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~ Harry S. Truman



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Marlene Mills-Richardson was having nightmares about a never-ending line on Election Day. So the 70-year-old from Philadelphia's Wynnefield section drove to her nearest early voting center last week and waited two hours to submit a mail ballot.

Mia Chiaro, a freshman and first-time voter at the University of Pittsburgh, worried about the days after polls close, and the prospect of political violence breaking out in her first semester in a big city. "I think Biden has a good chance, but I'm still nervous about what follows," she said.

And Jim Worthington, of Bucks County, said the 2020 election could prove that President Donald Trump's 2016 win "wasn't a fluke," for Americans who he said consider Trump supporters like him "chumps" or "racists."

Hours before an unprecedented Election Day, Pennsylvanians across the state are anxious. And it's not just the typical last-minute jitters.

Many have anticipated this moment for four years, ever since Trump stunned the country in 2016.

And as Election Day arrives, people are sick and dying as [coronavirus cases](#) spike to [record levels](#). They are isolated. They are angry. They have lost jobs. They are distrustful of the news media and government. Many are armed. Leaders in both parties have warned that what's at risk [is the very republic](#).

It all adds up to a country on edge as it holds one of the most charged elections in memory.

"I do have such mood swings about it," said Ann Rea, chair of the Indiana County Democrats, who [got involved in local politics](#) in her very Republican county in Southwestern Pennsylvania after Trump's election. "It did occur to me last night that I've basically been working on this since January 2017 and the outcome is just about to happen.

I've joked about getting a Valium prescription," she added. "It's going to be an incredibly nerve-racking several days."

[There are many voters like her](#), who woke up the day after Trump's victory determined to prove it was an aberration. Others are just as eager to affirm it, to show the political, cultural, and media elite for a second time that [the polls](#) are wrong again and they still don't know what they're talking about.

Jim Maser, a Biden supporter from Johnstown, recalled seeing another voter in a local television interview: "They asked how long he'd been standing in line. He said he'd been standing in line for four years."

"That's where I'm at, as far as that goes," said Maser, 63.

All that waiting, effort, and energy now enters its final days, with the added tension of a pandemic that has killed nearly 230,000 people in the United States and months of civil unrest, protests, and some looting and violence after Black people have been shot by police — [including just last week in Philadelphia](#).

On top of all of that, the president has refused to commit to a peaceful transition of power and has primed voters on both sides to question the legitimacy of the election results.

He has repeatedly, and baselessly, [warned his supporters of huge voter fraud](#) "rigging" the election against him, [specifically in Philadelphia](#), home to a huge number of the state's Democrats. His false attacks on mail ballots have raised fears on the left that he is trying to steal the election.

Rep. Dwight Evans remembers being elected to Congress in 2016. He watched the results roll in at the West Oak Lane restaurant Relish until late into

the night. He was the last patron to leave. The next morning he took a train to Washington.

"I made my mind up I would do everything I could do to work to get us back," said Evans, who will watch the returns at a much smaller, socially distanced gathering at Relish this year. "Now all the sudden, it's here."

Pennsylvania Democrats like Evans see this as an opportunity for redemption from four years ago, when the state turned red for the first time since 1988 and helped hand the presidency to Trump.

"I was among the many who was surprised by the 2016 results, in Pennsylvania especially," said Sen. Bob Casey, a Biden surrogate. "So I've been waiting a long time to be able to help put us in a position to win this one."

Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, of Delaware County, was part of the surge of Democratic activism, led by women, that Trump's election powered. The president didn't change course after the Democratic wave of 2018, she said. And he didn't change after being impeached by House members like herself.

"So we are down to the fact that it's the election that needs to cause a course correction for our country," Scanlon said.

Some 83% of Americans said this election "really matters," [according to a Pew Research Center poll in August](#), by far the highest number dating to 2000. In a sign of how eager people are to vote, more than two million Pennsylvanians have already submitted mail ballots, some waiting in two- to four-hour-long lines over the last few weeks, others sending ballots back their first opportunity weeks ago.

Pennsylvania Democrats entered the homestretch fearful [the U.S. Supreme Court could throw out ballots received after Election Day](#). That would overturn a state Supreme Court ruling that ballots arriving three days later must be counted.

People are terrified that's going to happen," Cumberland County Commissioner Jean Foschi said.

Meanwhile, three out of four voters are worried about the possibility of violence on Election Day, and only about one in four is "very confident" about a peaceful transfer of power if Biden wins, according to a [USA Today/Suffolk University Poll released this week](#).

Much of the tension comes from Trump's conduct over the last four years, and whether Americans will support or reject it, said Julian Zelizer, a political historian at Princeton University. "It's the question: Is this acceptable or not?" Zelizer said. "Every element of Trump politics is on trial."

Usually, shared threats like Russian election interference or the coronavirus pandemic would bring the country together, said Michael Macy, who teaches a class on polarization and tribal politics at Cornell University. But instead, they have driven people further apart.

"That's the concern: That we've reached a tipping point in polarization that may be very difficult to reverse," Macy said. "The usual mechanisms that do reverse that, namely a common threat, seem to be adding fuel to the fire."

Election night itself will also be unlike any other, with the great possibility Americans will go to sleep — those who can sleep — [without knowing the winner](#). Because Republicans are expected to vote more in person and Democrats more by mail, there's a strong likelihood early returns will show a Trump lead in Pennsylvania, where several counties won't begin counting mail ballots until the next day. That could make it [look as if Trump is winning the state before all votes are counted](#).

"It's like we're all watching the World Series game, but no one can tell us who won until later. I think it's going to potentially cause chaos," said Greg Rothman, a Republican state representative in Cumberland County.

Rothman said he hopes if Trump is reelected, Democrats "finally accept the results of the presidential election four years ago."

"I wasn't happy Penn State lost to Indiana, but you know what? They lost, and you can't not play the next game or say 'I'm done playing' or 'I'm going to protest this,'" Rothman said. "We have to respect that maybe not everyone agrees with me."

Worthington, of Bucks County, who attended one of [three Trump rallies in the state](#) Monday, said reelection would mean validation. "To all Americans — even the ones that hate us, the ones that call us chumps and deplorables and racists — it would be a win for all Americans," he said.

But increasingly, the election is looking as if it could be contested by either side.

Antoinette Haren, 47, of Eddystone, in Delaware County, said this Election Day is particularly stress-inducing, because of new voting systems, the pandemic, and the potential for voter intimidation.

"I'm gonna get up before dawn and go sit out there in my car, so I can be the first person," she said. That way, she hopes her vote will count and she'll face minimal exposure to either coronavirus or Election Day shenanigans.

She's not confident, though: "My concern is that the ballots won't get scanned — or any number of things can happen."

Many progressive groups are preparing for the possibility that Trump might not concede the election, said Claire Gawinowicz, 66, of Oreland, in Montgomery County. Gawinowicz, who supported Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary, said she's feeling even more anxious now that Election Day has almost arrived.

"Between the pandemic, young people not being enthused about Biden, Trump being such a cheater ... lawsuits out the wazoo trying to stop voters — how could there not be anxiety?" she asked.

Carbondale, outside of Scranton, is [the kind of small Rust Belt town](#) where Trump needs to run up big margins for a repeat win. That's adding to the unease, said Maria Gillette, chair of the local GOP there.

"Oh boy, I'm a little nervous," Gillette said. "I mean logically, I feel great — look at his rallies, look at everything he's done. But then this area is not logical. People are not logical."

Gillette is taking the whole week off work, unsure of when she'll know the outcome. She plans to vote in person on Election Day. "Freedom is on the line. I really believe that," she said.

Chiaro, the freshman at Pitt, said her Instagram is filled with people pleading with friends to vote. Her [high school friends from Dunmore](#), near Scranton, are divided.

"It's such a polarized thing, it's causing problems with friendships," she said. "I don't think a lot of people in our generation, voting for the first time, realize it's not usually like this." — *Philadelphia Inquirer*



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