

The voting experience

# Anxieties of Voting-by-Mail in 2020: Contending with the Past, the Pandemic, and the Political Climate

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Visit our website for more information about our work: <https://civicdesign.org/>

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# Context for this research

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Although voting-by-mail has been widely used in some parts of the United States since it was introduced during the Civil War, the 2020 election—equal parts historic and chaotic—created an abrupt surge in its use across nearly all 50 states. In response to pandemic social distancing and public health considerations, states made rapid changes to vote-by-mail eligibility requirements and procedures, with the stated intention of expanding voting access amidst widespread closures and interruptions.

Overall, the use of mail-in ballots nearly doubled in the 2020 election from previous elections. In the primaries, the percentage of people voting by mail rose from 25% in 2016 to 46% in 2020. However, those overall statistics do not show differences in uses of mail voting by different demographic groups. A Pew Research report on the 2020 voting experience showed that Black and Latina/o voters were less likely to vote by mail than white voters, even within those who say they voted for Biden.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, states have each had their own rules for voting by mail. In western states such as Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah, and California, voting by mail is either used by the entire state or by a large majority of voters. In comparison, many Midwest and eastern states still required an excuse to use an absentee ballot. Even in states with newly modernized rules, like Pennsylvania and Michigan, the use of absentee voting was still less than 50%. This meant that voters in large cities from Detroit to Atlanta had less experience with voting by mail, and the election offices had less capacity for the rapid adoption of this method of voting in the 2020 general election.

The 2020 elections were complicated, conducted during a pandemic in a backdrop of demonstrations and social upheaval, and had a historically high turnout despite the challenges. In this context, this research aimed to understand how historically disenfranchised voters made the decision of whether or not to vote by mail. We wanted to know how these communities navigated the uncertainty of the pandemic, escalating misinformation campaigns, fears of intimidation, and mixed messages about the process of voting.

Some states, which had already abandoned requirements for an excuse to cast a vote by mail, mailed ballots to all voters or actively promoted voting by mail (including California, Maryland, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin). Other states made temporary changes, either allowing for mail-in ballots to be completed without the normally required excuse or added a blanket exception for

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<sup>1</sup> The voting experience in 2020 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/11/20/the-voting-experience-in-2020/>

health concerns that rendered mail-in ballots temporarily universal (including New York, Missouri, Kentucky, and Massachusetts). In both cases, these changes in eligibility for voting-by-mail were accompanied by a whirlwind of deadline and procedural adjustments, and voter questions and concerns.

Although the stated aim of these changes was to rapidly scale voting alternatives that addressed COVID-19 health risks of in-person gatherings, the flurry of changes raised red flags about whether the election offices were up to the task of administering both mail-in ballots and in-person voting fairly and safely.

A series of problems in the primary elections contributed to voter concerns about the reliability and integrity of the vote-by-mail processes.

- In Brooklyn, roughly 30,000 residents received mail-in ballots for the wrong person and address (later corrected by new mailers).
- In Baltimore during the primary, ballots arrived in Baltimore City much later than other Maryland counties, making it difficult for voters in the city to return their ballots in time.
- In Philadelphia, legal challenges regarding mail-in ballots and the rules governing them carried on through the late summer until the election, making it hard for voters to know what was allowed and what was not.
- In the August primary election, the vote counts in 46% of Detroit precincts did not match, raising politicized (and ultimately refuted) charges of mismanagement or election fraud.

Through a series of interviews with voters, we wanted to know how the combination of rapid procedural changes related to expanded voting-by-mail options. We looked at the often confusing or misleading information campaigns around vote-by-mail and how they shaped voting decisions and considerations within communities of voters that carry the additional burden of contending with histories of voter disenfranchisement, pandemic or no pandemic.

Our participants came from two different sources: Black/Latinx voters, and members of community organizations who worked closely with these voters. We centered conversations around voting considerations, anxieties, information access, community organizing strategies, and individual voting experiences. We focused on four cities – Baltimore, Philadelphia, Detroit, and New York.

In the end, election administration across the country managed the exceptional turnout with few of the problems seen in the primary elections, and results that

survived legal challenges, recounts, and audits. As important as that story is, it is not the whole story.

Our interviews with 17 voters reflect a deep reservoir of mistrust caused by long histories of unequal voter access and structural barriers to voting. In the end, most of them decided to vote in person. The surety of witnessing their vote cast in a familiar way took priority over the health concerns of voting during a pandemic and logistical challenges of going to a vote center or polling place.

Despite the challenges, voters in our study were able to choose how they wanted to cast their ballot and did so in record numbers. But there is an even more important lesson: that a single change in policy cannot undo the past. Options for voting must do more than make it increase voter access. They must do so in a way that meets the needs of each community, with careful attention to voter preferences, communications, and tangible equity in election administration. We hope that by sharing the stories of voters in the challenging 2020 election, this research can inform future visions for how elections are run.

# About this project

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Between August and November 2020, we held a series of conversations with 17 residents and 21 community representatives in four cities—Baltimore, Detroit, New York City, and Philadelphia. Our goal was to understand how they made decisions about when, how, and where to vote in the November general election.

These conversations took place in a complex and chaotic election year that included widespread misinformation campaigns, stories of fake drop boxes, and calls for armed patrols at polling places.

Pandemic fatigue, overall exhaustion related to the economic crisis, and daily digital troubleshooting required to accomplish basic daily activities permeated every conversation we had with voters and advocates.

The voters we spoke with also expressed not only concern, but near certainty, that votes cast by mail from historically disenfranchised communities would confront greater risks of being discounted or sabotaged due to historical patterns of suppression and disenfranchisement in these same communities. Alternatively, in-person voting options raised a host of physical safety concerns between pandemic health risks and fears of violence or intimidation at the polls.

In this context, voters each had to decide the most reliable *and* most safe option for voting.

This project was launched to better understand and document those concerns as they evolved leading up to the November 2020 election, focusing on the less familiar option of mail-in voting.

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"The only reason I don't ever want to do it again [is] just knowing it's in the right place. When you're at the polling sites, you know when it's submitted. Too many steps here. Mail gets lost every day and then there's people trying to sabotage. I can only imagine the number of ballots that will actually show up after the election and haven't been counted. I thought about putting the dollar tracker thing on it but thought they might send it back to be fixed. I didn't want to do that because then they can say I altered the envelope."

- NYC resident

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We hope the insights provided here help shed light on how to re-center future expanded voter access efforts around the histories, needs, daily lives, and trust considerations of people living in cities. While this report focused on Black and Latina/o voters in four cities, we hope the findings shared below speak to broader structural changes that both respond to and benefit a wide range of voting communities.

Most people we spoke with were determined to—and ultimately did—vote in person, despite a myriad of pandemic complications and considerations.

This decision stemmed from six common considerations:

- Concerns about sabotage and vote-tampering of ballots or drop boxes.
- Concerns about votes' getting lost' on the way to election offices.
- Absence of ballot tracking and confirmation that their ballot was received.
- Concerns that easily fixed errors on mail ballot envelopes wouldn't be flagged for fixing would lead to the exclusion of large batches of ballots.
- In light of widely reported stories about the US Postal Service, concerns about having to complete and cast ballots by mail far ahead of official deadlines to account for pick-up delays, travel delays, processing delays, and potential error corrections.
- Claims by state and White House officials that voting-by-mail constituted voting fraud and held legal or criminal consequences.

More generally, voters named five factors that weighed heavily in their voting-related calculations and plans.

- An overall determination to vote and receive confirmation that their vote was counted.
- COVID-19 related hardship and fatigue, including unemployment and institutional/service closures.
- Legacy structural barriers that compounded the 2020 challenges, rule changes, and closures.
- Daily living and transit considerations that affect city residents differently than suburban and rural areas, including the percentage of renters and address changes and dependence on public transit.

- Historical experiences of racialized voter suppression or intimidation that raised red flags regarding bureaucratic rule changes or the trustworthiness of the VBM process.
- Fears and concerns related to election and post-election violence.

The widespread attempts to delegitimize mail-in ballots in the weeks following the November 3rd election (efforts that continue with laws introduced across the country in 2021) reflected precisely the concerns that voters we spoke to had expressed.

## **Key goals, questions, and answers**

The following questions guided our conversations throughout this research:

- How did the 2020 social and political climate shape day-to-day voting and election considerations?
- How did voters make decisions about new voting processes and widespread changes to the rules in general, and to the rapid adoption of vote-by-mail specifically?
- How did differences in the process of voting by mail affect confidence in its use?
- Who and what are trusted (or not trusted) information sources when election and voting rules or processes change?
- When was uncertainty and mistrust in mail-in ballot processing most significant? When was trust and confidence highest?
- How can future ways of voting be designed to increase trust and ultimately increase participation?



# Learning Methodology

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We held two types of qualitative interviews in Baltimore, Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia between August and November 2020: group listening sessions with community organizations and oral history style interviews with individual voters.

## Listening sessions

We held one listening session in each city, with 3-7 people from grassroots community organizations and local social institutions. One listening session was held every month from August through Nov 2020 in order to reflect and capture the changing information and social/media climate related to voting rules, news, and voting-related decisions and anxieties.

These discussions sought to understand the issues voters faced in their work, as well as the various strategies that they took as community organizations to fill in the blanks on process and protocol left by cities and states in the midst of urgent clarification needs and public trust deficits within communities they represent and serve.

Listening sessions gathered four categories of community organizations:

- Voter outreach and engagement organizations
- Civil society and community organizations (churches, campus organizers)
- Family, close neighbors, and friends
- Social service intermediaries (social workers, librarians, professors)

We invited cohorts of community organizations and organizers who reflected a range of personal and organizational experiences in each of the four cities.

Participating organizations include:

- Make the Road, All Voting is Local, We are CASA, and OnePA in Philadelphia
- Brooklyn Library, and the Center for Independence of the Disabled in New York City
- ACLU of Michigan, NAACP, Brilliant Detroit, and the League of Women Voters in Detroit
- Strong City Baltimore, Black Girls Vote, Baltimore Votes, Downtown Baltimore, Family Alliance, League of Women Voters Baltimore City, HARBEL community organization, and School of Journalism and Communication at Morgan State University in Baltimore

## Oral history interviews

In each of the same four cities, we also conducted oral history<sup>2</sup> style interviews with 3-5 people in each city, interviewing a total of 17 individual voters in a panel diary study.

Each person was interviewed three times over a 5–6-week period. Two interviews were held with each participant between early October and Election Day on November 3rd, 2020, and one interview was held in the two weeks after the election. Each round of interviews focused on specific goals and themes, laid out below.

Interview Round	Interview Dates	Interview Themes and Objectives
First Round	Early Oct 2020	<p>Creating a comfortable environment for participants through open conversation</p> <p>How people situate themselves in and relate to the cities they live in</p> <p>How 2020 events and experiences to date have disrupted or changed their lives and communities</p> <p>Their earliest experiences and memories of voting</p> <p>Their relationship to government and civic processes</p> <p>How they describe voting and elections differently this year</p>

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<sup>2</sup>The oral history interviews followed a strict code of ethics based on the Core Principles of the Oral History Association. Participants received a consent form with the project's goals, how the oral history will be used, and where it will be archived.

Interview Round	Interview Dates	Interview Themes and Objectives
Second Round	Late Oct 2020	<p>General feelings and top of mind concerns or thoughts in the week leading up to Election Day</p> <p>Expectations for and trust in the process for sharing election results</p> <p>How they finally chose to vote and the process for/experience of doing so, whether person or vote-by-mail</p> <p>The top three issues or priorities for them in daily life and in this election, hopes and fears about the future</p>
Final Round	Early to mid-Nov 2020	<p>Where, when, and how they received final election results</p> <p>How they understood and responded to specific parts of the voting process after having completed it, drawing on stories and experiences</p> <p>Reactions to and preferences regarding the expansion of Election Day to Election week (with early in-person voting or extended time for mailing ballots)</p> <p>How they might reimagine the democratic process of voting and elections overall</p>

## Who we spoke to

The people we interviewed included both relatively new voters and older adults with longer experiences with elections.

Age range	Number	
18-24	4	■ ■ ■ ■
25-34	3	■ ■ ■
35-49	3	■ ■ ■
50-64	7	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Gender	Number	
Female	11	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Male	6	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Other		

We asked them to describe their racial or ethnic identity, without listing categories.

Identity description	Number	
Black/African American	8	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Latina/Latino	2	■ ■
White	6	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Indian American	1	■

In addition, 3 participants described themselves as having disabilities.

In selecting voters to interview, we looked for people who rented their house or apartment because this is more typical of city residents. In addition, people who own a home tend to live in the same location for longer than those who rent. This stability of their address makes voting by mail easier.

Residence	Number	
Homeowners	4	■ ■ ■ ■
Renters	13	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

In the end, the decision they made about how to vote was very consistent. Only 4 chose to vote by mail.

How they voted	Number	
By mail	4	■ ■ ■ ■
In person	13	■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

A few people talked to us about being new citizens, or the citizenship journey of their family.

Citizenship	Number	
Naturalized	1	■
First generation	1	■
Second generation	2	■ ■

More than half were unemployed or significantly underemployed. Participants described their professions as a home healthcare worker, social worker, professor, professional dancer, poll worker, student organizer, parent, bartender, and volunteer, among others.

## Their most important issues

The issues most important to the people we spoke to, in no particular order, included:

### General

- Getting COVID-19 under control in terms of health, jobs, and the deepening economic strain caused by months-long closures.
- Local issues in each city that preceded (and will continue after) this election, including education quality and funding, crumbling infrastructure, racial justice and policing oversight, affordable housing, and support services for newer immigrant communities.
- Rent/mortgage relief.

### Election-related

- Peaceful post-election transition and having an election free of violence.
- Ensuring that all votes were counted.
- Accuracy of final results of the election.

# Core findings

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In all four cities, voters' determination to ensure that their votes were cast *and* counted gained momentum as Election Day grew closer. This determination served as a backdrop for the conversations, planning, calculations, and eventual choices that voters—and the community organizations supporting them—made this year in casting a ballot.

Longstanding and persistent structural barriers related to distance and transportation challenges, documentation, and cost burdens, were compounded by the new context of COVID closures, USPS delays, and misinformation campaigns.

Pandemic-induced difficulties related to voter registration and mail ballot applications and completing tasks with little or no in-person support, along with misinformation accompanying changes to the process, cumulatively contributed to anxiety over and mistrust of the process.

The political climate, above all, fostered general confusion while amplifying specific messages of and calls for intimidation toward historically disenfranchised voters—and Black voters in particular.

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"I can't believe it's 2020 and we're talking about violence and intimidation at the polls. We moved from down south to get away from that!"

- Detroit resident

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For the people we spoke with, this context was marked by the ongoing need to question and check official and informal messages to determine truth, accuracy, safety, and practicality of guidance related to voting— a constant sorting of fact from fiction. It was almost impossible to keep up with the changing rules amidst the non-stop stress of pandemic-related disruptions of everyday life. This was particularly true in Pennsylvania and Michigan, where legal challenges produced changes in the election rules even after Election Day.

Most voters we spoke with opted for the familiar process of voting-in-person, even in the face of pandemic-related barriers and health risks, to bypass the endless uncertainty of requesting, returning, and finally feeling confident that votes-by-mail would be counted. During the primaries, voters often camped out for hours in long lines during a pandemic to ensure their ballots were cast in person and

counted. Images of these long lines became simultaneously emblematic of their determination and of how barriers in U.S. elections disproportionately impact communities of color and city residents more than others.

The following sections describe how these intersecting 2020 realities shaped voting decisions and strategies among voters in the four cities we spoke to.

### COVID-19 institutional and service closures impacted nearly all everyday activities, including voting

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"For one thing, I lost my job and didn't have any income. A lot of things changed for me. The salon I used to be in, even when it reopened, they didn't have enough money to do back-pay. The owner had to give up the salon. I have had to find a different way to make a living. But thank God, now there's something I have to bring in a couple dollars, so I can continue taking care of my son."  
- NYC resident

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**The COVID context directly and indirectly shaped time, capacity, and tolerance for election-related changes and uncertainty for nearly every participant.** Given the burdens and stresses these changes compounded:

- Roughly three-quarters were affected by unemployment or job loss, either their own or an immediate family member's, which affected time, resources, and capacity for managing day-to-day needs.
- Rapid shifts of all daily activities and services from in-person to online—from parenting children in remote classes to finalizing documents with the DMV or immigration services—created deep stress in 'keeping up every day' and a general sense of fatigue.
- COVID-19 public transit changes, delays, and route or scheduling reductions created the need for several trips and one or more half-day excursions or time off of work in order to consider COVID-related lines at polling places.
- Community organizations and institutions similarly described a common experience of the challenges of supporting voters with the pace of change and uncertainty given their own increasingly heavy reliance on new technology and communication systems with fewer staff and fewer resources.

## Legacy and persistent structural barriers compounded 2020 challenges, rule changes, and closures for city residents

**People dependent on public transportation, wage workers with fixed hourly or part-time schedules, people with disabilities, non-English speakers, and people with childcare needs** encountered additional and sometimes compounding costs (in time or money) when last-minute changes were made to voting sites, deadlines, or processes, or when transportation routes or frequency were reduced due to COVID-19 closures.

- Most of the participants we spoke to were renters, relied on public transportation for all everyday activities, were under- or unemployed at some point in 2020, or some combination of the three.
- State agencies often updated plans on rules and processes at the state level. Still, this information did not provide specific local details and real-time instructions, such as maps with up-to-date drop box locations by neighborhood, quality translations for an accurate city-level location or scheduling changes beyond what is found on state websites, or simplified instructions for residents with recently changed addresses.
- For voters with physical disabilities, access challenges to physical spaces were compounded by rapid, albeit temporary, changes to social or public service sites and polling relocation. For voters with cognitive disabilities<sup>3</sup>, learning new and changing processes with multi-step processes to complete ballots and registration was difficult.
- Already low confidence in the speed of USPS deliveries and arrivals to lower-income city neighborhoods was exacerbated by reporting on intentional delays caused by under-resourcing or defunding of mail processing.
- Incidental costs, including the cost of stamps, printing (and accessing a printer), and transportation when required to complete ballot requests, also made voting by mail options less useful.
- Language access, combined with the need for *ad hoc* rapid response approaches, produced an incomplete patchwork of non-English language options across materials, websites, and communications about changes.

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<sup>3</sup> As shared by intermediaries



- Cities are home to many returning citizens, who often have little support for navigating reentry in general, let alone a new and complicated processes like voting by mail.

### **Racialized histories of voter disenfranchisement, intimidation, and suppression raised concerns of violence and whether votes would count**

Subtle forms of disenfranchisement and direct threats of violence created an environment of intimidation for voters of color that was regularly cited as impacting voting decisions, including:

- Hearing stories about physical intimidation at polling sites and drop boxes from news outlets and in White House messaging.
- Hearing stories (whether real or rumor) that entire batches of mail-in ballots from specific (historically disenfranchised) zip codes had or would disappear.

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"[We're] hearing that there's going to be a militia group at the polling places. Some organizations with volunteers are trying to protect people."

- Philadelphia resident

In Detroit, one respondent decided to vote by mail to avoid potential violence at polling sites because of Open Carry laws allowing firearms in their vicinity.

"Both sides are going to act out like never before, because we are seeing that now... I'm concerned about Klansman, the Confederates. How wild are they going to get? How belligerent are they going to get in the areas where they live...?"

-NYC resident

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- Most participants were worried and anxious about the possibility of escalated attacks or sustained violence resulting from contestations of the declared result on or after Election Day in general, and particularly in the ways that Black populations, and communities of color more broadly, would bear the brunt of it.

- With widespread protests against racial violence in each of the four cities this past year, participants raised additional concerns about police or counter-protestors at, or on the way to, voting sites during this election cycle.
- Many participants tried to avoid the news in the days after the election, citing high levels of anxiety and a desire for the process to be over, without violence, regardless of who was actually declared the winner.

## **Voters' many layers of calculations for (and against) voting by mail**

Highly skeptical that votes cast by mail would ultimately get counted, nearly all the participants with whom we spoke opted for in-person voting when confronted with the many possible scenarios in which ballots cast by mail might disappear or get discounted.

This section lays out the most common calculations participants made and information gaps they encountered, which resulted in persistent doubts and low confidence in vote-by-mail as a trustworthy option for casting a ballot in 2020.

**The most significant and consistent concern about voting by mail was the desire for tracking and final confirmation that a ballot had arrived and was counted.**

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"Even down to a week before the primary, it was not clear. They didn't have tracking, and it was just a waiting game. It was hard because we didn't have answers. You didn't know when they would receive it or if they received it. A few people reached out to me after the primary saying they'd just gotten their ballot and should they send it in. I didn't know. I kind of think the Bureau of Elections is a game. If you send it to one person, they might accept it, another, maybe not."

-NYC resident

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The most common gaps and concerns expressed about their vote by mail ballots were all issues that highlight the difference from the more familiar voting in person. Even though all four of the cities provided the features they wanted, these voters did not know that the information was available. Challenges they talked about included:

- Not knowing whether a ballot had arrived for counting or had gotten intentionally *or* accidentally lost along the way.
- Not knowing whether or not a ballot had arrived by the deadline in order to be counted, or whether it had been discarded for late arrival.
- Having no way to confirm whether or not everything on the envelope was correct and not knowing whose discretion would be used to reject ballots that could otherwise be corrected.
- Not being able to see ballots getting picked up from drop boxes and mailboxes and transferred to election sites, although trust slightly increased when drop boxes were inside official institutions like the post office, instead of outside on the street.
- Not knowing how counting worked or how different officials or people with different levels of discretion had the authorization to discount ballots.

In the days following the election, participants described increasing confidence when they could see and follow the news and election results sites showing significant hourly or daily increases of the number of mail-in ballots counted.

### **Endless mental gymnastics in trying to account for and mitigate all scenarios in which ballots might get lost, sabotaged, or disqualified**

Almost all participants described a process of thinking through scenarios, which they used to consider a seemingly infinite number of possible setbacks, unexpected rule changes, delays or errors, in voting by mail that might ultimately mean their vote would not be counted.

"It was all too little too late. She [the city clerk] waits until the last minute, then makes a big to-do. We should have had information about drop boxes months ago."

-Detroit resident

The most common scenarios people considered were:

- **Speed and timing calculations of VBM** are a complicated matrix of interconnected 'if-thens' ranging from the number of additional days a ballot would take to arrive due to USPS delays to determining a rough series of deadlines for applying, completing, sending, and leaving time for mistakes to be corrected, throwing most participants into calculations with no fixed assurances of ballots arriving or getting counted at the end.
- General confusion about the mail-in ballot process arose from a seemingly **disorganized and fragmented process**, including, for example, voters in the same household in Baltimore receiving ballots on different days or in different weeks in advance of the Maryland primary, Philadelphia voters receiving last-minute notice of changes to polling places, and Detroit voters trying to make decisions without any information on drop box options until September.
- **Past experiences of trying and failing** to register, of having to navigate a labyrinth of steps and document submission that still led to rejection, or outright restrictions on voting altogether **created burnout** even before considering the added complexity arising from pandemic closures and process changes, and ultimately led some people to abandon trying to vote at all. A Baltimorean in their mid-30s tried multiple times to mail in a ballot which kept getting returned, and he eventually stopped trying.

A Philadelphian's elderly father was unable to vote in person due to long lines, making three round trips from home to the polling place, and eventually giving up on the third try because of long lines and physical inability.

- **Confusion because of different mail-in ballot categories, terminology, and eligibility criteria**—such as absentee ballots, mail-in ballots, no-excuse ballots, and naked ballots—raised concerns about whether or not voters make the right choice and whether their ballot would be counted.
- **Without the support from neighborhood election volunteers** typical of any other election year, many voters remained anxious and insecure about the process, having to navigate huge information gaps or uncertainty on their own, and those basic errors would not be noticed or have time for correction.

- While participants remained uncertain of election information up until election day, **social media or search engine information cards with localized practical information on rule changes voting details**, often tailored to zip codes or neighborhoods where voters lived, **were increasingly cited by several participants as both a useful and trustworthy go-to source for information**, especially as the election got closer.

### News and social media stories about mail-in ballots, whether real, rumor, or speculation, reinforced many of the hesitations and concerns participants expressed about Vote-By-Mail

"I didn't even know what that meant. Stop the Count? I just saw it as a headline. The news presents it as [playing] such an important role. They repeat these headlines but don't actually break down how it's supposed to work or anything like that."

- NYC resident

Stories about **stolen, burned, or fake drop boxes**, related to **violence at polling sites, intentionally displaced ballots** by mail carriers, and **delays in mail pick up or drop off**, and **USPS budget cuts** raised red flags among voters all too familiar with these tactics, with some types of stories referenced more than others:

"So many different stories that you're hearing—voter fraud, problems with the post office in P.A. Things mentioned seem like big stories, but then there's no resolution. Where are we with this? This is a breaking news story, but what's going on with it now?"

-Philadelphia resident

- The growing coverage of efforts to defund or dismantle efficient operations of the USPS - images, visuals, rumors, and realities of VBM sabotage through the public mail—stood out to most participants.
- National news stories were sometimes retold as local events. For example, stories about drop boxes being vandalized or removed in various cities or not having ballots collected for weeks.

One Philadelphia voter had heard that a mail carrier had disposed of 250,000 ballots.

A New York voter described the placement of fake drop boxes in California as a cautionary tale for New Yorkers considering VBM.

In Baltimore, one voter described a story being circulated of an armed assault of a security guard at a drop box.

- Repetition of specific headlines or soundbites from public officials, particularly those messages with intimidating information (declaring the risk of engaging in criminal activity by using mail-in ballots) or confusing information (changing ballot submission deadlines or processes), raised alarm bells for most participants.
- Social media and internet search engine banners often flashed stressful news headlines about intimidation or sabotage efforts.
- Participants expressed high trust in local news channels and had skepticism over the reliability of information coming from national news sources.

### **Legacies of personal experiences with government-enabled or -driven exclusion, neglect, mistreatment, or criminalization of communities of color reinforced VBM doubts when their use became linked with fraud**

**Lack of general trust in government institutions** primed many voters to be extra vigilant when punitive action is associated with everyday activities and rights.

Detroit residents were the target of predatory robocalls aimed at discouraging voters from voting by mail. Full of misinformation and false consequences, the calls played on Detroit residents' fears of economic hardship or punitive government action following the election.

- White House messages about voter fraud contradicted information from state government officials, creating doubt, confusion, and sometimes fear.
- Experiences from the 2020 primaries, including ballots that voters received after deadlines for voting or rules that changed after ballots had been mailed, amplified concerns about revised protocols retroactively determining some ballots in violation of last-minute rule changes.

## In a general climate of reluctance, mistrust, and aversion to using VBM, some participants *did* vote by mail, often citing insurmountable safety concerns to voting in person

While the majority of voters we spoke with, and community organizations working most closely with them, had serious doubts about voting by mail for many of the reasons already shared in this report, **some voters did vote-by-mail, mainly citing health and public safety concerns, such as:**

- Having high-risk elders in the family during a pandemic made voting by mail a safer alternative than familial traditions of voting in person.
- Fear of physical violence and intimidation at the polls given Open Carry laws and histories of armed intimidation of Black voters at polling sites and on Election Day.
- Right-wing militia groups encouraged by the President of the United States to watch polling sites.
- Inability to wait in long lines or go to in-person sites due to physical health risks during COVID, disability, or both.
- Having a greater familiarity with, and therefore trust in, VBM as a reliable vote casting option, mainly in Michigan, which has had regular VBM use in prior elections while the other three states where we interviewed had not.

"If I were younger, I probably wouldn't take it [the pandemic] seriously. But due to my age, I'm playing it safe. This is new for me because I just retired, and I'm normally very active."

- Detroit resident

The risk of contracting COVID-19 with a compromised immune system created two bad choices for one voter: risk having her vote discounted or risk her health—finally opting to roll the dice and cast her ballot by mail.

## Community organization filled information gaps

Community organizations filled critical election-related information and support gaps alongside serving as community 'first responders' for pandemic-related hardship.

With physical voting sites, election offices, and community spaces like libraries and mosques all closed, the usual trusted, go-to sources of support and information for voters we spoke to found their operations transformed. With voting rules changing through the election cycle, they had to engage in near-continuous fact-checking and rapid response communications to ensure they did not share incorrect or incomplete information. At the same time, they were ministering to concerns about voter suppression, a contentious political climate, and overall community needs and well-being amidst a pandemic and economic crisis.

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"I got people asking a lot about deadlines. People reaching out to me the day before requesting [ballots] for their parents and grandparents. I would explain that you could request it online or that you could call in. I also had to explain that you could request it but it might not get there in time by November 3rd but that you could go in by November 10th and drop it off at the Bureau of Elections."

- NYC community organizer

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### Information needs and anxieties peaked and slowed based on the time remaining until Election Day

Community organizations expressed that the months leading up to November were an overall marathon of individualized troubleshooting, question and answer, coaching and convincing on the importance of voting even when the process or its integrity genuinely came into question. The frequency of stories related to experiences of active disenfranchisement or confusion arising from chaotic or unclear rule changes took on a timeline of its own—with marked changes in voter perceptions as Election Day approached.

The calendar-based timeline of these concerns below shows the challenges community organizations and organizers encountered this election year:

Time until election	Voter concerns
1-2 months remaining	<p>The legitimacy of drop boxes, locations, the pace of mail-ins, and general anxiety that votes would not get counted.</p> <p>Negative or confusing primary experiences still colored all questions, doubts, and confidence about voting at all on Election Day.</p>



Time until election	Voter concerns
	<p>A lot of anxiety about ballot tracking, ballot sabotage, and changing rules regarding deadlines.</p> <p>Concerns &amp; questions about having multiple voting options and whether it would be possible to vote in person is already committed to the mail-in ballot through having completed the application.</p>
1-2 weeks remaining	<p>Last-minute rapid response surged across communications platforms before every single deadline, with questions related to various parts of the process, including ballot applications, registration, and emergency forms or corrections.</p> <p>Requests for final details and preparation related to mail-in ballot identifications required by revised rules, and support for making Election Day plans for individual voters and their relatives.</p>
Election Day/ Week	<p>Poll workers become key community intermediaries, troubleshooting a wide range of on-site concerns and questions.</p> <p>Managing drop box drop-offs, people waiting to vote in person, and a heightened level of confusion about parts of the process.</p> <p>People brought extensive documentation thinking in-person registration.</p>

### Rapid response communications became central to all community organizations' activities and operations for several months

**Organizers used a patchwork** of hotlines, Zoom and social media livestreams, WhatsApp groups, and new channels for distributing information, all requiring improvisation and 'gymnastics' to put staffing and other resources where needed most, including:

- Generating regular, though often *ad hoc*, FAQ lists based on the day's or week's mis/information, new voting process or protocol guidance—smaller organizations relied heavily on social media and Whatsapp groups, community organizations like churches additionally relied on Zoom gatherings which replaced in-person gatherings. In comparison, larger organizations additionally used mailers and call-in information lines.
- Using existing trusted distribution channels, including inserts into Meals on Wheels or Social Security mailers.
- Surge staffing of existing hotlines or other COVID-compliant communication channels to try and keep up with the shifting demand for information concentrated in newer and fewer channels. This happened most often after dramatic news announcements and as deadlines were approaching.
- Community members without Internet access or with less comfort navigating digital and Internet platforms, websites, and information pages, were eager for 1-on-1 support, which became a challenge due to pandemic health risks and the sheer volume of people reaching out to the same, small clusters of groups considered trustworthy information bearers.

### **The abrupt shift to digital operations upended traditional social and organizational support roles, prompting internal operational changes to keep up**

Traditional go-to leaders or sites for support were reversed. The type of information often needed was visual and not verbal, and information on major rules or protocols often became outdated as quickly as it was published. Organizers and organizations pointed toward some of the following changes as requiring the biggest adjustments:

- Digital and social media savvy community organizers or members became overwhelmed by requests for specialized election information or the accuracy of new protocols. In contrast, trusted community and neighborhood organizations, the long-established and go-to points for election and voting support, became overwhelmed by the need for digital and social media communication methods, verifying, and interacting with online and offline populations.

- Visual trust-building played a central role in the shift to digital as many groups and organizations had to center rapid response communications on visual imagery and photos for public education (i.e., of drop boxes), using Instagram campaigns or simple visual explainers (i.e., of eligibility or rules) shared through messages, email, websites, and Whatsapp.
- Whatsapp and group text messages became a key method for real-time information sharing, myth-busting, process updates, and for providing support through confusing or intimidating parts of the process.
- Whatsapp and group text messages also provided a sense of a group community space and experience, otherwise lost to pandemic isolation, which also enabled some forms of misinformation to be seen as trustworthy.
- Groups of trusted community organizations quickly formed informal coalitions and alliances to split up the effort of verifying information, keeping track of updates, amplifying one another's communications campaigns, and troubleshoot technology or communications challenges, among others.

### How community organizations handled the dual challenge of maintaining community trust and vetting for accuracy amidst continuous confusion and misinformation

"People are getting confused about a lot of new forms and changing options, like what's allowed and what isn't allowed or the differences between absentee ballot vs. mail-in ballot vs. dropping off ballots at voting centers."  
- Baltimore resident and community organization leader

Community leaders expressed a number of challenges and strategies for navigating them in terms of voter doubts and confusion—whether ballots were not arriving in time, households getting critical documents at different times, ballots getting rejected without explanation, or sufficient time for resubmission. The most repeated among them were:

- A near-continuous process of addressing rumors and confusion and developing internal, albeit *ad hoc*, fact-checking processes for separating between active misinformation, unclear or partial information, or information that was accurate but had changed multiple times or was shared slightly differently by different trusted or official sources.

- A surge of questions and requests about accuracy and truth regarding the rules and what was allowed, prohibited, and criminalized, came at points when messaging from the White House competed with or contradicted messaging from state officials.
- Each delay or mistake by the elections offices added to the challenge for community organizations by adding to mistrust of the integrity of the process and the need for resources and time needed to make sense of rule changes and provide updates for clarification.
- Some local community organizations expressed concern that large, otherwise reputable national organizations, continued to unintentionally distribute or post incorrect state-specific misinformation in the hustle, which local organizations then had to compete with in terms of correctly educating or supporting voters in already rushed efforts to complete ballots.

# Where do we go from here?

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The statistics from the election are finally coming out, and, in the end, the country dodged many potential disasters.

In voting by mail, voters face the persistent concern that their vote might not get counted. The prospect that after having requested and received a ballot, marked that ballot, packed it up, and dropped it in a mailbox, drop box, or at a voting location, votes still might not get counted—and worse, they may never know why—led many voters we spoke with to vote in person.

As Nathaniel Rakich reported in FiveThirtyEight<sup>4</sup> in an analysis of the first 27 states with complete data, the surprise is that so *few* absentee ballots were rejected. In Maryland, the rate of rejections dropped to 0.2%, and in Michigan, the rate 0.5%. Perhaps the most dramatic story is New York City, where over 20% of ballots were rejected in the primary. On November 9th, the Board of Elections tweeted that there were just 4% rejected ballots—when the process of notifying voters who could fix a mistake was still going on<sup>5</sup>.

However, of the four states, only Maryland is in the desired range of 0.2% or fewer statewide. And the cities still have even further to go to improve voting-by-mail enough that it can win voters' trust.

Another legacy of the election is the efforts to disqualify votes cast by mail. Even after the states had certified the results, the long period of court challenges and the horrific events of January 6th, 2021, are part of the history of this year that will shape voters' perceptions and confidence in upcoming elections. This history is also playing out in state legislatures, where laws to restrict voting by mail (and other aspects of elections) in some states are in sharp contrast to expanded opportunities to vote in others.

## **Designing vote-by-mail to be trusted, convenient, and familiar**

The voters in our interviews and listening sessions had many suggestions for how vote-by-mail could be improved to make it more trustworthy, reliable and how it fit into their ideas of an election in a more familiar way.

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<sup>4</sup> Why So Few Absentee Ballots Were Rejected In 2020, February 17, 2021  
<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-so-few-absentee-ballots-were-rejected-in-2020/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/BOENYC/status/1326235826578214912>

The recommendations that follow are both ideas directly suggested by the voters in our interviews, and extrapolations from their comments based on our knowledge of elections across the country.

As voters and community organizations reflected on rule changes, news, experiences, and decisions leading up to the 2020 election, they raised several common needs and priorities related to the trustworthiness, reliability, and familiarity of voting by mail.

### **Mail-in ballot tracking, real-time counting, and tally confirmation**

- Run campaigns to educate and familiarize voters in advance of elections on the presence, role, and function of ballot tracking and ballot correcting features and processes.
- Implement a tracking system that would allow voters to receive a text message or email updates on their ballot's collection from mail or drop box receptacles, on final confirmation upon arrival at the Board of Elections, and whether they were counted—using similar functions from other government services as an example. Several voters suggested that ballot tracking could be modeled on FedEx or Amazon-style commercial delivery tracking or the unique identifiers used in the Census.
- Use text messages and email to alert voters when mail envelopes need to be fixed and provide in-person and digital options for voters to fix the problem easily.
- Provide live reporting at local election offices, with detailed updates on the number of ballots received and checked-in for counting from each neighborhood or zip code, while mail-in ballots are still being accepted.

### **Multi-faceted voter education, myth-busting, and voter information**

- Create officially verified *and* community-trusted digital platforms for rumor and misinformation tracking. This is especially important for community intermediaries and organizations who need to respond quickly to rumors and stories.
- Create highly visual, well-designed infographics or primers that can be circulated throughout social media and social networks on new voting processes or options, such as mail-in ballots or drop boxes.
- Use familiar, trusted processes at social service agencies, including Social Security, public schools, or SNAP, as a vote-by-mail process model.

- Increase K-12 civics education about voting by mail, and voting processes more generally, to prepare students to navigate voting rules and options along with an awareness of the history of elections.
- Host public and community events near and around drop boxes in order to create opportunities for informal public education about them.
- Keep hotlines and other rapid response communications that were widely used in place for future elections.

### **Ongoing participatory campaigns for improving drop box legitimacy**

- Increase drop box convenience and availability by placing them in all neighborhoods, busy areas, daily public transit routes, high traffic sites, and schools.
- Prioritize placement of drop boxes *inside* trusted community institutions, when possible, including libraries and USPS offices, rather than on the street to reduce real and perceived sabotage or intimidation efforts.
- Publicly post information on the actual drop box, which shows the frequency of ballot pick-up, collection, and transfer. Have a posted phone numbers for voters to call for immediate answers.
- Create neighborhood-level maps—not just city-level maps—with drop box locations, along with information on where and how to get support using them. Make these maps available for community organizations already playing a bridge role with voters.
- Create pop culture-friendly social media livestream tutorials explaining how it works at the drop box, what a correctly completed ballot for that state looks like, with common FAQs built into the tutorial.
- Place 'practice' mail-in ballot documents in a wide range of community and social service organization spaces so community members can see the layout and have a chance to ask questions about using them.
- Host in-person support days at physical drop box sites to educate on the process from drop-off to the moment a ballot is counted or positioning specific 311-style hours with trusted community organizations to provide in-person introductions, assistance, and support while answering questions.

## **More equitable voting starts with structural change**

Throughout this research, the most frequently mentioned barriers to voting both in person and by mail reflected a combination of legacy structural barriers to voting along with some specific to the challenges of 2020.

Many of the following recommendations, presented as starting points for change, are already in use in some cities and states around the country. Many of the burdens of planning how and when to vote related to casting a ballot in-person on a single day, Election Day. The anxieties about voting were significantly lightened by having a week or more to vote early in person, along with the option to vote from home.

However, the future is not yet evenly applied. While many of these ideas are not new, their uneven adoption across the country means that it is easier for people in some places to vote than others.

### **Make successful emergency voting measures permanent**

- Keep early voting and universal eligibility for mail-in ballots added in 2020 and expand to places where they do not exist.
- Provide free postage for any mail related to voting as part of eliminating all financial costs associated with voting.
- Create 'cut-the-line' tickets for voters who go to the wrong polling place and need to go somewhere else, or who come to a voting location to correct a problem with a vote-by-mail ballot.
- Provide mail ballot drop boxes at all in-person voting locations.
- Automatically mail VBM applications to all voters, along with information about the process of voting by mail.
- Keep in-person options available, in convenient locations with capacity so that no one has to wait more than 30 minutes to vote.
- Create systems that provide information about wait times at all voting locations, so voters can make choices about when to vote.

### **Remove overlapping burdens of distance, resources, and time to vote**

- Provide free public transportation with subways and buses during Election Week, or for a dedicated period of time during Early Voting through the end of Election Day to ensure that the cost of transit, or the need for multiple routes or rides, is not a barrier to voting.



- Convert basic broadband into a publicly provided service to ensure that a lack of internet access does not serve as a barrier to finding information about voting.
- Provide free bagged lunches for anyone waiting in line, or who have voted.
- Fully fund the USPS, and set service rules to provide fast, reliable service in all neighborhoods.

### **Improve language access programs to cover the full voting process**

- Create a robust program for language access spot checks for all parts of the process in several languages so that websites, mailers, and polling places have accurate, voter-centered translations.
- Expand language access by having dedicated interpreters at each voting location who can offer assistance with every part of the voting process.
- Monitor for targeted misinformation algorithms, which in this past election, directed specific misinformation at Spanish-speaking and minority populations.
- Run language access initiatives so that all voters are engaged consistently through the election cycles. Setting up programs at the last minute can increase mistrust rather than raise confidence due to the abrupt nature of engagement.
- Reduce or eliminate the use of automated web translation software (such as Google Translate) without checking and correcting the resulting text with qualified human translators.
- Set up multilingual news- and social media-based tutorials and stories on how the entire voting process works, addressing and explaining aspects that are already known to raise the greatest uncertainty and doubt.

### **Build trust among and tailoring for community organizations by listening to their input on better, more responsive, electoral design**

- Undertake broader dialogue regarding the ways that historical experiences, mistrust, or legacies of inequality serve as and shape the trustworthiness of specific voting materials; requiring a more sustained, earnest, and ongoing effort by and with local officials to go beyond design questions toward addressing broader issues of community mis/trust.

- Engage (and fund) community organizations to be trusted sources of support and information for voters, rather than relying on official information sources alone.
- Provide voting information through existing organizational or agency hotlines that already experience high trust and high call volumes from a range of voting communities, including library hotlines, city-specific 311, or other services.
- Provide election information at the county or city-level to provide geographically detailed information specific to the local context.
- Understand the diverse experiences of race, ethnicity, nationality, language spoken, or ability among others within communities to understand complex relationships to the voting process better.
- Create official social media accounts on popular platforms in each community to share information more quickly. Use these accounts to engage the community, not just post information.