



Mass. Voters Doubt Election Results Will Be Trusted, Split on Trump's Respect for Rule of Law

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Massachusetts voters are divided down party lines when it comes to their views about the actions of the president. But when it comes to doubts about whether the results of the 2020 election will be widely trusted, they are much closer in line, according to the latest WBUR poll of primary voters.

Only 13% of Democratic primary voters ([topline](#), [crosstabs](#)) said they are “very confident” that the outcome of the 2020 presidential election will be viewed as legitimate and both sides will accept the results, while 40% felt “somewhat confident.” Among Republicans primary voters ([topline](#), [crosstabs](#)), 27% are “very confident” that the election outcome will be viewed as legitimate and the results accepted, while 23% said they are “somewhat confident.”

That distrust belies the fact the chances that election results will be hacked or otherwise compromised is extremely low, said David Becker, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Election Innovation & Research in Washington.

Becker said efforts by local and state election officials to boost election security, and the fact that the vast number of states — including Massachusetts — use paper ballots, should give voters some comfort.

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“So objectively we doing a lot better” than before the 2016 election, Becker said. “But the narrative that we are hearing the media and from those who seek to divide us is that we shouldn't trust our selection systems and processes, and that if our candidate loses, that it system was rigged against them. And that is incredibly damaging.”

Becker cites media coverage of reports of Russian efforts to [interfere](#) in the election, which sows distrust in election security despite the fact the most foreign interference efforts identified by U.S. intelligence agencies involves [disinformation campaigns](#) on social media and elsewhere — not ballot box hacking.

“The real problems with all of this is, of course, this is exactly what our foreign adversaries want,” Becker said. “They want Americans to stop trusting the democracy as working for them.”

Democrats Say Trump Flouts Rule of Law, GOP Voters Disagree

There is a partisan divide on voters' opinions of whether President Trump has disregarded the rule of law with his statements about the Department of Justice and members of the judiciary since his impeachment acquittal.

The vast majority of Democratic primary voters do not believe Trump remains committed to the rule of law after he was acquitted of articles of impeachment by the Senate last month.

Asked if the president sees himself as above the law, 84% of Democratic primary voters said he does, and 74% said Trump has weakened the rule of law. Only 22% of Republican voters said Trump sees himself as above the law, and 11% said he's weakened the rule of law.

But the perception that the president acts in a lawless way is a problem — regardless of whether it is proven that his behavior goes outside legal limitations, experts said.

“From what I have seen, President Trump has not been intervening directly with Justice Department investigations,” said Ilya Shapiro, director of the Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank.

But, Shapiro said, “public perception is very important.”

“If the public doesn't have confidence that the law is being applied fairly and justly, then that is a problem,” Shapiro said. “The rule of law is not just about how the law is applied. It's about how political and legal institutions are perceived.”

Maggie Jo Buchanan, director of Legal Progress at the Center for American Progress, a liberal policy group, said she does believe that Trump's actions — including publicly calling former campaign advisor's sentencing recommendation “a miscarriage of justice” — are out of bounds. The fact that the Justice Department took the unusual step of overruling the recommendation of prosecutors in that case to request a more lenient sentence proves that, she said.

“It confuses the public — certainly his supporters — about what the proper role of the DOJ is,” Buchanan said. “And of course prosecutors need to be able to act independently and address serious problems facing our communities, and do so without political influence, or communities will become less safe.”

Attacks on the Judiciary Problematic, Experts Said

Trump's recent comments that Supreme Court Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg are also problematic to the rule of law, some experts said. Trump this week said the two justices should recuse themselves from all cases involving the administration because of statements they've made in legal opinions and elsewhere.

Kristen Clarke, president and executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, called Trump's comments “deeply disturbing and unprecedented.”

“No president in modern time has shown greater disrespect for or worked to actively undermine the independence of the judiciary than President Trump,” Clarke said.

Shapiro said criticizing judges or legal opinions is not in itself a violation of the rule of law.

“It doesn't necessarily mean it's good, but it's not out of bounds,” Shapiro said.

Buchanan had a different view.

“What (Trump) is trying to do through his social media accounts, through his grandstanding and speeches and rallies, is try to confuse people and have them distrust the judicial system,” Buchanan said.