**Headline:** Democracy Headache: More Than 70 Percent of Trump Voters Distrust the Best-Run Election in Years

**Teaser:** As 2020’s elections continue, there may be millions who mistrust American democracy.

By Steven Rosenfeld

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**[Article Body:]**

Angela Clark-Smith, a lawyer, started learning about the intricacies of observing elections when she was a member of the same sorority as Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. In 2020, three decades later, she was deployed by the Georgia Democratic Party to observe the presidential election and, most recently, the processing of returned absentee ballots in its Senate runoffs.

“There’s a process. It is very straightforward,” Clark-Smith said during a break at an [early voting center](https://www.ajc.com/news/senate-runoffs-where-and-when-to-vote-early-in-dekalb-county/AVAYR7OEXJFZLL3GBOH53FCBWQ/) in an Atlanta suburb, where she praised poll workers and the process of verifying signatures on ballot envelopes and flagging problems for follow-up with voters. “Watching it was like watching a work of art.”

Elections in Georgia are [better run](https://www.sightline.org/2020/06/26/whats-your-states-grade-for-safe-elections/) than those in many blue states. But as the state has become a national battleground following Joe Biden’s narrow win there and during Senate runoffs that could return control of Congress to the Democrats, the artful process that Clark-Smith has seen and praised has become a “circus,” she says.

Clark-Smith witnessed the turmoil that is tearing apart American democracy: where partisans do not understand the process; do not know what they are seeing as they view election administration up close for the first time; and are part of a tidal wave—nearly [three-fourths](https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome) of Republicans, according to an [NPR poll](https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome) conducted in early December—who don’t trust that the 2020 election results are accurate.

“It went from a really dignified process to feeling it was like a circus,” Clark-Smith said, referring to the Republican observers who came to watch the initial processing of the runoff’s absentee ballots. “You had people who were jumping on tables and making accusations. There was this one man who said, ‘We should count this vote!’ And I’m like, ‘Sir. It’s a write-in vote for Mike Pence. He’s not on the ballot! Relax… Sit down… Come on!”

**A Deepening Democracy Crisis**

American politics and elections have always had dark sides: Suspicions versus inquiries. Fictions versus facts. Conspiracies versus realities. Yet the darker impulses seem to be worsening. In every close presidential election since 2000, growing numbers of partisan activists and voters whose side lost are angrier.

The 2020 election stands apart because the president has been leading this truculence by making [false claims](https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2020/election-integrity/) to rally his base, raise [hundreds of millions](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/us/politics/trump-money-future.html) of dollars and dangle extremist courses to stay in power, such as recently floating a [declaration of martial law](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/24/could-trump-declare-martial-law-try-steal-election/). Trump’s anti-democratic antics and sowing of wide distrust of electoral institutions are in a class by themselves. No foreign power has made [as persistent an attack](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/magazine/trump-voter-fraud.html) on American democracy.

There are other differences between 2020 and recent presidential elections that roiled voters. In 2000 and 2004, and then in 2016, voting rights reformers called out structural deficiencies—not fantasies. It was a [real problem](https://verifiedvoting.org/publication/summary-of-the-problem-with-electronic-voting/) that all-electronic voting systems meant that ballots could not be recounted. It was a valid concern that central counting nodes could be [tweaked](https://blackboxvoting.org/fraction-magic-1/?doing_wp_cron=1608831296.8571629524230957031250) by local election officials or their contractors to tilt outcomes, or theoretically [infiltrated](https://verifiedvoting.org/publication/summary-of-the-problem-with-electronic-voting/) by computer hackers.

By 2020, some of these top criticisms had been addressed. [Russian interference](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf) in 2016’s presidential election was an unanticipated impetus to [replace or shore up](https://www.cisa.gov/election-security) voting systems. Reformers’ demands, such as using [paper ballots](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2019/08/14/why-paper-is-considered-state-of-the-art-voting-technology/) and better [vote count audits](https://www.alternet.org/2018/12/why-election-officials-are-pinning-their-hopes-different-vote-verifying/), were adopted. Other demands, mostly from progressives who could not accept that Republicans had again won, fell on deaf ears. Those demands, such as [abandoning electronics](https://nvrtf.org/key-issues/paper-ballots.html) in voting systems, have been [seized](https://www.njspotlight.com/2020/12/he-did-breakthrough-work-on-hacking-voting-machines-now-hes-beloved-by-conspiracy-trolls/) by Trump backers.

What is more ironic from an election administration perspective, however, is that 2020’s general election has been one of the [best-run elections](https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/the-2020-voting-experience-and-goals-for-reform/?_cldee=c3RldmVuQGluZC5tZWRpYQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-1a6396879130e911a976000d3a18cb47-ace4c5467f51466d8988c3d63379164a&utm_source=ClickDimensions&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Elections%20%7C%202020%20Voting%20Experience%20%7C%2012.15.20&esid=e1c534e7-263b-eb11-a813-000d3a1bb7bb) in years. The same can be said of the [early voting](https://electproject.github.io/Early-Vote-2020G/GA_RO.html) for Georgia’s Senate runoffs, which culminate in a January 5 election. The positive outlook on the 2020 elections is supported by facts, which [Trump](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/trump-looking-fraud-all-wrong-places/617366/) and [his supporters](https://twitter.com/beckerdavidj/status/1341442852824465408) ignore as they make baseless claims to the contrary.

No election is flawless. That’s especially true of presidential contests, such as this fall’s election where [158.2 million](https://bit.ly/38C6P42) people cast ballots in a national exercise staffed by [900,000-plus](https://healthyelections.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Poll_Worker_Recruitment.pdf) citizen poll workers. There are always poll worker errors, uncounted votes and some people voting illegally. Most lapses are due to [human error](https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2020/election-integrity/?itid=lk_inline_manual_9) and do not affect the outcomes in major races. Those issues were seen in isolated instances in presidential battlegrounds this fall. Yet consider the objective measures about the larger contours of the 2020 general election.

Record numbers of voters [participated](https://bit.ly/3pgMkR6)—even in a pandemic. [Automatic](https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx) and [online](https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx) voter registration has never been as widespread. Voters had [more options](https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/how-to-vote-2020/) to cast ballots than ever: by mail, voting early or on Election Day. Never before have [as many voters](https://electproject.github.io/Early-Vote-2020G/index.html) cast mailed-out ballots or voted early. Almost everyone cast [paper ballots](https://www.rollcall.com/2020/11/30/trumps-former-cybersecurity-chief-calls-vote-fraud-claims-nonsense/). More vote counts were [double-checked](https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-donald-trump-technology-elections-voting-f42170f9ca455058049bf9854c99e60b) by audits and recounts than ever. The counting process was widely [streamed online](https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/11/04/1011648/livestream-vote-counts-are-here-to-stay/) and has never been as public. Georgia’s presidential ballots were counted three times each using a different methodology—including an unprecedented manual count. Each count [reaffirmed](https://abc7news.com/georgia-recount-election-results-2020-joe-biden/8586053/) that Biden won. This catalog of election administration [achievements](https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/the-2020-voting-experience-and-goals-for-reform/?_cldee=c3RldmVuQGluZC5tZWRpYQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-1a6396879130e911a976000d3a18cb47-ace4c5467f51466d8988c3d63379164a&utm_source=ClickDimensions&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Elections%20%7C%202020%20Voting%20Experience%20%7C%2012.15.20&esid=e1c534e7-263b-eb11-a813-000d3a1bb7bb) is remarkable.

But it is also indisputable that these facts barely matter in some important circles. More than a few Americans, possibly [tens of millions](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_111820/#post-40802248188:~:text=Three%2Dquarters%20(77%25)%20of%20Trump%20backers%20say%20Biden%E2%80%99s%20win%20was%20due%20to%20fraud) (if [recent](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_111820/) [polls](https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome) accurately represent the rest of the nation’s [74 million](https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/millions-trust-election-results-evidence-widespread-fraud-experts/story?id=74258192) Trump voters), will wince when Biden puts his hand on the Bible on January 20 to be sworn in. Some voters [still expect](https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/what-it-means-if-republican-voters-still-think-biden-lost-463302/) that Trump will serve a second term. How these Trump supporters will react in the short and long run is not a trifle. Their response will impact what follows every major election, which are the lessons learned and the reform agendas for states and Congress.

**When Mobs Are Swayed**

When multitudes believe that elections [cannot be trusted](https://thenewpress.com/books/when-times-mob-swayed), democracy is in trouble. Those believers in 2020 include scores of Republican members of Congress, state attorneys general and legislators, all who [signed onto](https://apnews.com/article/texas-led-election-lawsuit-litmus-test-e813a3380bd142d8d0a0a3e648363d27) pro-Trump lawsuits seeking to overturn the popular vote in their state—or more outrageously, in other states. Those lawsuits were filled with fabrications, shoddy analyses and lies that were overwhelmingly [rejected](https://twitter.com/beckerdavidj/status/1341892469240246273) by dozens of state and federal judges. Some of these same assertions have been [recurring](https://www.ajc.com/politics/eligibility-of-364000-georgia-voters-challenged-before-senate-runoff/3UIMDOVRFVERXOJ3IBHYWZBWYI/) in GOP-led lawsuits targeting Georgia’s runoffs. They are being [rejected](https://electionlawblog.org/?p=119764) there as well. But these narratives have not disappeared from the court of public opinion, especially in [right-wing media](https://electionlawblog.org/?p=119855), whose [audiences grow](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/22/business/media/newsmax-trump-fox-news.html) in response to baiting and fanning their fears and fantasies.

Many constitutional scholars [believe](https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/the-2020-voting-experience-and-goals-for-reform/?_cldee=c3RldmVuQGluZC5tZWRpYQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-1a6396879130e911a976000d3a18cb47-ace4c5467f51466d8988c3d63379164a&utm_source=ClickDimensions&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Elections%20%7C%202020%20Voting%20Experience%20%7C%2012.15.20&esid=e1c534e7-263b-eb11-a813-000d3a1bb7bb) that the country was lucky that Trump’s lawyers overplayed their post-election cards. Had the 2020 election hinged on a single state, legal experts [believe](https://electionlawblog.org/?p=119320) that the country could now be in a constitutional crisis. They doubt that a single state’s laws and top officials could have withstood this White House’s pressure to select—not elect—Trump as its Electoral College winner. Some Republicans in Congress, nonetheless, are still expected to [challenge ratification](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/trump-electoral-college-challenge-b1778457.html) of Biden’s Electoral College victory on January 6. But a continuing Democratic majority in the House ensures that Biden [will be sworn in](https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2020/12/22/heres-why-trump-and-gop-lawmakers-plan-to-challenge-election-in-congress-wont-work/?sh=4aa069ab7573) as the next president on January 20.

The [incompetence](https://twitter.com/_justinlevitt_/status/1341508342619885568) of Trump’s legal team and its allies is one thing. Their power-hungry guile and ongoing effort to subvert the electoral process is another. And the willingness of more than 70 percent of Republicans to distrust the results, according to [NPR’s poll](https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome), is most disturbing of all.

Polls are imperfect snapshots of a slice of voters in any given moment. One can hope that the Trump team’s ongoing failures to win election lawsuits will sink in and shrink the numbers who distrust 2020’s results. But they probably will not, because these court defeats address false claims, not deeper feelings.

For example, in Georgia, the Republican lawsuits targeting the Senate runoffs have tried to disqualify hundreds of thousands of voters. The [lawsuits](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/18/judge-skewers-gop-georiga-suit-448547) [cite](https://www.ajc.com/politics/eligibility-of-364000-georgia-voters-challenged-before-senate-runoff/3UIMDOVRFVERXOJ3IBHYWZBWYI/) a government database to posit that these voters are no longer state residents—rendering them ineligible to vote. But that database, the post office’s national change of address file, was never intended to track voters. It mostly lists heads of households and addresses, not every person living at an address and every voter. Judges and county election boards have been [rejecting](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/18/judge-skewers-gop-georiga-suit-448547) the illegal voter claims. One result has been that the early voting turnout in the Senate runoffs has [rivaled](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/12/15/georgia-senate-runoffs-more-voters-turn-out-for-first-day-of-early-voting-than-for-general-election/?sh=19e3e634655b) the general election. Accommodating high voter turnout is a sign of a well-run election.

But there’s a disconnect. On one hand, those [attacking](https://electionlawblog.org/?s=georgia&x=0&y=0) the process in Georgia and [disparaging](https://electionlawblog.org/?s=georgia&x=0&y=0) the presidential results say that the electoral sky is falling. But quieter multitudes have found that it has been easier to vote in 2020, even during the pandemic. This is because there were more [voting options](https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/how-to-vote-2020/) in 2020: in person or via a mailed-out ballot, early or on Election Day. (Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a rare Republican who [has stood up](https://billmoyers.com/story/view-from-georgia/) to Trump, said on December 23 that local officials are “overwhelmed” and [called on](https://sos.ga.gov/index.php/elections/georgias_elections_officials_are_overwhelmed_running_three_parallel_election) the state’s GOP-led legislature to reinstate the requirement that Georgia voters need an excuse to get a mailed-out ballot. Democrats won’t be pleased if that proposal gains traction in 2021.)

Normally, in years when the presidency changes party, the period between early November’s Election Day and late January’s Inauguration Day is a time when experts seek [to influence](https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-transition-team-agencies-ted-kaufman-trump-legacy-obama-2020-9) a new administration. In the election fold, however, some of the biggest players have been notably quiet. Some privately say that the attacks by Trump and his allies are still a big and unfolding crisis—a bonfire that won’t disappear until he leaves office. The harms being unleashed, at least among the voters who backed Trump, may take years to undo.

Nonetheless, there has been some talk among elections experts since November 3 about [what to do next](https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/the-2020-voting-experience-and-goals-for-reform/?_cldee=c3RldmVuQGluZC5tZWRpYQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-1a6396879130e911a976000d3a18cb47-ace4c5467f51466d8988c3d63379164a&utm_source=ClickDimensions&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Elections%20%7C%202020%20Voting%20Experience%20%7C%2012.15.20&esid=e1c534e7-263b-eb11-a813-000d3a1bb7bb) in Congress and state capitals. Many of these experts from different disciplines have suggestions on how to fine-tune the voting process. Constitutional scholars say that holes in [19th-century law](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/01/congress-must-fix-this-election-law-before-its-too-late/) must be filled so that another president cannot overrule a popular vote and have state legislatures select him for a second term. Voting rights lawyers want to ward off efforts to shrink voting options, such as Raffensperger’s move to reel in Georgia’s absentee ballot program. Those talks are happening as Trump and his allies keep attacking the electoral process. But the full damage Trump has done to America’s elections has yet to emerge.

**Way Beyond Seeds of Doubt**

Why do so many people believe elections are stolen if their presidential candidate loses? There’s [no one answer](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126028106). From an election reform perspective, the fact that the intricacies of election administration are not readily apparent—or self-evident to untrained observers—does not help. But when so many partisans have a [predisposed view](https://billmoyers.com/story/fabricated-ballots-dead-voters-and-other-phantom-fears-from-trump-supporters-at-georgia-presidential-audit/) that ranges from suspicious, to paranoid, or even conspiratorial, it is clear that something deeper is going on to trigger these assumptions and impulses.

Brené Brown, one of America’s best-known trauma experts, recently said in a New York Times [podcast](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/17/opinion/sway-kara-swisher-brene-brown.html) that the most aggressive Trump campaign t-shirts—those saying, “Fuck your feelings”—are overly defensive and are a reflection of people who are struggling rather than embracing some high-minded cause. Apart from how that emotional dynamic unfolds politically, it means that election [officials and experts](https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/the-2020-voting-experience-and-goals-for-reform/?_cldee=c3RldmVuQGluZC5tZWRpYQ%3d%3d&recipientid=contact-1a6396879130e911a976000d3a18cb47-ace4c5467f51466d8988c3d63379164a&utm_source=ClickDimensions&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Elections%20%7C%202020%20Voting%20Experience%20%7C%2012.15.20&esid=e1c534e7-263b-eb11-a813-000d3a1bb7bb) seeking to improve America’s elections are facing hurdles that cannot be cleared solely by emphasizing facts, instituting best practices, and producing better evidence of vote counts. If the mistrust of elections is as deep as polls suggest, one must ask what solutions can address the [underlying triggers](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/17/opinion/sway-kara-swisher-brene-brown.html), so elections are not collateral damage in a wider societal or cultural schism.

American elections are not perfect. In the 21st century, they are [privatized](https://www.salon.com/2018/02/22/americas-voting-machinery-is-hackable-falling-apart-and-privatized-and-the-gop-doesnt-care_partner/) as never before. They are overly complex, meaning that impassioned citizens who race to election centers to observe [cannot readily grasp](https://billmoyers.com/story/fabricated-ballots-dead-voters-and-other-phantom-fears-from-trump-supporters-at-georgia-presidential-audit/) what they are seeing. The many stages of the process, from the starting line of voter registration to the finish line of certifying the vote count, take years to learn, appreciate and unwind. These steps and stages are not sufficiently self-evident, which fans [conspiracies](https://billmoyers.com/story/agitated-trump-supporters-coalescing-into-distrustful-new-election-integrity-movement/).

One might like to think that there is a silent majority of Americans who have figured out how to ignore the noise and vote in a pandemic—even in numbers that have not been seen before. One can look to Georgia and see such turnout in its [presidential election](https://electproject.github.io/Early-Vote-2020G/GA.html) and in the early voting in the [Senate runoffs](https://electproject.github.io/Early-Vote-2020G/GA_RO.html). One might hope that there were more Republicans, such as Georgia’s secretary of state and governor, who said “no” to Trump’s [demand](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/brian-kemp-trump-election-results/2020/12/06/4c5db908-37d4-11eb-9276-ae0ca72729be_story.html) that they select him as their state’s Electoral College slate winner—ignoring the results of the [5 million](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-georgia.html) votes cast by Georgians.

But elections will always be about power. There is usually more than one reason why political leaders do anything. Raffensperger might be saying that he wants to end no-excuse absentee voting in Georgia because county officials [cannot handle](https://sos.ga.gov/index.php/elections/georgias_elections_officials_are_overwhelmed_running_three_parallel_election) the extra workload. That policy, should it be enacted before the 2022 governor’s race, could undermine turnout. That impact may help a fellow GOP incumbent, Gov. Brian Kemp, who will be seeking reelection.

Is that an unduly cynical take? Perhaps. Or perhaps it shows why elections can become mirrors of [societal distrust](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126028106). Even if the process met challenges in 2020 and empowered record numbers of Americans to vote, some of the candidates seeking high office were less honest and less straightforward than the electoral process was. In 2020, the democratic process, if viewed apart from some candidates, might be better than ever. But American elections cannot be divorced from the candidates, especially not in the [Trump era](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/magazine/trump-voter-fraud.html).

When America faces a leader with totalitarian impulses who thinks he can will his way into another term, it is also facing its greatest democratic crisis in decades. The passage of time always heals wounds, including political wounds. But what can be done to revive public trust in elections in the meantime is not just an open-ended question. Democracy’s fragile skin has been stretched as never before, when tens of millions of voters say that they [don’t trust](https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome) the results from the best-run election in years.