December 2021

Junior and Senior Students' Perceptions of the 2020 Presidential Election

This report was written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) ACES subcommittee. The 2021 University of Maryland Student Survey (UMSS 21) was administered online from March 22 - April 9, 2021 to juniors and seniors enrolled in Professional Writing courses. This report summarizes initial findings on students' perceptions of the 2020 presidential election.

884 students completed the survey (24% of all students enrolled in these courses), and 99.5% had been at the University of Maryland (UMD) for more than one semester.[1] Considering these factors, the highly politicized nature of the 2020 election, and the COVID-19 pandemic, in which absentee voting was more common than previous elections, respondents may have been more willing to vote than in general.

Respondents did not believe the U.S. has a stable democracy, but agreed that our democracy is important.

- Less than a quarter of respondents (23%) agreed or strongly agreed that democracy in the U.S. is stable.
  - Lower percentages of Black/African American (14%) and Hispanic (10%) respondents agreed/strongly agreed with this statement.
- Thirty-six percent of respondents disagreed or were neutral in their response to the question, "The results of the 2020 election legitimately reflect the will of the U.S. voters" (Figure 1).
- Almost 8 in 10 respondents (79%) agreed that election misinformation undermines U.S. democracy.
- Seventy-eight percent of respondents agreed that democracy is something all citizens must work toward every day (Figure 1); a lower percentage of Black/African American respondents (66%) agreed or strongly agreed, while a higher percentage felt "neutral" (33%).

Questions to consider

- What about our democracy is leading respondents to believe it is unstable?
- What can UMD do to increase the perception that election results legitimately reflect the will of U.S. voters?
- How can UMD capitalize on students' agreement that democracy in the U.S. is something we must work toward every day? Is there more we can do to educate students about how to identify election misinformation?
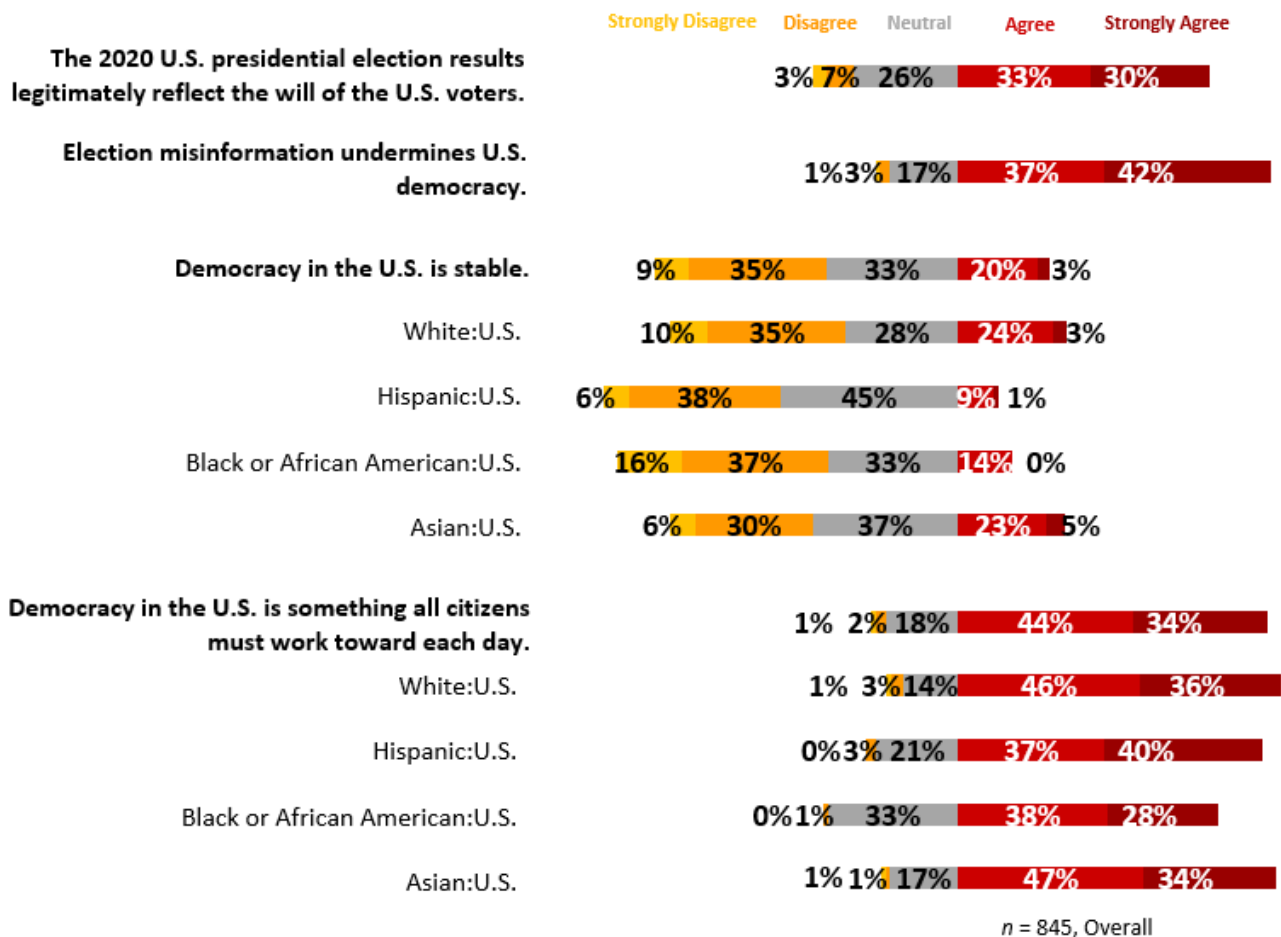

Figure 1. Percent distribution of respondents' agreement about voting, UMSS21. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.[2]

While the majority of respondents believe in the importance of voting and plan to vote in the future, fewer believe that the system for registering and voting is fair and works well. Perceptions differed by race/ethnicity.[2]

- Black/African American respondents were less likely to agree that the system for registering and the system for voting work well; similar percentages of Black/African American and Hispanic respondents plan to vote in 2022 (see Figure 2).
- More Asian respondents agreed that the system for registering and the system for voting work well; however, significantly fewer plan to vote in 2022 compared to other groups (see Figure 2).

Behind the findings

The UMSS 2021 was administered after the 2020 election and the January 6, 2021 insurrection. As of this writing, questions regarding voter rights continue to be investigated at the local, state, and national levels.

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[2] An ANOVA, through a structure equation modeling approach, was conducted to find group differences. Visit this site for more information https://www.jstor.org/stable/20172130. If a question doesn't show group distributions, then there were no significant group differences.Besides Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, and White students, all other groups were excluded because the sample size was too small to provide any meaningful results.
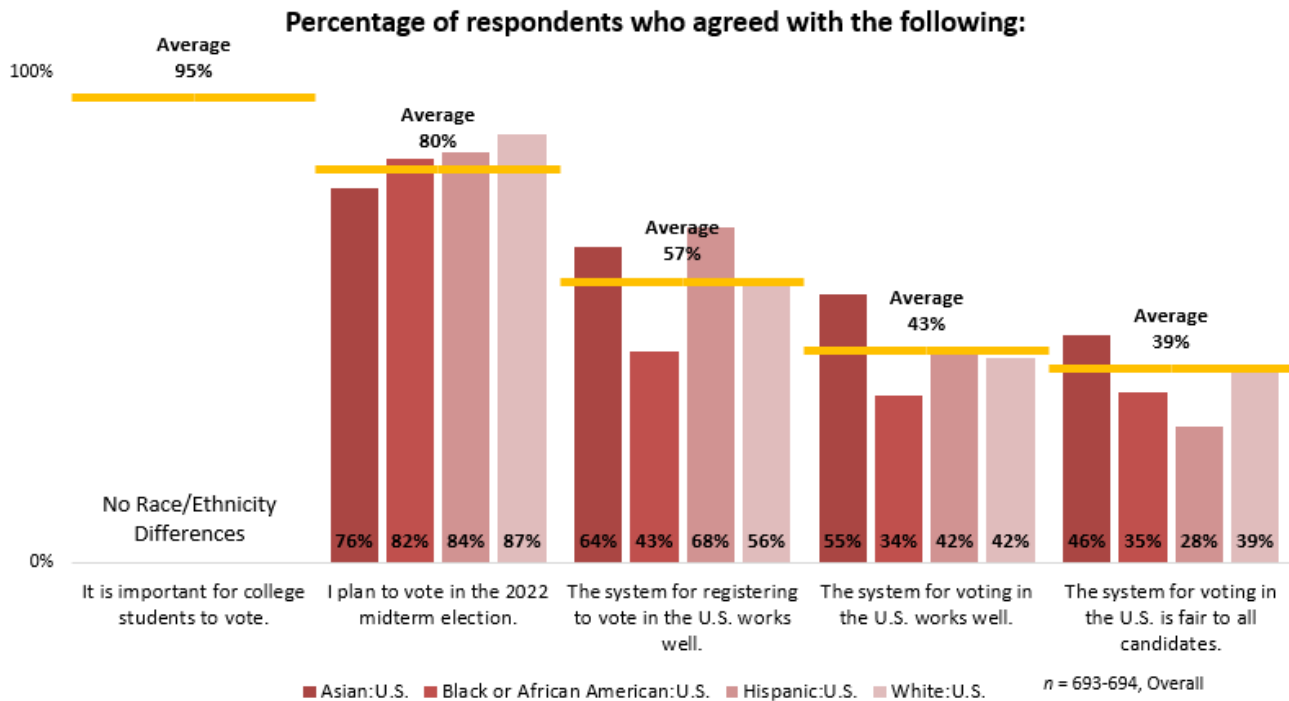
Percentage of respondents who agreed with the following:

	It is important for college students to vote.	I plan to vote in the 2022 midterm election.	The system for registering to vote in the U.S. works well.	The system for voting in the U.S. works well.	The system for voting in the U.S. is fair to all candidates.
Average	95%	80%	57%	43%	39%
Asian:U.S.	No Race/Ethnicity Differences	76%	64%	55%	46%
Black or African American:U.S.		82%	43%	34%	35%
Hispanic:U.S.		84%	68%	42%	28%
White:U.S.		87%	56%	42%	39%

n = 693-694, Overall

Figure 2. Percent distribution of respondents' agreement (said "Yes") with a series of statements about voting, UMSS21.

Overall, 86% of respondents said they were registered to vote in the November presidential election, and of those respondents, almost all (94%) said they voted.

- Three-fourths of respondents (74%) said they were registered to vote in Maryland (Figure 3).
- According to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), 85% of voting-eligible UMD students registered to vote in the 2020 election -- almost identical to the percentage of respondents in this survey who said they registered to vote (86%).
- Compared to the campus overall, a higher percentage of survey respondents said they voted. While 94% of registered respondents said they voted, according to NSLVE data, 84% of registered UMD students voted on Election Day.

Questions to Consider

- Why did a larger percentage of our respondents say they voted compared to NSLVE results?
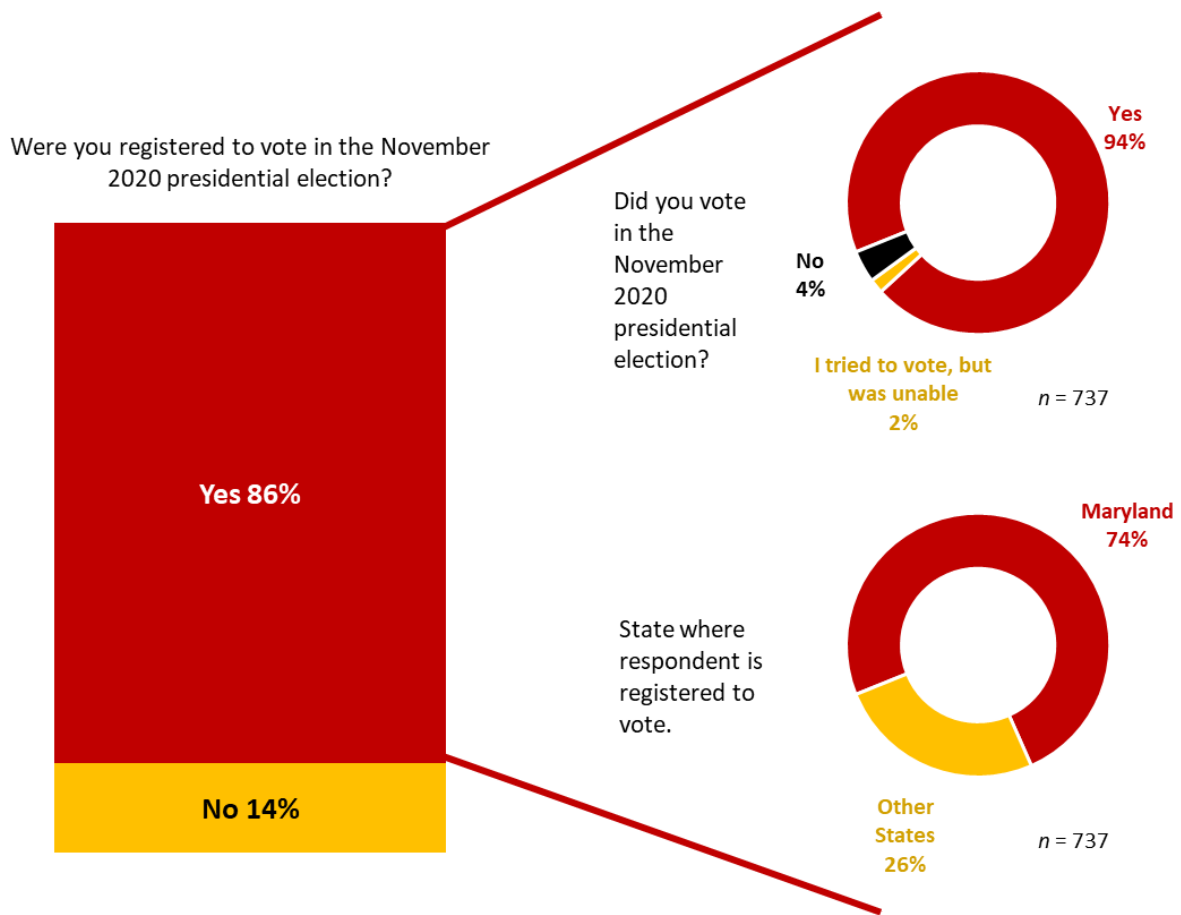- What can UMD do to get more people to register to vote?

Figure 3. Percent and count distribution of respondents' registration and voting status, UMSS21.

A small group of respondents (~41) were able to vote but did not. However, this small number of results is difficult to generalize to the general junior and senior student population.
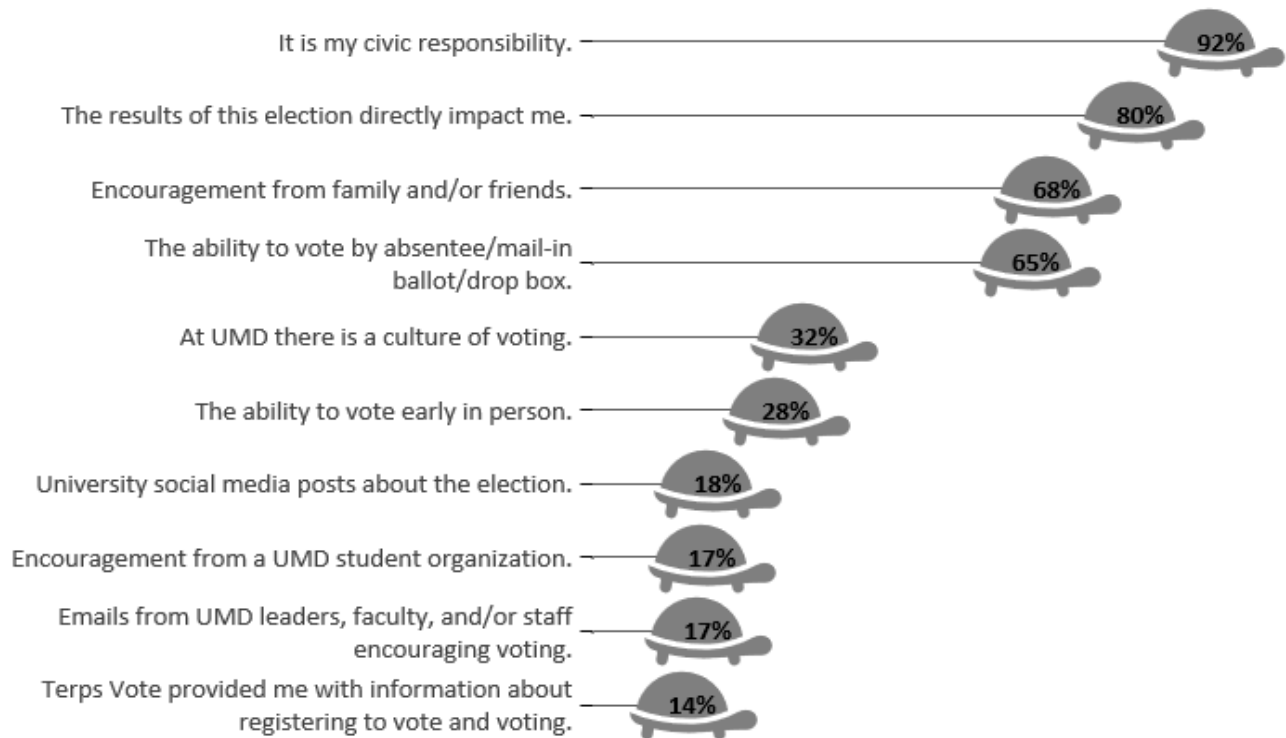
When asked why they voted, students did not cite specific efforts by UMD as a reason for voting. Rather, they cited civic responsibility and the personal impacts of the election.

- Almost all respondents (92%) voted because of their sense of civic responsibility, and 80% said they voted because the election results impacted them (Figure 4).
- Less than 20% of respondents cited reasons connected to UMD (e.g., university social media posts, emails from UMD leaders, faculty, and/or staff). However, students may have seen Terps Vote messaging about the election, even if they do not associate it with the Terps Vote brand.

Questions to consider

- Can Terps Vote connect the "We're Terps" identity with the behavior of voting?
- How can Terps Vote increase the perception that elections matter, including those some may perceive as lower stakes (e.g., midterm and local elections)?

Percentage of respondents who gave the following reasons for voting:

It is my civic responsibility. — 92%

The results of this election directly impact me. — 80%

Encouragement from family and/or friends. — 68%

The ability to vote by absentee/mail-in ballot/drop box. — 65%

At UMD there is a culture of voting. — 32%

The ability to vote early in person. — 28%

University social media posts about the election. — 18%

Encouragement from a UMD student organization. — 17%

Emails from UMD leaders, faculty, and/or staff encouraging voting. — 17%

Terps Vote provided me with information about registering to vote and voting. — 14%

n = 693-694

Figure 4. Percent distribution of respondents' reasons for voting; only those that voted, UMSS21. Respondents had the ability to respond yes or no to each statement.

Conclusions

The data presented here represent parts of juniors' and seniors' experiences during an extraordinarily challenging year. Most respondents claimed to have ended up voting. However, respondents are inclined to say that U.S. democracy is not stable and that election misinformation undermines U.S democracy.