

'Worry isn't going to get the election result that we want': 5 things to do on Election Night instead of freaking out

Published: Oct. 29, 2020 at 5:54 a.m. ET

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'In some ways, what we are engaging in is a national exercise in deferred gratification'



Experts say the unprecedented, pandemic-induced surge in absentee voting could lead to vote counts stretching days or even weeks after Election Day.

VALERIE MACON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A potentially longer-than-usual wait to find out this year's election results doesn't have to mean stress-eating, doomscrolling or impulsively moving around your money.

Experts say the unprecedented, pandemic-induced [surge in mail voting](#) could lead to some states' vote counts stretching days or even weeks after Election Day. Partisan splits in early and [Election Day voting](#)

preference, along with different timelines when states process mail-in ballots, may also paint a misleading initial picture of which presidential candidate is ahead. Battleground states Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin could take longer to report results.

While election-night results have never been official, you've probably grown accustomed (for the most part) to knowing who won a presidential election the night of or soon afterward. But instead of spinning your wheels on Nov. 3 and the days that follow, you can choose to embrace the uncertainty — and take these five productive steps to benefit your mental health, your money and democracy at large:

Prepare to not know the winner by election night

If we get answers more quickly than expected, we can be pleasantly surprised, said Andra Gillespie, an associate professor of political science at Emory University. But managing expectations in advance gives you permission to watch a movie, abstain from watching wall-to-wall news coverage, or get plenty of sleep ahead of an early-morning meeting, Gillespie said. Counsel your friends and family to have realistic expectations, too.

“In some ways, what we are engaging in is a national exercise in deferred gratification,” Gillespie said. “We have to take this as a character-building exercise.”

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Heading into this period with that mindset will “make it less likely that you’ll be disappointed when we don’t have the results that we’ve always expected and always received, except one time in our adult lifetimes,” added Vaile Wright, a clinical psychologist and researcher at the American Psychological Association.

Don't mess with your money

Don't let the polls influence your personal-finance decisions, “and certainly not your investments,” said Kashif Ahmed, the founder and president of American Private Wealth. Assuming you have a sound financial strategy to begin with, “probably, the most productive thing to do is to not do anything” in anticipation of who wins or loses the election, he said.

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— Vaile Wright, a clinical psychologist and researcher at the American Psychological Association

“Too many people fail when they try to predict and act and bet on something that may or may not happen,” he said.

Learn from 2016, when conventional wisdom held that Hillary Clinton would win the election (she didn't) and Trump's election would lead to a market crash (it didn't), Ahmed said. Stick to your long-term goals and avoid moving your money around for the sole purpose of feeling like you're doing something.

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“If you just keep common-sense things in your portfolio, you will do well over time, and there's no need to swing for the fences based on what's going to happen on one day out of the calendar every four years,” Ahmed said. “People succumb to fear and they succumb to greed, and neither of those are strategies — they're just emotions.”

Make a plan to preserve your mental health

Uncertainty interferes with our ability to plan and reminds us of everything that is beyond our control, Wright said. So try to focus on the things that are within your control. “Worry isn't going to get the election result that we want” Wright said

Plan election-night activities you know will be soothing, Wright said, whether they're dinner with your family or a game night. Identify healthy stress outlets and people you can talk to. Continue practicing self-care activities like eating well, getting enough sleep, staying active and keeping socially connected.

Decide how you're going to take in information that night, and give yourself leeway to do things a bit differently this year for the sake of your mental health, experts say. It's OK to say, "I'd rather not talk about Joe Biden or Donald Trump, let's talk about something non-political instead."

"I've never not watched election results," Wright said, "but I'm questioning whether it's helpful to watch them this year."

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If you opt to watch election coverage on TV, how will you decompress in the event that you get too stressed out? Would you benefit from taking a mental-health day? Give yourself permission to take care of yourself, Wright said.

"Planning for various different scenarios could be helpful: the scenario that we don't know the results 'til mid- to end [of] November; the scenario that, like four years ago, somebody could lose the popular vote but win the Electoral College," Wright added. Similarly, what will you do if you don't get the result you want? Prepare now. This can help you plan to cope with any uncertainty or disappointment associated with such outcomes.

Avoid "doomscrolling" endlessly through negative news, Wright said. Social media isn't bad in and of itself, she added; its effect depends on how you use it. "If you're using it to engage with others in a productive way, then people can get a lot of out of social media," Wright said. "When we're just scrolling through without interacting, exposing ourselves to negative stimuli over and over again, that's increasing stress – especially if we do it before bed."

Get more civically engaged

Investigate when your next election will be, whether it's a tax referendum, a school-board election or a state legislative primary happening at an odd time of the year. "We vote more than once every four years – and so if you want to be constructive, one of the things that we need to do is to boost turnout in non-presidential election years," Gillespie said. Turnout drops off in midterm elections and off-year state and local races, she said.

'I would look at elections as the start of the relationship between the constituent and the official, not the end of it.'

— Andra Gillespie, an associate professor of political science at Emory University

“Those races are important, and sometimes the issues that people care about most are actually decided by the people who are getting elected in these off-cycle contests that are held at [weird] times of the year, where very few people are actually selecting these people for office,” she said. “Remember, this is not a ‘See you in 2024’ — this is ‘See you next year’ or ‘See you in a few months.’”

Plan to engage with your elected officials even after the election ends, Gillespie added: A politician may assume that your vote for them translates to broad approval of everything they stand for, “but voting is actually a pretty blunt instrument, and not the best communication tool to convey to a politician what you want them to do,” she said. Visit with your elected officials and write them letters and emails; to engage with the federal government, check the [Federal Register](#) and weigh in on proposed regulatory changes.

“I would look at elections as the start of the relationship between the constituent and the official, not the end of it,” Gillespie said.

Keep things in perspective

“Although elections absolutely have consequences, and it is important how things unfold in a democracy with respect to the policies and the candidates that we support, the apocalyptic predictions that people have and that candidates have an incentive to foster [if their opponent wins] are almost certainly overblown,” said Vincent Hutchings, a University of Michigan political scientist.

With the exception of the climate-change crisis, the stakes of any given election cycle “for most people, most of the time” are not actually life and death, Hutchings said. “A version of this unfolds every election cycle: ‘Vote for me, or we will fall into the abyss.’ That’s never true, or it’s rarely true,” he said.

Recognize that people who disagree with you on politics or policy are not necessarily bad people, Hutchings added.

“They want to feed their families, take care of their kids, be kind to their coworkers [and] watch their communities thrive just like you do,” he said. “I’m not Pollyanna-ish; I’m not saying everything is fine. But I also don’t think that the people who disagree with me politically are the embodiment of evil.” **MW**





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