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Pack Your Patience...We Probably Won't Know the Winner on Election Night



With Kamala Harris and Donald Trump neck and neck in the polls, the 2024 presidential election could come down to a handful of ballots in one state, and recounts and lengthy court challenges.

Or, experts say, it may be a clear victory for one candidate or the other by 10 p.m. on election night.

So how will we know who wins? The news media.

Litigation (both existing and anticipated), political polarization among the electorate, the culture of “scoops” and the memories of the 2000 and 2020 presidential elections, and claims of political fraud put tremendous pressure on the newsrooms to make a call this year. And that may mean a little bit of a wait on the evening of Nov. 5.

The task of counting and announcing vote results from over 100,000 precincts across the country requires a massive operation that involves hundreds of thousands of poll workers, election officials and observers.

We may think of a presidential election as a single national contest, but how elections are administered varies across the 50 states and Washington D.C. Even within states, different jurisdictions — counties, cities and so on — could have different administrative practices or logistics in the election process. In all, national news outlets will report vote results from 4,635 jurisdictions across the U.S.

Nearly all jurisdictions provide multiple updates to the vote count on election night and in the following days. In the November 2020 election, news outlets received over 88,000 updates to its vote totals across 542 different races. More than 45,000 of those vote updates came before 2 a.m. ET on election night.

How do states and counties tabulate their vote results? The vote results reported on the news are the product of hundreds of thousands of people working to accurately and efficiently count and report the results. The process begins at your local polling place or precinct. On Election Day 2020, there were over 107,000 physical polling places nationwide, staffed by nearly 700,000 poll workers, many of them volunteers.

After polls close and the last voters have cast their ballots, poll workers begin to close the precincts and tabulate the votes. Each state has different requirements for the process, but the steps generally include turning off and securing voting machines and ensuring that the number of voters who checked in corresponds with the number of ballots cast.

Then, each precinct tabulates its vote results and reports those numbers to a central office in its county or town.

In some states, local precincts also count mail ballots from voters who live inside the boundaries of those precincts. Poll workers must scan them through tabulation machines either on Election Day, perhaps while the precincts are not busy, or after polls have closed.

In other places, mail ballots are counted centrally in a jurisdiction's single facility instead of precinct by precinct. Some of those counties, such as Clark County, Nevada (home of Las Vegas), and Maricopa County, Arizona (home of Phoenix), provide partial reports at regular intervals. Others, like Pennsylvania, do not report any mail results until they have tabulated all the mail ballots. Complicating things in Pennsylvania is that the Commonwealth is one of seven states that does not allow election workers to begin processing absentee or mail ballots until 7 a.m. on Election Day. This means workers across the commonwealth must deal with these ballots at the same time the polls are open, functionally running two elections at once, which can cause delays in unofficial results being available.

No centralized, federal government agency collects and reports vote results, so each state determines how it makes those results available. Many states have websites where anybody can access the real-time vote counts. Others have websites with results — but the numbers on election night are not as up to date as what is available from individual counties. And some states do not have vote results pages that update on election night at all.

Since no single U.S government agency or federal commission that tallies results and declares winners, that role falls to the news media. The networks are going to have sophisticated operations, both looking at exit polls, looking at exactly where votes are coming in from, benchmarks relative to the last election and so on.

So, with all this in mind, what should voters do as they anxiously await election results on Nov. 5?

Be patient, and don't get on X (formerly known as Twitter). Understand that counting ballots takes time and that responsible journalism takes time. Be patient and be just a little bit skeptical — have your ears open for speculation, for thin sourcing, wild guesses and be careful where you're getting information from, The major networks and major news organizations are not the only credible sources of information, but there are a lot of bad actors online right now with the intent to spread dis- and misinformation.

Along with patience, have perspective. We shouldn't forget as American voters that from the time of the founding to now, almost every national election has been a really messy, difficult, contentious process. People seem better conditioned these days — particularly because of 2000 and 2020 — to acknowledge that and to be a bit more patient.

