

Role of Media in the 2020 election cycle and voting in the COVID-19 era

First, let's review.

In the United States of America, one of the world's most successful democracies, "eligible citizens" cast a single vote for the candidate of their choice in an electoral process that was described, in painstaking detail, in our Constitution. Over the centuries the definition of "eligible citizen" has been updated to reflect the essence of what our government was built upon: equality.

Each vote is treated equally – no matter gender, race, creed, ethnicity, economic status or region - and the candidate with the most votes wins. The requirements continue to be very simple: you must be a US citizen and you must be at least 18 years of age. Remember, the Framers were focused on avoiding/diminishing/eliminating the chance of a monarchy or autocracy from emerging, so emphasis on any one citizen's full-throated participation in the electoral process (or one may say preserving democracy) was featured prominently.

Over time, the act of casting a vote has evolved; rising to meet the needs of the electorate, but mainly we still vote by a set of similar circumstances across the country: go to your local precinct polling place on Election Day and cast your vote.

This process is so engrained into our culture that for generations we have had peaceful transfers of power, something that continues to elude so many countries worldwide.

Fast forward to 2020

We have a painfully divided electorate (rise in misinformation), a rapid deterioration of trust in some of our oldest institutions (the free press) and a pandemic (COVID-19).

Rise in misinformation and the free press

Notice I use the word misinformation instead of disinformation. Why? Because I do not believe anyone (social media/big tech) set out in some grand scheme to mislead the public. There was no malicious intent. It was an unintended consequence. So, I make the distinction.

In politics, we have always known how powerful "peer to peer" validation can be. We all have seen this tactic used in modern political campaigns. It is within our nature, as human beings, to trust those who look like we do, who have similar backgrounds and those we believe have shared life experiences. This is not new and has been used as an effective tactic in modern electoral politics.

Opinion driven cable news and social media has transformed this tactic from a cute, big-eyed,

HARMLESS Gizmo (see 80s movie “Gremlins) into a destructive, hate-driven Stripe; wreaking havoc for sport. But instead of a midnight snack being the culprit for igniting the devastation, here we have the “echo chamber” to blame.

In other words, when you consistently surround yourself with or only seek out information from those who share your life perspective you begin to believe EVERYONE thinks the same way you do and with the same intensity.

As we know, the consistent amplification of one perspective creates a darker, artificially extreme contrast with any conflicting or different perspective. And because we are human, something different always brings with it an element of irrational fear.

This process becomes a nasty, vicious cycle. As a result, the things in which we once knew as fair, honest and worthy of our trust are inexplicably questioned as dubious or, in some cases, outright deceitful.

COVID-19 and Voting in 2020

More review.

Each individual state plans, underwrites and conducts its own elections. The federal government dictates timing and, for federal candidates, outlines qualifications for candidacy. Each state also writes its own voter registration guidelines. Both “red” and “blue” states have, what is now considered to be, antiquated voter registration and Election Day rules.

There have been many efforts over the years to “federalize” the election process so that every state adheres to the same guidelines regarding rules and access. These attempts have never been successful.

Difference between Absentee Voting and Vote-by-Mail

Five states – Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah and Hawaii – conduct (and have been for years) ALL vote- by- mail elections with ease and success. In fact, most of these states gravitated towards this method for efficiency but also to mitigate fraud.

Absentee voting and vote-by-mail are essentially one and the same. The same quality control and effort to protect the integrity of the ballot is applied. The one difference is an individual voter must request an absentee ballot, whereas, vote-by-mail states send each registered voter a ballot automatically.

There is no credible evidence to suggest absentee voting or vote by mail is fraught with or susceptible to systemic fraud.

In states like Florida and Arizona, where there is a substantial part-time resident population, absentee voting is very popular. And because of this, it has been standard procedure to have one or both of these states experience a delay in certifying and reporting their election results.

Because of social distancing guidelines associated with COVID-19 there has been an unprecedented desire by the public to vote by mail/absentee this year. As a result, most states have either relaxed or eliminated the rules that limit access to absentee voting.

Sound straightforward? Why all the controversy?

One word. Politics. More specifically; the politics of COVID-19, the politics of race, and the culture wars.

Never in modern history have we seen a U.S. President go out of his way to “suppress” votes. In essence, cherry-picking who has the right to vote and whose vote “counts”. Never have we seen the Leader of our country promote disinformation for the express purpose of personal political gain or prey on the fears of Americans to purposefully distort reality so they simply look better.

The gradual erosion in the trust of the democratic institutions in which our constitution is based: freedom of the press and fair and free elections is troubling and should concern any American interested in preserving personal liberty.

What happens next? No one knows. This is unprecedented. Hopefully, the guardrails of democracy can hold a little longer.

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Denny has worked in 20 states managing communications for candidates, elected officials and progressive organizations. Her expertise is concentrated in Iowa – an early Presidential primary state. Most recently she was a principal advisor for Sen. Bernie Sanders in Iowa during the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary. She is currently working with candidates, labor unions and progressive organizations in 12 states creating and implementing strategic campaign communications.

Denny has also consulted with major US corporations. From 2010-2012, Denny Todd worked with FedEx Corp as an Issues and Crisis Communications Consultant. Among her duties, she assisted in the creation and executed an education initiative for the corporation .

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