



WHAT TO EXPECT THIS ELECTION SEASON

AN ELECTION TIP SHEET

The 2020 general election will be unlike any previous election, happening against the backdrop of a pandemic, and with disinformation running rampant. It's vital that voters know what to expect. Here are five things to keep in mind.

1. Expect voting to require more time and preparation than usual.

A variety of things may look or feel different this year: long lines on Election Day, for example, should not be taken as a bad sign; they may be necessary to allow for social distancing. Whether it's vote-by-mail, early voting, or voting in-person on November 3, figure out a plan to vote and recognize that there may be wrinkles. [Local guidelines and deadlines](#) for registering to vote, and for requesting and submitting mail-in ballots, differ by state. Some states allow early in-person voting at designated polling places, and some states have secure bins where you can drop off your mail-in ballot, while others don't. Go to the National Association of Secretaries of State's ["Can I Vote" page](#) to confirm your own voter registration status, [check your state's deadlines and procedures](#), and make your plan.

2. Expect to fact check everything you hear—even from people you trust.

Americans get their news and information from a wide variety of sources, some verified and trusted, and others not. It can be hard to tell the difference between a report from a credible news source and a piece of propaganda being spread for partisan or monetary gain. During this election, almost everything will benefit from a good fact-check, even if it's coming from someone you know and trust. (You can learn how to fact-check what you see [with PEN America's resources](#), or take First Draft's text message-based course in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).) So, make sure you're bringing the same level of scrutiny to what your trusted sources say as you do to the news you see and read online. And even for news reports, checking with more than one outlet is always a good idea before you share or react to breaking news.

3. Expect the media's reporting on early results to look different from usual.

On election night, you're probably used to seeing "percentage of precincts reporting" as results trickle in. But those percentages usually reflect ballots cast in-person. This year, with so many people voting by mail, those numbers won't mean as much, and many outlets may not report them. In fact, because different states also count their mail-in ballots at different times, [with 14 states not even starting until the polls have closed](#), it's important this year to take early results for what they are: partial tallies that won't necessarily reflect what final results will be. The Associated Press, or AP, is widely considered the gold standard in tabulating votes and declaring election winners. The AP [has said that it will not call a race](#) until it concludes the trailing candidate will not catch the leader. Be patient, check multiple news outlets for results coverage, and be alert to how results are being reported on election night.

4. Expect and accept delays in election results.

The vote tabulation process will likely take longer than usual this year because of the increased use of mail-in ballots and other effects of the coronavirus pandemic. And that might be especially true for the presidential election. We should not necessarily conclude these delays mean there is "chaos" or a "rigged election." Many election experts [have pointed out](#) that election night is likely to become "election week" or even "election month." However, this is likely to be a period during which disinformation is used to cast doubt on the credibility of the electoral process. Voters will need to be patient while election officials count the ballots accurately and avoid mistakes. "The need to take a longer time to process and count these ballots is a sign of the process working," a Department of Homeland Security official [told The New York Times](#). Keep in mind that you also have the power to help shape how people respond to a delay in results; when you post on social media, be careful to cite trusted news sources, and avoid language that would sow unfounded doubt in the process.

5. Expect the unexpected.

You should be ready for anything this election season. Maybe it's verifiably false headlines, which [PEN America can help you learn to spot](#). Or, there may be legitimate concerns about voter suppression, voiced by knowledgeable and experienced activists and more than one expert. You might hear candidates claiming victory before results have been announced by official or independent sources. And for all the caution about results taking a long time, it's certainly still possible the presidential election could be called on election night. This list is just a starting point. No matter what, prepare for the unexpected. We know that 2020 will be an election like no other, so no matter what happens, think before you react.