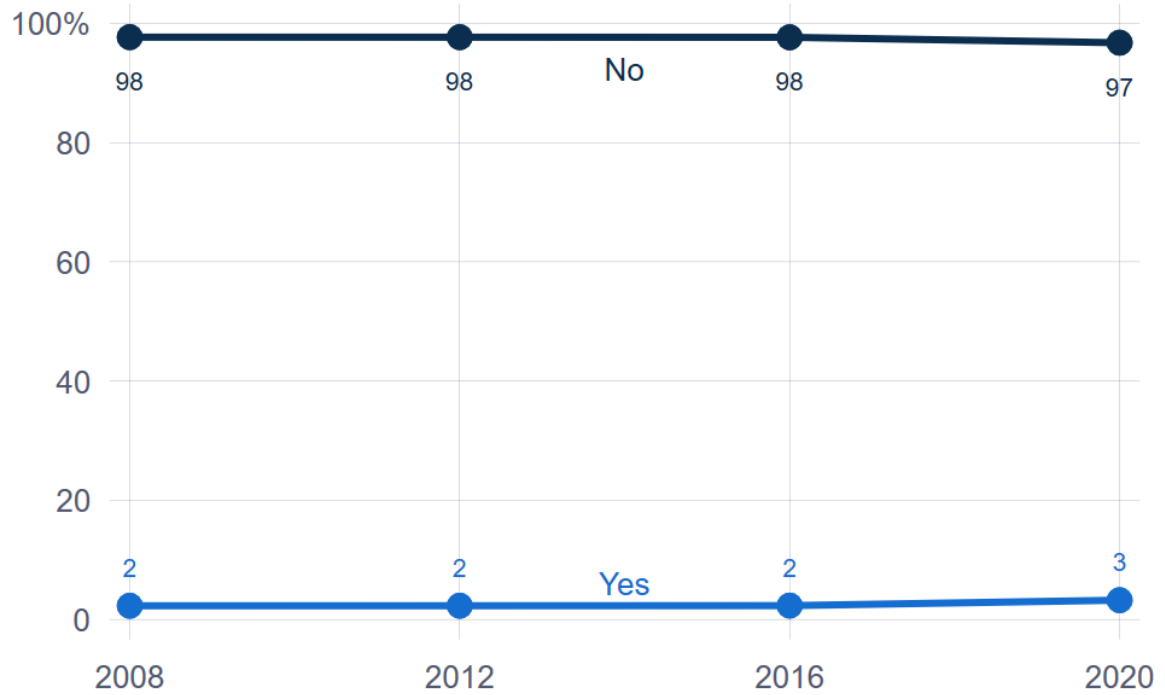
Was there a problem with your voter registration when you tried to vote?

Election Day voting



Did you encounter any problems with the voting equipment or the ballot that may have interfered with your ability to cast your vote as intended?

Election Day voting



How well were things run at the polling place where you voted?

Election Day voting



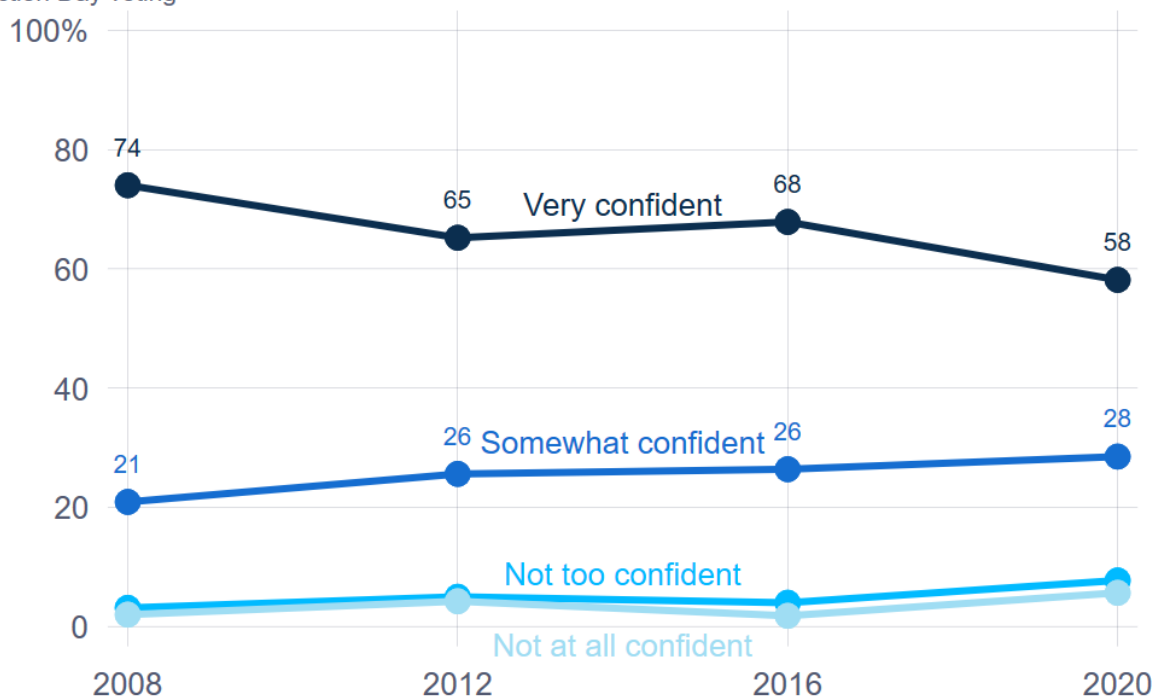
Please rate the job performance of the poll workers at the polling place where you voted.

Election Day voting



How confident are you that your vote in the General Election was counted as you intended?

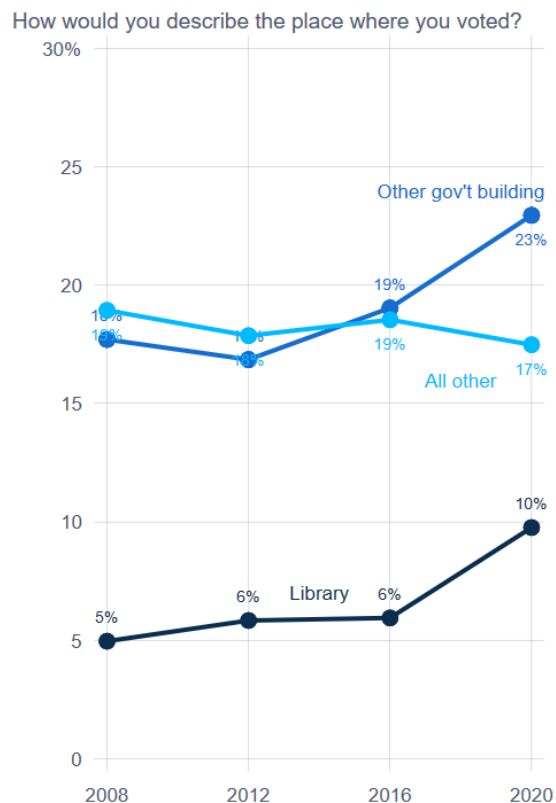
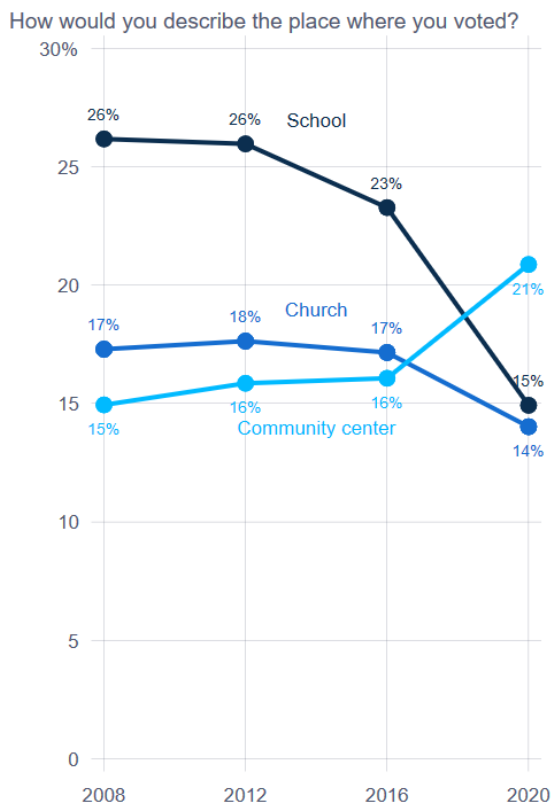
Election Day voting



Where people voted

One of the worries in the run-up to the general election was the availability of polling places to accommodate demand for in-person voting during a pandemic. With schools closing, churches not holding services, rising concerns about infections in nursing homes, and apprehension among first responders about interacting with the public, the availability of schools, churches, senior centers, and fire stations — traditional high-demand polling places in the past — was in question.

In the end, the two biggest suppliers of polling places in past years, schools and churches, saw declines as in-person voting sites in 2020. The percentage of voters casting ballots in schools fell from 23% in 2016 to 15% in 2020; the percentage casting ballots in churches declined from 17% to 14%. Instead, use of community centers and other government buildings (courthouses, government office buildings, etc.) increased to take their place. In addition, while not as frequently used as other venues, libraries saw a large increase in usage as in-person voting sites in 2020.



One of the most publicly visible types of polling places in 2020 was sports arenas. NBA teams, baseball teams, and other major sporting leagues made their facilities available to election officials. These were high-visibility locations, but they did not accommodate many voters overall. Only six-tenths of 1% of in-person voters reported that they voted in a sports arena. This is four-tenths of 1% of Election Day voters, and eight-tenths of 1% of early voters. Of course, large sporting arenas are not available everywhere, and are concentrated in large urban areas. Looking at only the counties in which voters reported voting in arenas, 3.5% of in-person voters in these counties reported casting a ballot in a sports arena — 3.0% of Election Day voters and 3.9% of early voters.

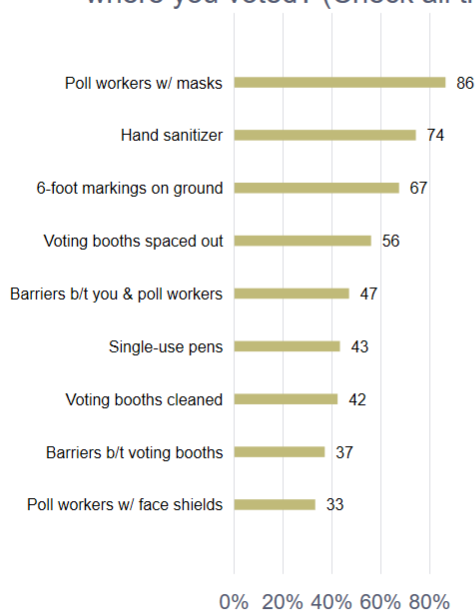
Health precautions in polling places

Of course, the big issue in maintaining in-person voting sites was the susceptibility of voters and poll workers to catching the COVID-19 virus while in the polling place. Election officials placed a premium on ensuring that in-person polling sites were safe for voters and poll workers alike. In-person voters on the whole reported that they felt safe when they voted in-person. Fifty-nine percent stated that they were very confident that the layout of the polling place they voted in protected them from being infected with COVID 19, while another 29% were somewhat confident.

Very confident	59%
Somewhat confident	29%
Not too confident	5%
Not at all confident	2%
I don't know	4%

In-person voters were asked to report on the various health-related activities they noticed when they voted. These voters most commonly reported that they saw poll workers wearing masks, followed by the use of hand sanitizer. Less commonly noted were poll workers with face shields, barriers between voting booths, voting booths being cleaned between voters, and single-use pens to mark ballots.

Did you see any of the following in the polling place where you voted? (Check all that apply)



Connecting these two pieces of information together, it appears that the availability of hand sanitizers and the cleaning of voting booths between voter contributed the most to voters feeling that polling places were safe from pandemic infection.

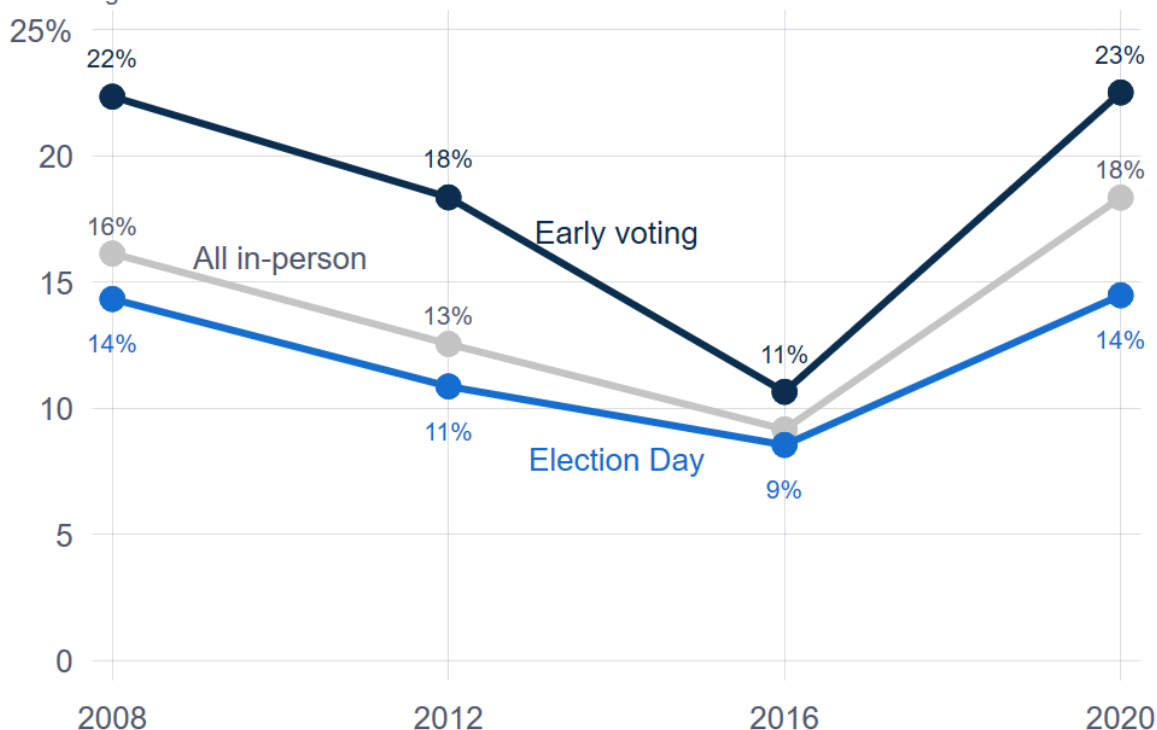
Wait times to vote

Because of the reduced capacity of polling places, the reduced number of polling places, and the longer service times due to social distancing, it was anticipated that wait times would be longer during in-person voting, even though the demand on in-person facilities would be smaller. And in fact, the SPAE data bear this out. Wait times to vote in 2020 were much

greater in 2020 than in 2016. As with the past three general presidential elections, early voting wait times were much greater than Election Day wait times — 23% of early voters reported waiting more than 30 minutes early voting versus 14% for Election Day voting. However, it is interesting to note that the percentage of people waiting more than 30 minutes to vote was on par with that statistic for the election of 2008.

Approximately, how long did you have to wait in line to vote?

Those waiting more than 30 minutes

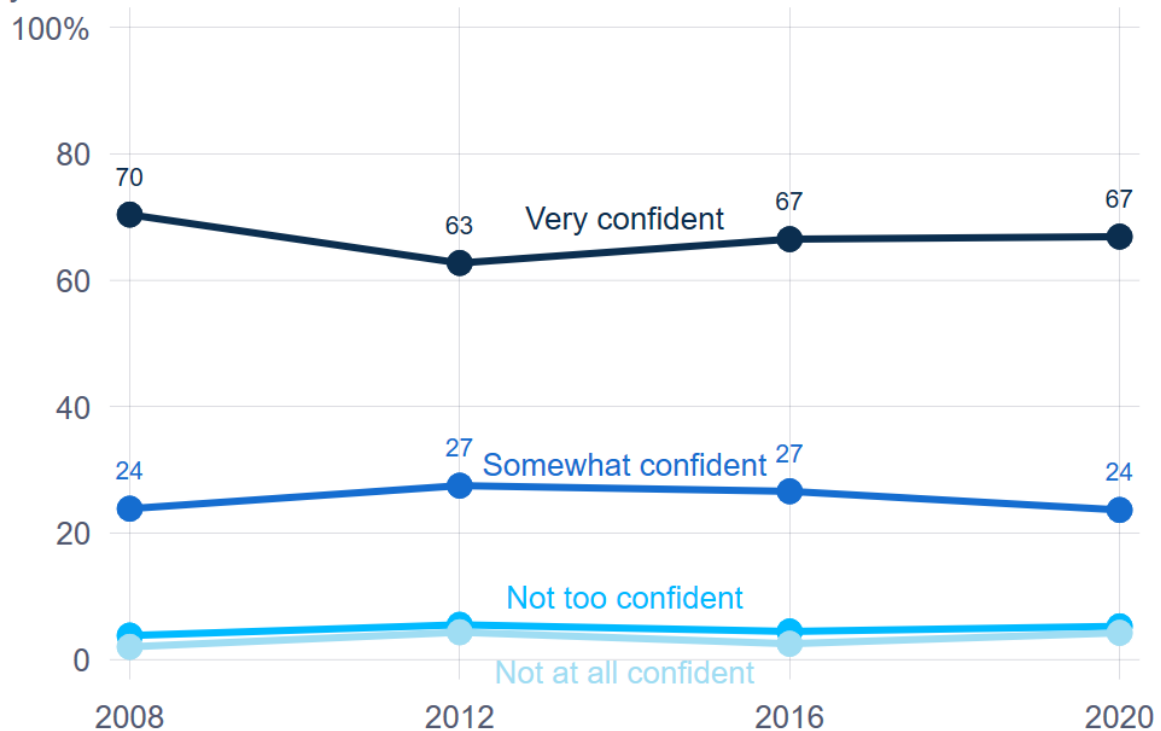


Confidence in the Election

With all of the discord over the postelection period, there is renewed attention to confidence in the electoral process and confidence in our democracy. The SPAE asks a series of questions that takes a very focused approach to the issue of confidence. It asks whether voters were confident that their vote was counted as intended. In addition, it asks all respondents, whether they voted or not, if they were confident that votes in their city, county, and nationwide were counted as intended.

As is true with the past several years, two-thirds of respondents were very confident that their own personal votes were counted as intended in 2020. The results on this score have been virtually unchanged over the past two decades.

How confident are you that your vote in the General Election was counted as you intended?



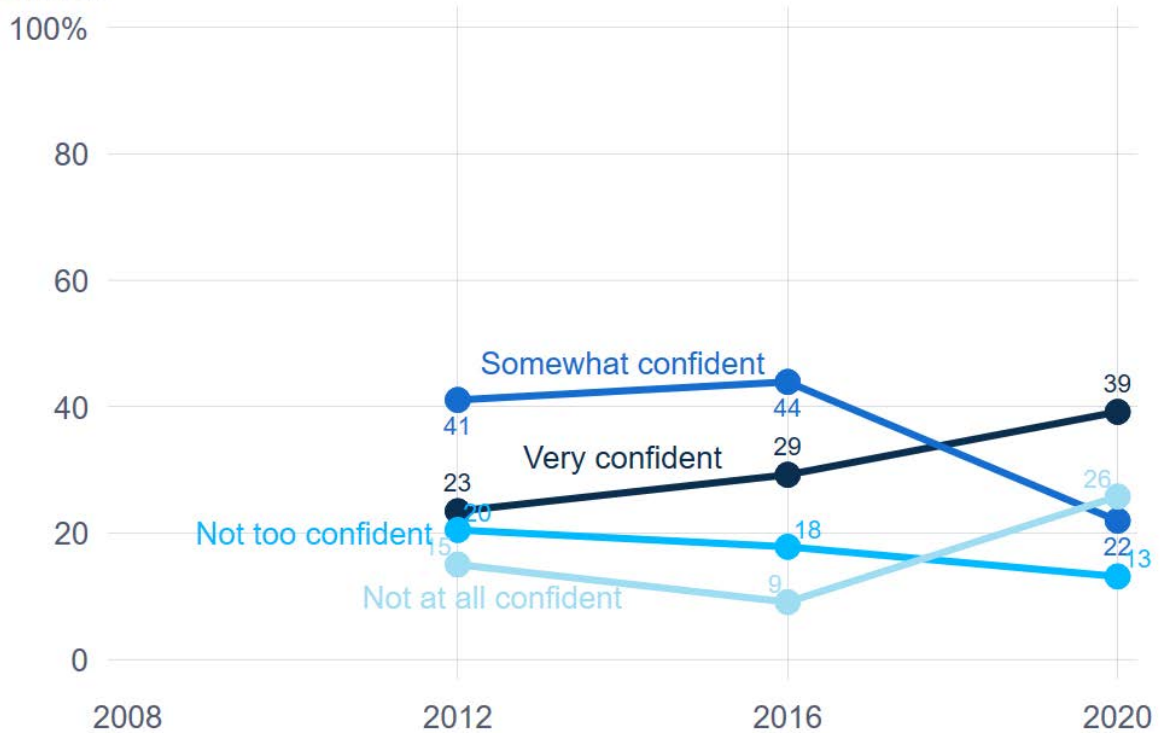
Confidence that votes were counted as intended statewide softened in 2020. The percentage of voters who were very confident actually rose, but the percentage of those who were somewhat confident fell, from 38% to 28%.

How confident are you that votes in your state were counted as intended?



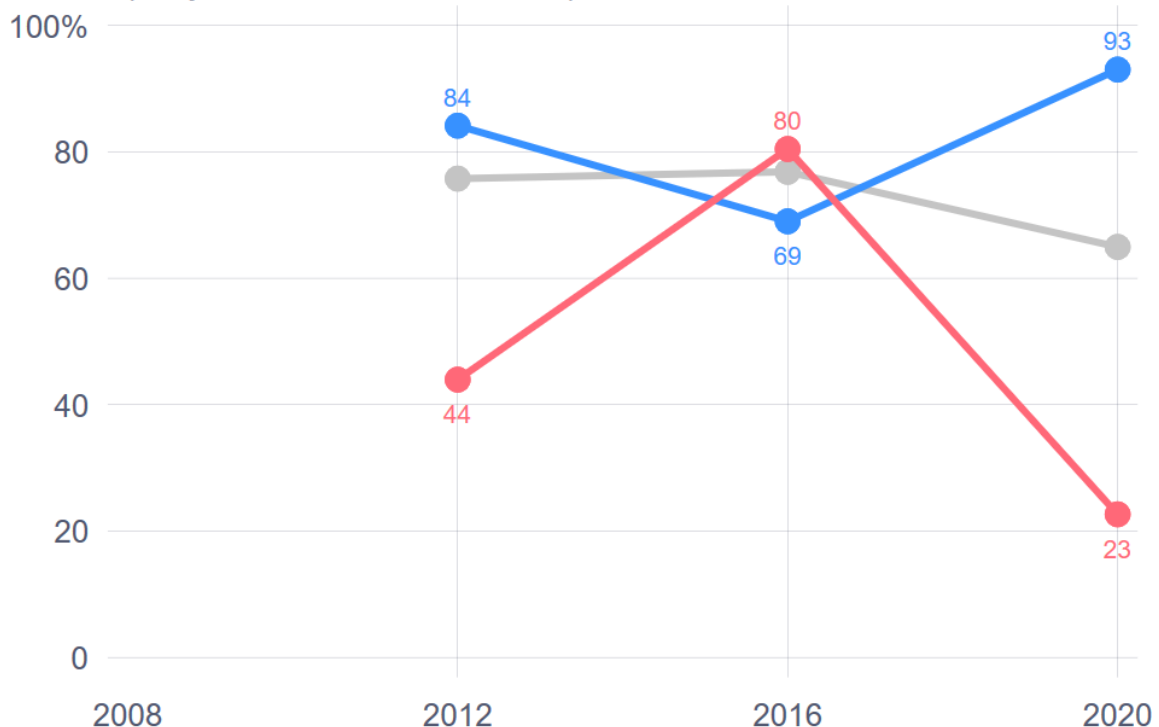
Respondents' answers to the questions about confidence in votes nationwide most clearly reflect the political polarization on the issue. Both the percentage of respondents saying they were very confident that votes were counted as intended nationwide and the percentage reporting that they were not confident at all rose from 2016. The "very confident" rose from 29% to 39%, and the "not-at-all confident" rose from 9% to 26%. At the same time, the middle categories – of those who were somewhat confident or not too confident – fell.

How confident are you that votes nationwide were counted as voters intended?

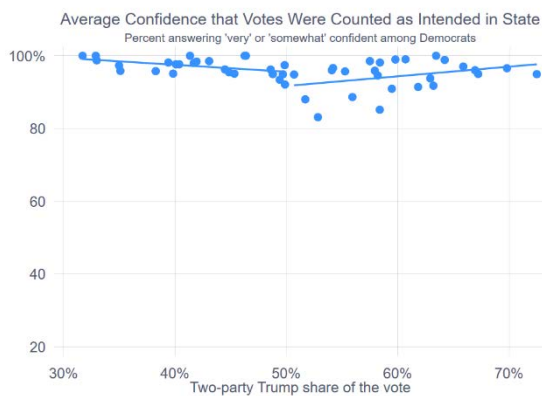
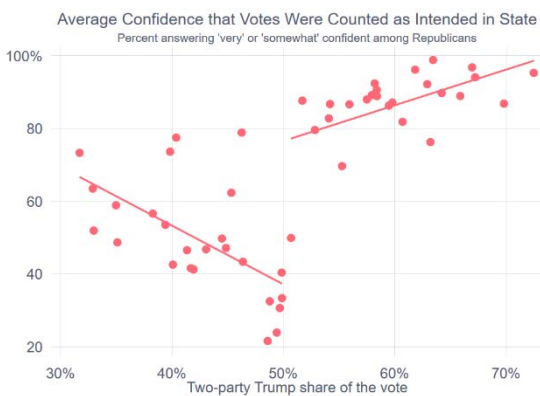
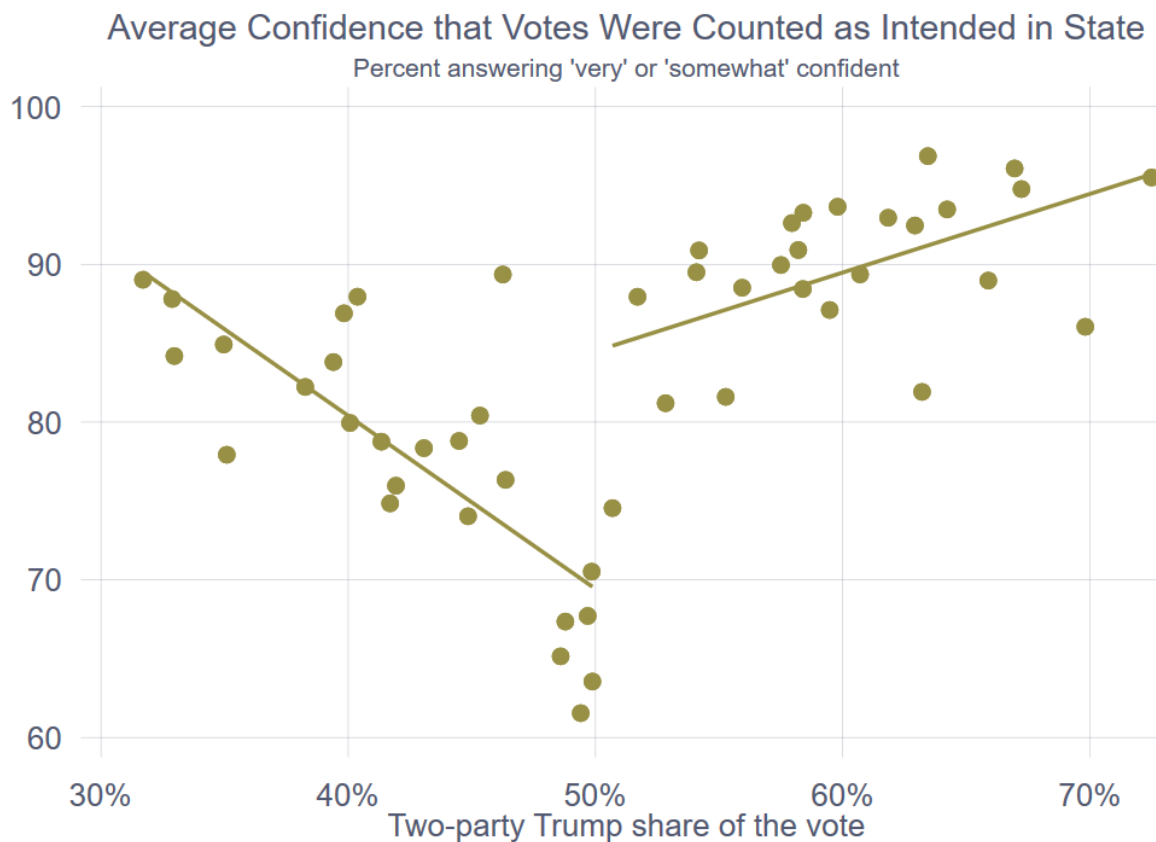


This pattern is a product of the fact that confidence in the nationwide vote count became highly polarized along partisan lines. In 2016, Democrats and Republicans were fairly similar in their responses to this question, with Republicans being slightly more confident. In 2020, confidence among Democrats rose from 69% to 93%, while the percentage of Republicans who were either very or somewhat confident in the nationwide vote count fell from 83% to 23%.

How confident are you that votes nationwide were counted as voters intended? (Very or somewhat confident)



Of particular interest here is confidence about vote counting in the states. It is the states, after all, that administer elections, and that therefore bear the brunt of controversy in close and contested elections. This is reflected in the pattern of voters who said that they were either very or somewhat confident that votes in their state were counted as intended. In particular, respondents in closely contested states were much less confident in their state's vote count than those in states where one of the candidates won in a landslide. Regardless of whether their candidate won or lost their state, Democrats on average were more confident in state vote counts than Republicans.

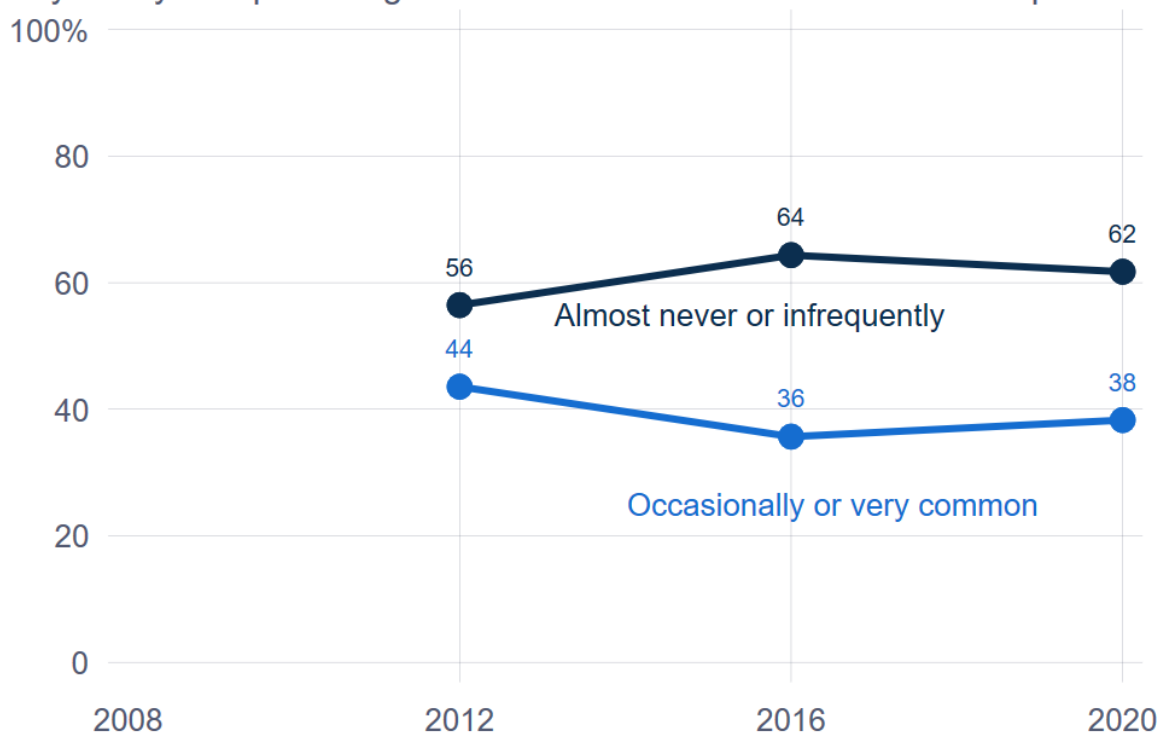


Fraud

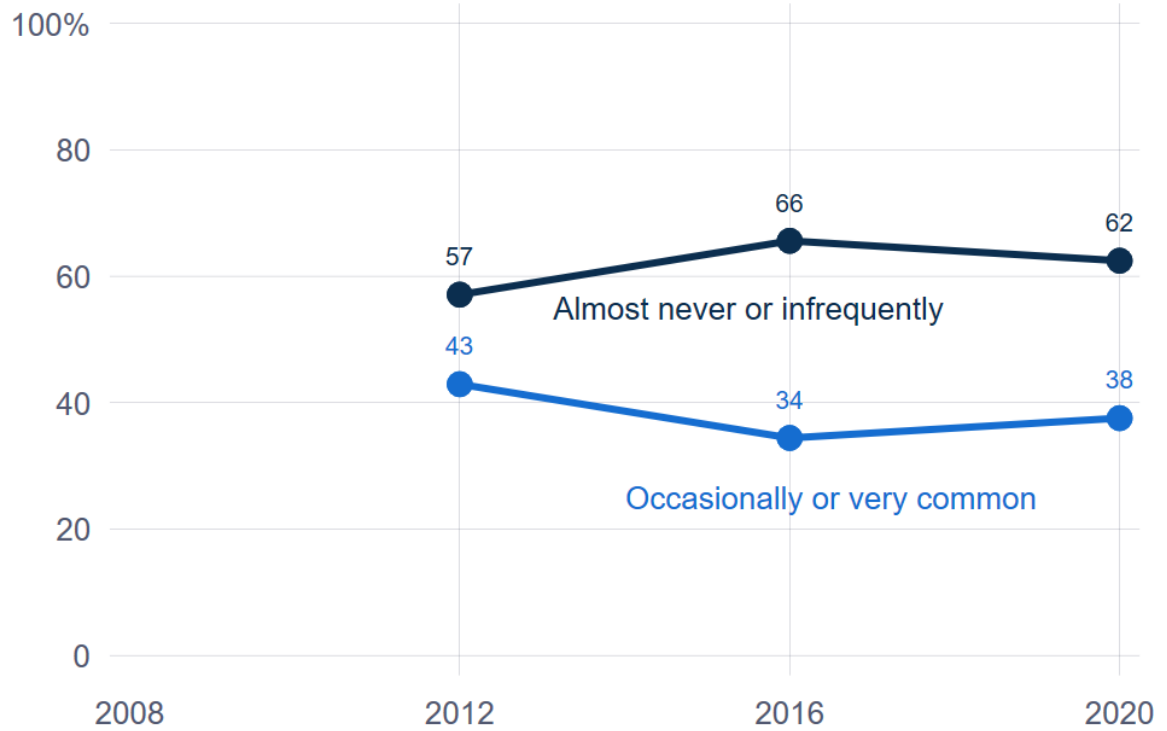
President Trump's continued criticism of voting by mail, and his charge that voting by mail was prone to corruption and fraud brought attention to these issues, and had the potential to encourage voters, particularly Republicans, to look at election administration in a negative light. We see from the responses to the SPAE that these comments had an effect.

For the last several years, the SPAE has asked respondents to indicate how often they believe certain fraudulent or illegal activities occur in their city or county. These activities include people voting with an absentee ballot intended for another person, noncitizens voting, voter impersonation, people voting more than once, election officials fraudulently changing the reported vote count, and people stealing or tampering with ballots that had been cast. On the whole, the overall percentage of voters who believed these activities occurred remains very similar to what we've seen over the past dozen years.

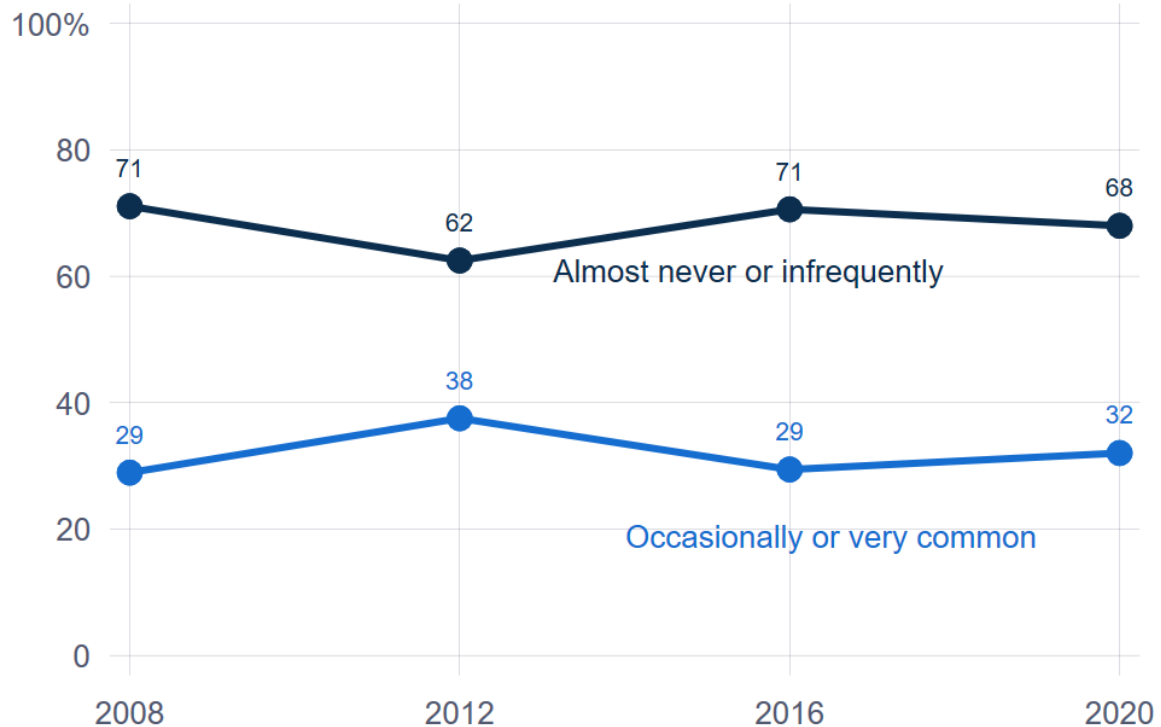
Please indicate how often you think these activities occur in your county or city: People voting an absentee ballot intended for another person.



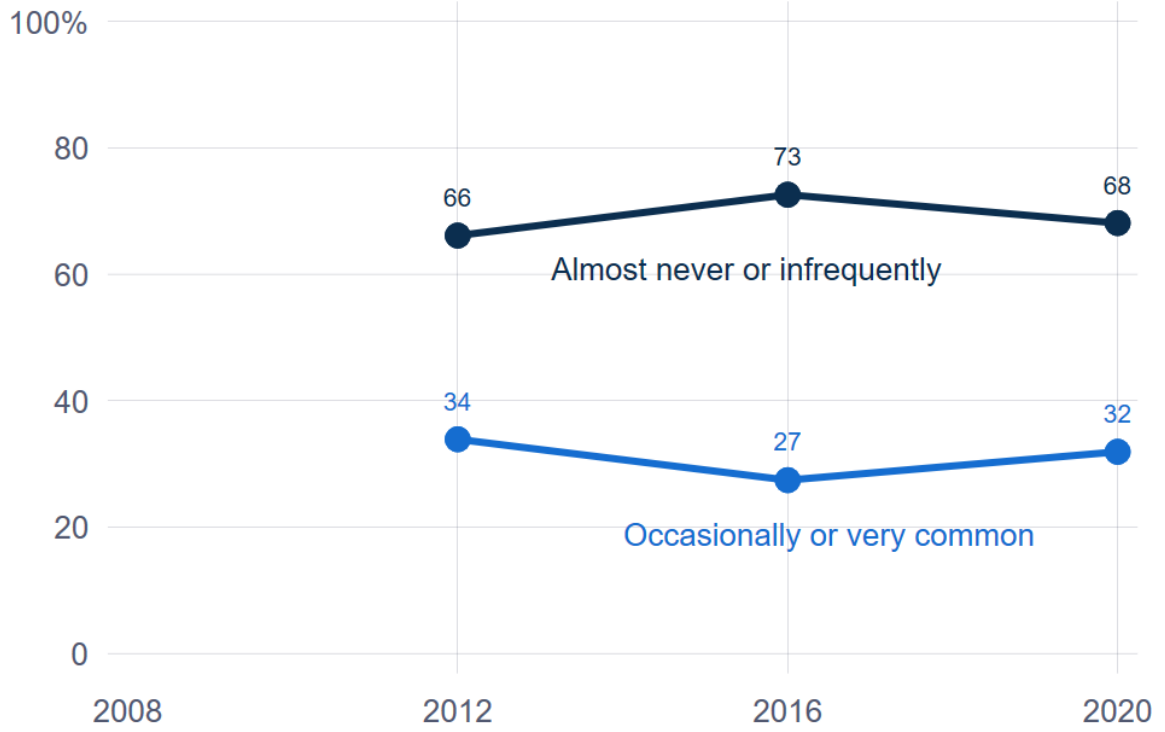
Please indicate how often you think these activities occur in your county or city: People voting who are not U.S. citizens.



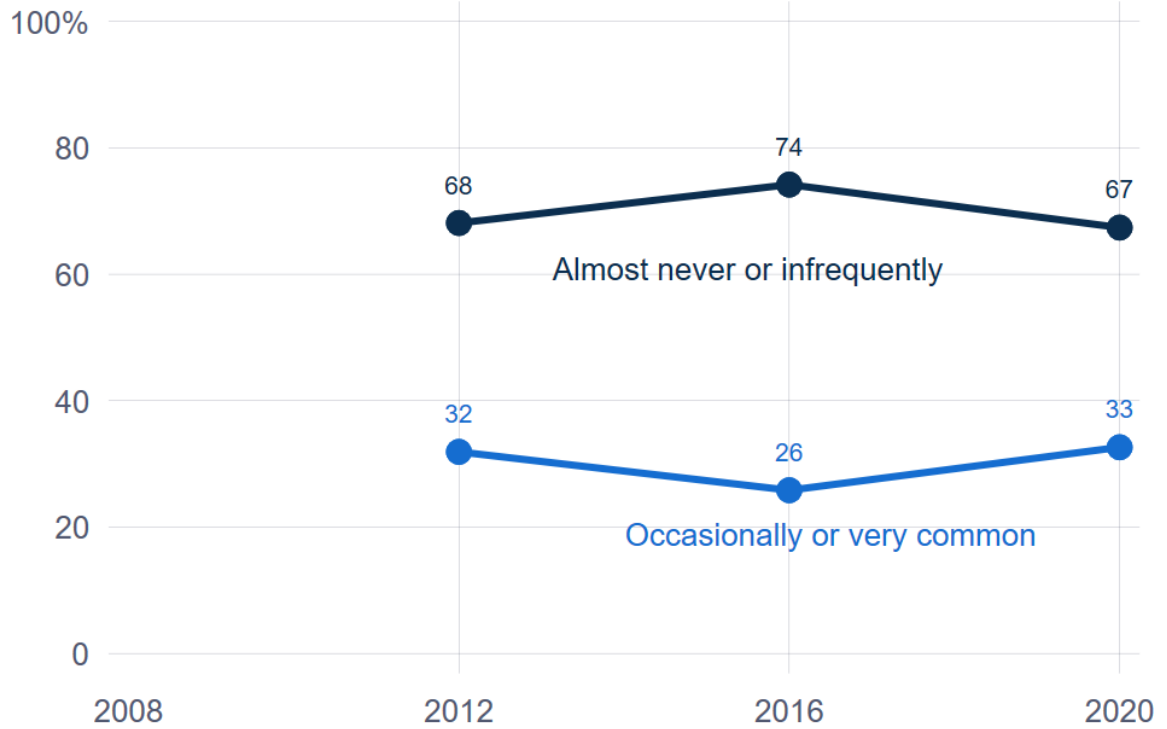
Please indicate how often you think these activities occur in your county or city: People pretending to be someone else when going to vote.



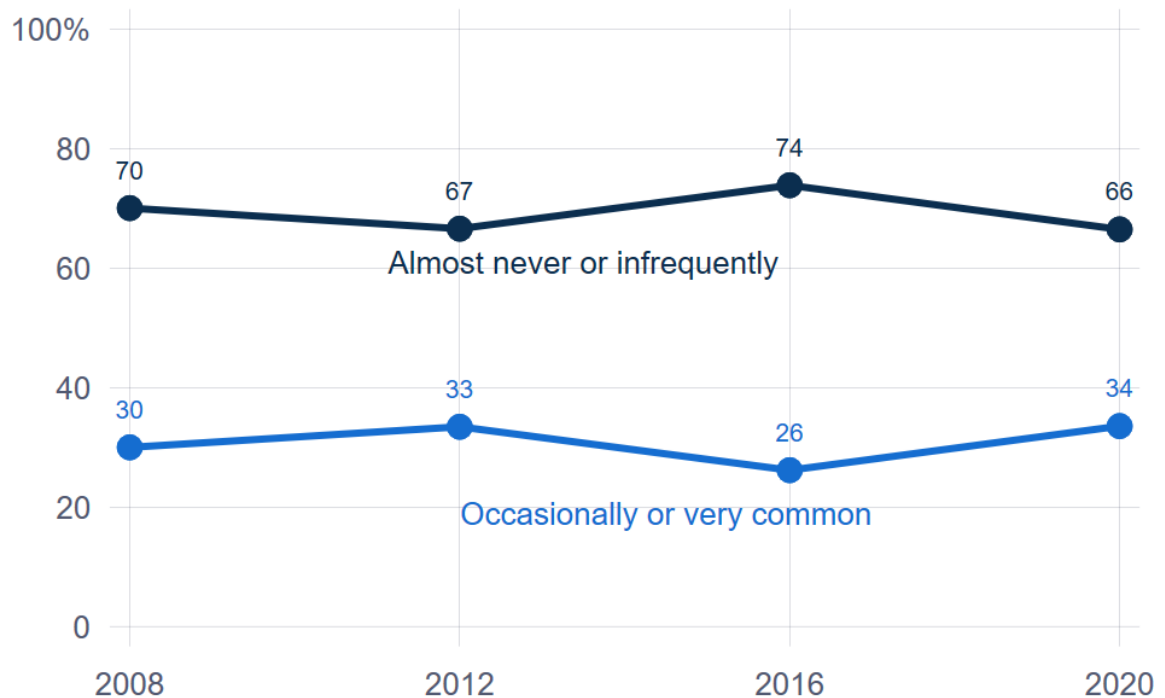
Please indicate how often you think these activities occur in your county or city: People voting more than once in an election.



Please indicate how often you think these activities occur in your county or city: Officials [fraudulently] changing the reported vote count

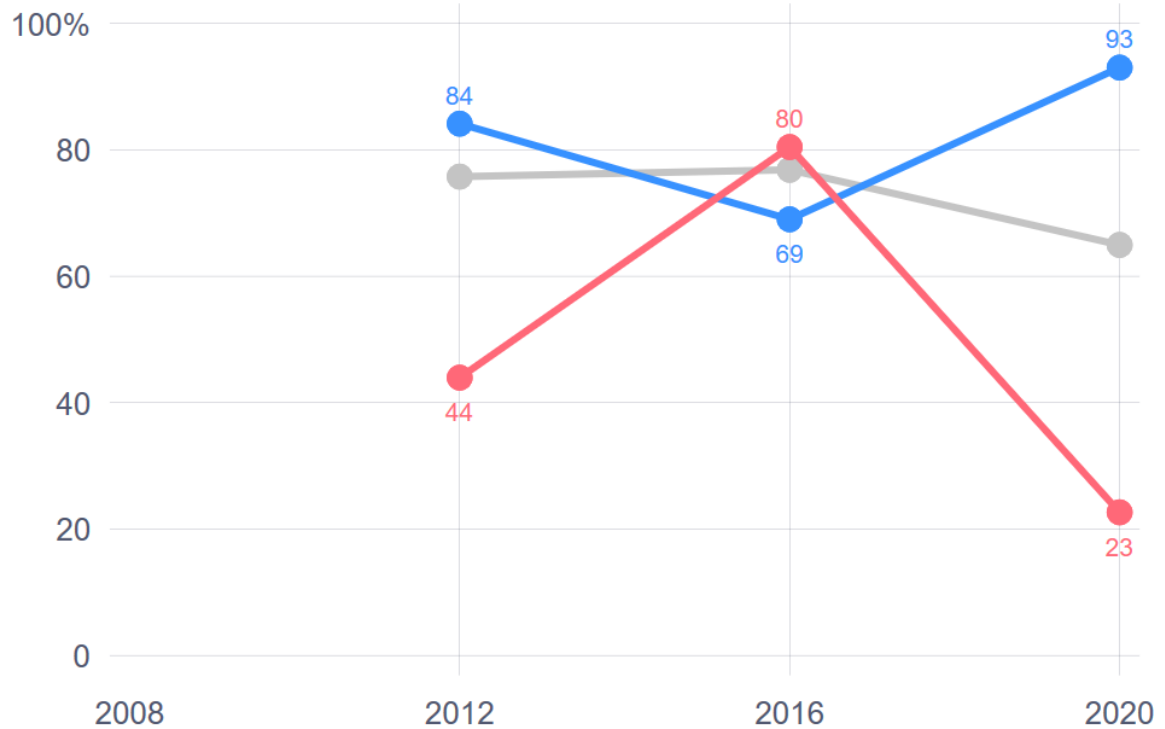


Please indicate how often you think these activities occur in your county or city: People stealing or tampering with ballots that have been voted



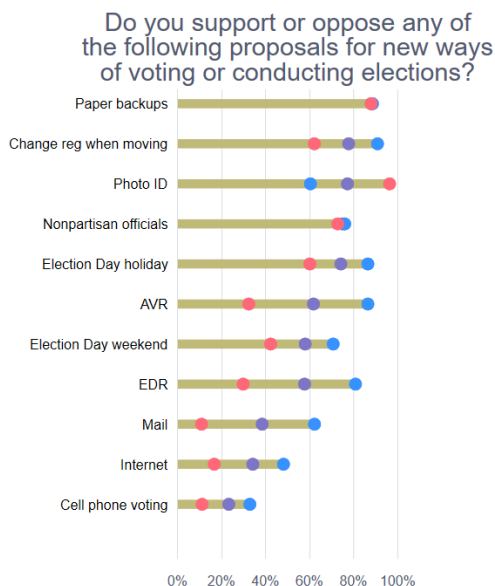
However, when we break the results out by party, we begin to see the large degree of partisan polarization that has been stoked by the focus on election fraud. The following graph shows one example of this, with respondents' answer to a question about stealing or tampering with ballots that have been voted. In the 2016 election, the percentage of Democrats and Republicans saying this almost never or infrequently happened was only 10 percentage points apart — 79% for Democrats and 69% for Republicans. In 2020, however, this percentage rose to 93% among Democrats and fell to 23% among Republicans. Similar patterns are seen with all of the other questions about perceptions of fraud included in the SPAE.

How confident are you that votes nationwide were counted as voters intended? (Very or somewhat confident)



Reform

Finally, there is the issue of election reform. For the past dozen years, the SPAE has asked respondents their opinions about 11 reform ideas that are pursued from time to time by various reform groups. These reforms range from voting over the Internet and voting by mail to establishing Election Day as a holiday or moving it to a weekend.



Responses to these items in 2020 were similar to previous years. The most popular reforms, by far, were requiring computerized voting machines to have paper backups, requiring voters to show photo ID to vote, allowing automatic changes to a voter's registration upon moving, making Election Day a national holiday, and electing officials on a bipartisan basis. The least popular reform has been voting by cell phone, followed by voting by mail and voting on the Internet.

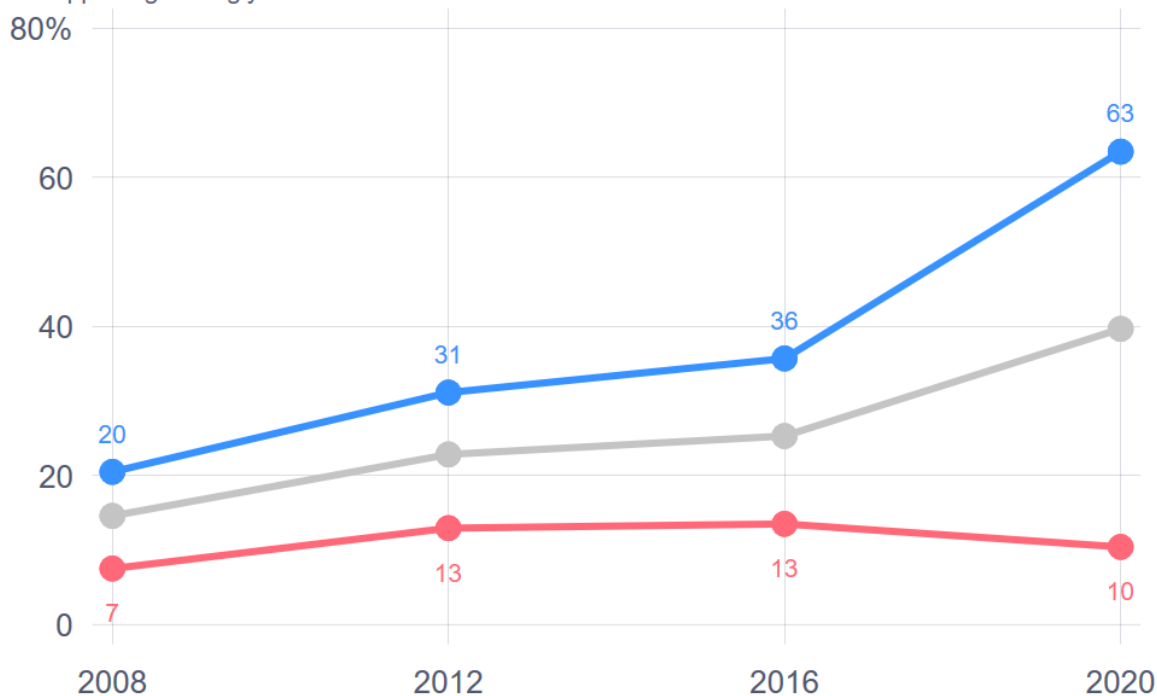
Many of these reform efforts are split on a partisan basis, notably on the issues of photo ID, enacting automatic voter registration, and Election Day registration.

The answers in 2020 had only two major differences to past years, on the issues of requiring voter ID and voting by mail. Support for requiring photo ID went up for Democrats, which caused overall support for the idea to increase. Support for voting by mail also rose dramatically among Democrats.

Over the past dozen years, Republicans have regularly been disinclined toward running all voting by mail. Democrats, too, have also tended to oppose the reform. However, in light of events surrounding 2020, Republican opposition increased a small amount, but Democratic support increased substantially. As a consequence, voting by mail is now more popular among the general public as a whole, but it is much more polarized.

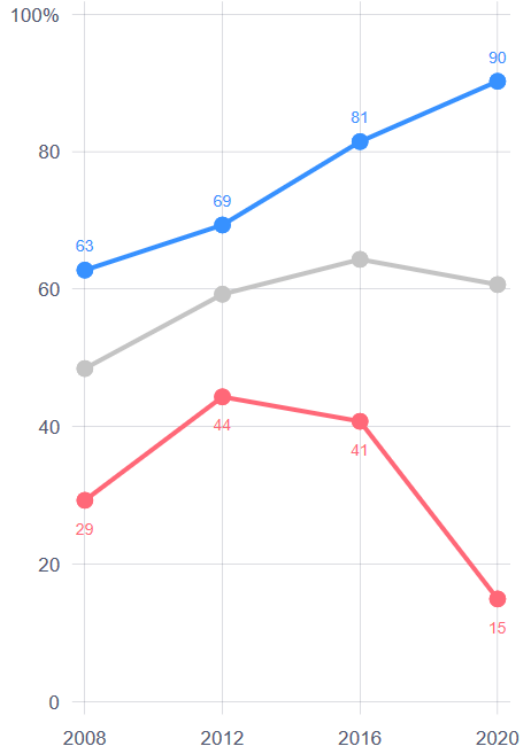
Do you support or oppose any of the following proposals for new ways of voting or conducting elections?

Those supporting 'strongly' or 'somewhat'

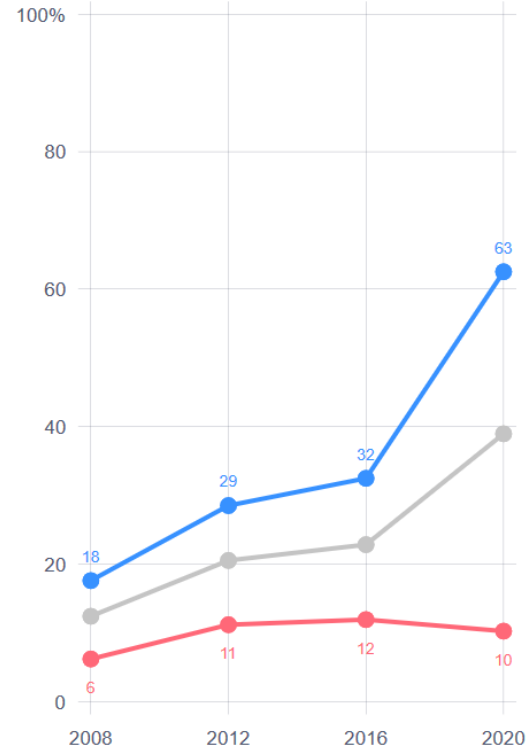


There is an interesting, and potentially very important pattern that emerges when we look at the question at the state level. Respondents in Colorado, Oregon, and Washington — states that have conducted all vote by mail elections for several cycles — have long been more supportive of voting by mail than in the rest of the nation. Although Republicans in these states have tended to support voting by mail at much lower rates than Democrats, in the past two presidential elections, Republican support has been around 40%. In the 2020 election, however, support among Republicans plummeted to 15% in these three states, while it continued to grow to 90% among Democrats.

Colorado, Oregon, and Washington
Those supporting 'strongly' or 'somewhat'



Except Colorado, Oregon, and Washington
Those supporting 'strongly' or 'somewhat'



At the same time, support among Republicans and the remaining states for voting by mail has always been low, and remained low in 2020. Democrats, on the other hand, had opposed voting by mail in the elections of 2008, 2012, and 2016 – until 2020, when support among Democrats in states without a long tradition of voting by mail nearly doubled.

Conclusion

The 2020 election may go down as one of the most administratively challenging elections in American history. Seen from the perspective of the voter, the experience was a positive one, both for those who voted in person and who voted by mail. These experiences will no doubt inform American attitudes in the coming months and years, as debates continue about how to incorporate what was learned from the emergency situation in 2020 into long-term practice.

The election will also have long-term consequences for the attitudes Americans bring to the issue of election administration. Although election administration already bore the marks of partisan divisions, that gap widened in 2020, especially on the issue of voting by mail. Whether these divisions will lead to changed policy at the state level will be tested in the next few months, as state legislatures convene in the new year.