To: Interested Parties
From: Dawn Milam and Sean McElwee
Re: Final Election Results May Come Later than Voters Expect
Date: 10/14/2020

A Data For Progress and The Justice Collaborative Institute poll shows that nearly half of likely voters (47%) believe that they will know the winner of the presidential election on election day.

These results are alarming because President Donald Trump continues to suggest, and media outlets continue to repeat, that the winner of the presidential election will be known on election day. Trump pairs this assertion with the false statement that any election results that include ballots counted after Nov. 3 cannot be trusted. This misleading narrative threatens to undermine public confidence in a free and fair election.

Election results are never final on election night—states have certification dates that allow for all votes to be tabulated more than a month later. It's not uncommon for votes that are counted after election night to change the outcome of a race. This year there is a much higher risk than usual that the winner of the presidential election will not be known on Nov. 3.

Election officials have warned that we likely will not know the results of this year’s presidential election on Nov. 3 and perhaps not even for days or weeks after voters cast their final ballots on election night. This expected delay is mostly due to voters taking...
advantage of mail-in voting over in-person voting in unprecedented numbers over concerns around the coronavirus pandemic.

Mail-in ballots take much longer to count than in-person votes, and in key swing states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin where election administrators aren’t legally allowed to begin counting mail-in ballots until election day (Michigan allows early processing, but not early counting), a final count will take days or even weeks to complete. Legal challenges and possible recounts, especially in states with narrow margins, further cast doubt on knowing the winner on election day.

To undercut confusion and falsehoods, it is critical for the public to understand that there likely will not be a clear winner of the presidential election on election day. Fortunately, our poll also shows that a sizable share of voters were not aware of factors that could delay the results; and, after receiving minimal background information, significantly fewer voters expressed confidence in knowing the results of the presidential election on election day or up to a week after election day.

These results underscore a critical and urgent role for national and local media outlets to prepare the public for the likelihood that we will not know the winner of the presidential election on election day.

The poll first asked likely voters how confident they are that the winner of the presidential election will be known on election day, within 2-3 days after election day, and within a week of election day.

After establishing a baseline understanding of voter confidence in knowing the winner of the presidential election on election day, the survey shared with those same likely voters three key pieces of information:

1) That mail-in ballots take longer to count;
2) That the Secretary of State of Pennsylvania recently stated that not all votes will be counted by election night; and
3) That election results have not been immediately clear (and have often changed after a few days of tallying) in states that have relied on mail-in ballots in the past.

After this, we saw a shift in voter confidence in when election results would be known.
The poll then **again** asked likely voters how confident they are that the winner of the presidential election will be known on election day, within 2-3 days after election day, and within a week of election day.

**Full Results**

When we asked likely voters about their confidence in knowing the winner of the presidential election on election day without providing any additional information, we found:

- 47% of likely voters say they are confident that they’ll know the winner of the election by the end of the night.

- 60% say they are confident they’ll know the results within two or three days of election day.
70% of likely voters are confident they'll know the results within a week.

After providing likely voters with additional information about the causes of potential delays, we found:

- 9% fewer voters were confident they’d know the results on election night.
In 2020, many states changed their election rules and laws and are now allowing more people to be eligible to cast their votes by mail. Some election officials have said that it may take longer to count all their votes. For example, the Secretary of State of Pennsylvania, when asked whether the votes will be counted on election night has said “No, we won’t,” noting that the state has 3 Million mail-in ballots to count. Election results in states that have relied on mail in balloting in past elections - such as Arizona and California often take days or weeks to fully count, and the results sometimes change between election night and the final tallies. In Arizona in 2018, for example, the Senate race showed one candidate leading on election night, but when all the votes were counted another candidate won by over 2%. Some congressional races in California that were called by news networks on election night ended up being wrong, and the winner was determined weeks after election night. Knowing what you know now, how confident are you that we will know the winner of the Presidential election: -- The night of Election Day?

- 14% fewer voters were confident they’d know the results within two or three days.
12% fewer voters were confident they’d know the results within a week.

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Methodology

From 10/7/2020 to 10/8/2020, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,138 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is +/- 3 percentage points.