Election Watch for the Digital Age

United States

Preelection assessment

General elections set for November 2020

The November vote is one of the most consequential in recent history for the well-being of American democracy. In the presidential contest, incumbent Donald Trump of the Republican Party is running for a second term against former vice president Joe Biden of the Democratic Party. All 435 seats in the Democrat-led lower chamber of Congress, the House of Representatives, are up for election, as are a third of the seats in the Republican-controlled upper chamber, the Senate.

Contributing to preelection tensions are the significant administrative challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's repeated refusal to commit to respecting the outcome of the vote if he were to lose—a stance that is without precedent in the United States. A scenario in which two presidential candidates claim victory after a close or dysfunctional election could be destabilizing, potentially prompting clashes between protesters and police, extended court cases that leave election results in limbo beyond constitutional deadlines, false claims of fraud and disinformation about the integrity of vote totals, or even armed violence by extremist groups.

The United States has experienced a multiyear decline in its democratic norms and institutions, with growing pressure on election integrity, judicial independence, and safeguards against corruption. Partisan manipulation of the electoral process is partly responsible for the degraded quality of elections. A swell of Republican-led efforts to alter voting rules—including onerous voter identification laws and changes in the number and location of polling sites—followed the Supreme Court's 2013 decision to strike down a portion of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This push is viewed by many experts as an attempt to suppress voting by demographic groups that are seen as likely to support Democratic candidates; the resulting disenfranchisement exacerbates a persistent problem that has historically centered on Black voters, but also affects Hispanic communities, Native Americans, students, low-income voters, and others.

In addition to complicating the electoral process overall, inadequate adjustments to voting procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic may compound these existing disparities. Meanwhile, the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which enforces campaign finance law in federal elections, has not been able to meet regularly for over a year due to multiple vacancies. The electoral environment has also been undermined by disinformation and other attempts to manipulate the information landscape by both domestic and foreign actors.

The United States has a score of 79 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The US score reflects problems with past elections and with the rule of law, including judicial independence, due process, and equal treatment. The country is rated **Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 86 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and **Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2019*, with an internet freedom score of 77 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the United States country reports for *Freedom in the World* and *Freedom on the Net*.

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **False or misleading information:** Though there is a broad range of incorrect information online, false and misleading content about election integrity poses a direct threat to democracy. President Trump himself has fueled such narratives, engaging in baseless attacks on the security of mail-in voting and repeatedly alleging mass fraud without offering any credible evidence. Such claims, particularly by political leaders, undermine the public's faith in the electoral process and set the stage for politicians and their supporters to reject the legitimacy of unfavorable results.

- **Incitement and violence:** In response to clashes between protesters and police during racial justice demonstrations that ramped up in late May, the president issued a series of threatening posts on social media, including a warning that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts"—a phrase associated with police violence against civil rights protesters in the 1960s. Twitter flagged the post for "glorifying violence." During the September 29 presidential debate, after the moderator urged Trump to tell white supremacist groups to "stand down" and not contribute to the protest-related violence, Trump called on one group to "stand back and stand by." The organization in question reportedly interpreted the comment—which Trump amended under pressure in the following days—as a directive to prepare for action and touted it widely on social media. Trump frequently calls out journalists and prominent critics by name, often on Twitter. Those he identifies, as well as others who challenge him, are in many cases harassed, doxed, or threatened online by the president's supporters. Such inflammatory remarks by the president, as well as other threatening online discourse, could encourage security forces or private militias and individuals to commit violent acts against protesters, voters, election workers, and other perceived opponents during the 2020 election period. QAnon, an online extremist movement centered on conspiracy theories that elevate Trump as a heroic leader against the forces of evil, has already been linked to multiple instances of violence.

- **Influence operations:** Several domestic and foreign influence operations have already been identified online ahead of the elections. A domestic influence campaign using spam-like behavior to spread false content was uncovered in September. The accounts involved, a number of which have since been removed by Facebook and Twitter, were

linked to teenagers in Arizona who were paid and managed by an affiliate of a prominent pro-Trump youth organization. In August, US intelligence services acknowledged suspected online influence operations by the regimes of Russia and Iran; Facebook and Twitter reported a Russian-backed network of fake accounts and a website purporting to be a left-wing news outlet the following month. These examples are similar to earlier influence campaigns that have gained prominence in US elections since 2016. Influence operations often rely on the exploitation of existing social and political divisions, and the increasingly tense electoral environment is fertile ground for further manipulation, especially in closely contested swing states where small changes in voter turnout can impact national races.

- **Cyberattacks:** In September 2020, Microsoft reported hundreds of election-related cyberattacks originating in Russia, China, and Iran that targeted individuals and organizations, including people associated with both presidential campaigns. Hundreds of ransomware attacks on state and local governments as well as their contractors have also been reported during the year. Extensive cyberattacks were documented during the 2016 elections, including against the Democratic National Committee, Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, and electoral systems in all 50 states. Some steps have been taken to upgrade election security in the intervening years, but the efforts have been limited, and electoral infrastructure remains vulnerable to infiltration and interference. The full extent of cyberattacks may not be known ahead of the elections, but continued attacks on a range of targets are expected.