

Utah clerks fight election rumors, misinformation ahead of Tuesday's polls

Salt Lake Tribune

November 1, 2020

<https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2020/11/01/utah-clerks-fight/>

By Taylor Stevens and Bethany Rodgers

Utah county clerks are preparing for potentially record-breaking voter turnout on an Election Day shaped by the pandemic — a task made all the more challenging by a volatile political climate and tidal wave of social media misinformation.

“If Facebook could be shut down for a while, maybe it would ease up,” Sanpete County Clerk Sandy Neill joked this week.

Neill says that on top of her standard pre-election hustle, she’s had to work recently to clamp down on a false rumor that flared up on social media after a ballot printing error in her county. But she’s found it difficult to counter the misinformation making the rounds on Facebook, as have other clerks who are contending with the voter skepticism that has emerged in Utah despite its years of success with mail-in balloting.



Nationwide, President Donald Trump has stoked distrust of mail-in balloting, repeatedly airing falsehoods about the security of the voting method and working to suppress vote-by-mail in battleground states.

Fears about mail-in voting flared up in Sanpete County after a printing error that omitted the signature line from thousands of ballots. Neill said her staff spent two days straight on the phone following the mistake, explaining how voters could sign their ballots despite the missing line. And for voters who’d submitted their ballots without a signature, the printing company at fault mailed out supplemental postcards that they could sign and return, she said.

Still, a false rumor has been circulating on Facebook that by-mail ballots in Sanpete County won’t count and that voting in person is the only fail-safe method, she said.

Several county clerks say their ballot drop boxes, where voters can submit their ballots without using the U.S. Postal Service, have become especially popular in this election amid similar fears.

“We’re getting more from the drop boxes than we are from the mail, which is unusual,” Salt Lake County Clerk Sherrie Swensen said in an interview. “That’s never occurred before and I’m sure it was because people were concerned about the post office.”

At this late date — with the state law requiring a by-mail ballot be postmarked no later than Monday to be counted — Swensen and other clerks are urging voters use the county drop boxes rather than the mail.

Washington County Clerk-Auditor Kim Hafen said he's also spoken with residents who are worried about vote-by-mail, although he faults national media for stirring up these concerns and says they come up every election cycle. To reassure voters, he'll typically describe the security precautions for handling and counting mail-in ballots, he said.

"And if that doesn't help, then I can't do much more," he said.

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

RELATED ARTICLES

More Utah women are donating to Biden as Trump struggles with female voters

More Utah women are donating to Biden as Trump struggles with female voters

Utah Health Department unveils COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan

Utah Health Department unveils COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan

Utah lawmakers continue to debate governor's emergency powers as coronavirus wears on

Utah lawmakers continue to debate governor's emergency powers as coronavirus wears on

Democrat Kael Weston hopes to be the 'unicorn' candidate who can unseat Rep. Chris Stewart

Democrat Kael Weston hopes to be the 'unicorn' candidate who can unseat Rep. Chris Stewart

Democrat Chris Peterson wages campaign against Utah's one-party rule

Democrat Chris Peterson wages campaign against Utah's one-party rule

Washington County has also been dealing with a rumor, first reported by the St. George News, that armed militia groups might show up to the polling site in St. George for early voting and Election Day balloting. While Hafen noted that spurious rumors abound before an election, a couple police officers were present at the voting location last week and will return on Nov. 3 to make sure everything runs smoothly.

"Temper may flare or whatever," he said. "We don't know what to expect."

Election officials across the country have had to make plans about how to combat the possibility for voter intimidation at the polls, as the president has urged his supporters to "go into the polls and watch very carefully" and has called for an "army" to keep an eye on the process in swing states and areas that are expected to be closely contested.

Experts worry those requests could spur confusion over the line between legal poll watching and voter intimidation.

Such intimidation can take many forms, according to a fact sheet from the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy Protection at Georgetown University — including violent behavior inside or outside of a polling location, confronting voters while wearing military-style uniforms, displaying or brandishing firearms in an intimidating manner or aggressively questioning voters about their qualifications to cast a ballot.

Utah law states that an individual may become a poll watcher in an election at any time but must register to do so with the administering election officer.

County clerks across the state say they've had several people sign up to poll watch but that most are affiliated with a group, like a political party.

"We have a few more than normal [signed up], but not a ton," said Weber County Clerk-Auditor Ricky Hatch, noting that he welcomes the sunshine that poll watchers bring to the process.

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Tom Bland examines a ballot, at the Weber County Elections Office on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020.

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Tom Bland examines a ballot, at the Weber County Elections Office on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020.

[Buy this image](#)

The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah plans to have poll watchers out in force this year, with between 100 and 200 volunteers in about a dozen counties across the state. But their effort is focused more on the nuts and bolts of ensuring people can vote than it is in anticipation of voter intimidation at the polls.

"We are prepared to keep an eye out for long lines, anybody who's having issues or challenges voting, we're there to be an advocate, the ACLU is here to be an advocate for those folks," said Nikila Venugopal, voting rights manager for the ACLU of Utah. "We'll be on the lookout for more extreme situations, though we're not expecting them."

The organization is also running a social media monitoring program with volunteers who aim to help answer questions and get "accurate, trustworthy information to voters" on Election Day.

"There's so much information, unfortunately, a lot of politically motivated misinformation and disinformation and we're trying to cut through that to the facts and the basics of how do you cast your ballot," Venugopal said.

Voters are encouraged to call the national nonpartisan Election Protection Hotline number at 866-OUR-VOTE with any questions related to their right to vote.

If there is a legitimate instance of voter intimidation at the polls, county clerks say they'll be prepared, noting they often coordinate with law enforcement to ensure a quick response if necessary.

Hatch said that while the county plans every year for voter intimidation, "we're giving it a little bit more attention" this election.

Davis County Clerk-Auditor Curtis Koch said the elections office there also has contingency plans in place. The law, he said, "is very clear on what can take place in and around polling locations. And so if there's anything that's gone afoul or amiss from what the law is, we will address that in an appropriate manner to make sure there is no voter intimidation."

In Box Elder County, the clerk is stationing law enforcement at each of the vote centers — something officials do on occasion when there's a high-interest election. Clerk Marla Young said she's unaware of any specific threats this year but wants police to be around as a precaution.

"Just because there is a little unrest of people this year," Young said. "But I don't really have any concerns, because I have prepared for that."

Young said she's also had a striking number of people ask her if they could change their votes even after they've submitted their ballots. The answer is no, she said.

But that, too, could be related to statements made by Trump, who has encouraged people to alter their votes if they've already marked their ballot for Democratic nominee Joe Biden.

All things considered, though, Utah's extensive experience with by-mail voting puts it in a much better position to weather the 2020 election compared to most other states, said Baodong Liu, a University of Utah political science professor.

"We are not just putting everything together at the last minute," he said. "And we certainly have much more psychological assurance about using it in this state, and we don't have the same kind of anxiety about whether our votes will be counted, if we do use vote-through-mail."

(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Evelyn Beguiristain drop her ballot in the vote-by-mail ballot drop box at the Salt Lake County Government Center, Oct. 19, 2020.

(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Evelyn Beguiristain drop her ballot in the vote-by-mail ballot drop box at the Salt Lake County Government Center, Oct. 19, 2020.

Buy this image

'All politics is national'

Despite the national tension and local misinformation, ballots have been pouring into elections offices in Utah in the lead-up to Election Day. As of Sunday morning, local officials had already processed more than 951,000 ballots, accounting for more than half of the state's active voters.

The turnout so far — which already totals about three-quarters of the ballots cast in the 2016 election — is good news to Justin Lee, the state's elections director.

"This is the outcome we wanted to see, is voters voting early," he said, "and not waiting to vote until Election Day."

Jeff Merchant, who chairs the Utah Democratic Party, said this year's presidential race has turned on its head the old adage about how all politics is local. Opinions about Trump have shaped even regional contests and are driving voters to the polls in Utah, as in other parts of the country, he said.

"This year, it seems that all politics is national," Merchant said. "And that doesn't bode well for Donald Trump, and it certainly doesn't bode well for Republicans."

State GOP chairman Derek Brown, on the other hand, believes the turnout numbers favor his party's candidates in deep-red Utah.

“Maybe he was confusing us with California or something,” Brown joked about his Democratic counterpart.

Along with a closely watched presidential contest, voters in Utah have the opportunity to weigh in on a number of high-profile local races this year, as well as a slate of ballot measures to change the state’s constitution.

Among the races expected to drive turnout in the state is the 4th Congressional District contest between Republican nominee Burgess Owens, a former NFL player and frequent Fox News commentator, and first-term Democratic Rep. Ben McAdams.

That competition is expected to be one of the closest in the country and is also one of the most expensive, as campaign finance records show nearly \$19 million has poured into the race.

Utahns also will elect a new governor to the seat left open by Gov. Gary Herbert, who opted not to run for reelection after 11 years in the post. Republican Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox is far ahead in polls in that race against Democratic opponent Chris Peterson, a University of Utah law professor.

Northern Utah’s 1st Congressional District also has an open seat with the retirement of Rep. Rob Bishop, the longest-serving member of the state’s Washington delegation. Republican businessman Blake Moore has waged a contest for that seat against Democratic nominee Darren Parry, the former chairman of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation.

Amid high voter engagement in this election season, county clerks in the Wasatch Front say the challenge they’re most hoping to stave off are long lines at the polls on Tuesday, spurred on by those last-minute voters who may not trust the post office and want to ensure their ballots are counted.

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Poll workers wait for voters pick up ballots, at the Weber County Elections Office, before taking them to their car to vote, on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020.

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Poll workers wait for voters pick up ballots, at the Weber County Elections Office, before taking them to their car to vote, on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020.

Buy this image

“We used to say, well, [it’s fine] if you prefer to vote early or in person on Election Day, but this is really important this time because of the social distancing,” Swensen said, urging people to cast their ballots ahead of Election Day. “If you have 20 people in line, your line is 120 feet long and we don’t want them to unnecessarily use the vote centers and cause crowding.”

Several clerks noted that anyone who turns up at an in-person voting center on Election Day will receive the same ballot they got in the mail and are similarly encouraging Utahns to vote the ballot they received.

“It’s really a tremendous waste of the voter’s time and of the government’s resources to request another ballot that is identical to what they’ve already received,” Koch said. “If they choose to do that, we’ll do everything we can to make it work for them, just recognizing there could be long lines if people don’t vote the ballot we mailed to them.”

Clerks around the state have implemented unique protocols to stem the spread of the coronavirus, from equipping poll workers with personal protective gear to implementing drive-up balloting, as in Davis County.

In Utah County, Clerk-Auditor Amelia Gardner says those who come to vote in-person on Election Day will be able to sign up for a text message, so they can wait in their car and be alerted when they're able to come in. That will keep long lines from forming in the cold and also ensure groups don't congregate as the coronavirus spikes across the state, she said.

Voters will also be sent to their cars to fill out their ballots if the center becomes crowded on Election Day in order to maintain social distancing, she said.

With all eyes on county clerks across the state, Hafen, the Washington County official, said he and his colleagues feel like they're together in facing the challenges of COVID-19 and a divisive election.

"One of the clerks sent out an email that said, 'May the force be with you,'" Hafen said. "And we certainly hope that's the case."