

US ELECTION 2020



10 DAYS TO GO

Two-thirds of voters say polls won't be fair

Two-thirds of American voters are concerned the presidential election will not be fair, suggesting Donald Trump's sustained attacks on mass mail-in ballots are working.

Sixty-six per cent of voters described themselves as "very or quite" concerned that the election will not be free or fair, with 68 per cent saying they doubt the result will be clear on 4 November, the day after Election Day, according to a JL Partners-Independent survey.

What's more, 65 per cent of respondents said they were worried that mail-in ballots will not be counted or will be counted incorrectly. In a sign Trump's attacks on mass mail voting are working, 81 percent of his supporters have concerns compared to 59 percent of Biden's backers. When it comes to voter fraud, 78 per cent of the president's loyalists have such worries – compared to 51 per cent of Biden supporters.

Have US media gone too easy on Biden?

AFP, New York

President Donald Trump's testy relationship with the US media is no secret, but his election rival Joe Biden has had a rather different experience during the 2020 campaign.

The Democratic former senator and vice president has largely faced polite questions and only rare criticism, experts say, but some call the disparity a justified one given the Republican leader's provocative style.

Trump has spent the better part of a week repeatedly attacking his opponent over unsubstantiated allegations concerning Biden, his son Hunter and a Ukrainian company suspected of corruption -- and the media has followed suit.

But Biden only faced a question about the issue more than two days into the news hurricane, and he quickly swept it aside. The following day, Biden did not speak to reporters. Finally, on Sunday, he replied to only one question... about the flavor of his milkshake.

"Question of the day for Joe Biden," tweeted New York Times reporter Jonathan Martin. "Are you in hiding most of this week because you are only willing to answer milkshake-related questions?"



Trump has often accused the media of going soft on his adversary.

Criticism of how Biden is covered transcends the specific issue of his son's business dealings, and is not limited to conservative commentators, who have roundly denounced the mainstream media coverage.

Last week, when Trump and Biden participated in town hall-style events in place of a planned debate, the gap seemed stark: The president was grilled by NBC's Savannah Guthrie, while observers felt Biden got an easier ride from ABC's George Stephanopoulos, a former top aide to president Bill Clinton.

Similarly in mid-September, Trump was questioned by

Stephanopoulos during an ABC event that Politico described as an "icy grilling," while characterizing a subsequent CNN town hall with Biden as reminiscent of "an affable reunion of old acquaintances."

For Grant Reeher, a professor of political science at Syracuse University, the issue is not "as much how softly the media is treating Biden as it is how harshly the media is treating President Trump."

The editorial boards at most of the top US newspapers including The New York Times and The Washington Post have endorsed Biden.

Dean Baquet, executive editor of the Times, admits that his paper's job is to "very aggressively

sort out fact from fiction" in covering Trump, while remaining "journalistically moral."

Some experts say the tougher approach to Trump is entirely merited.

"When you have a candidate that refers to the free press as the enemy and incites violence against members of the press, refuses to answer any straight questions and spills lie after lie about his record, to try to compare coverage of one candidate against the other in this situation is off-base," says Gabriel Kahn, a professor of journalism at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

But the former Washington Post and Huffington Post journalist admitted: "In a normal election cycle, problems like the ones Biden has would fuel way more media coverage than they are currently getting."

He wrote that Biden must not be lulled into a false sense of security that "he is immune to press scrutiny."

"Presidents need to be held accountable, and the period after Trump should be all about restoring accountability and transparency. That won't happen with a supine press corps."

THEFT OF US VOTER REGISTRATION INFO

Iran, Russia deny US intel report

AFP, Tehran

Iran and Russia yesterday strongly denied US allegations of having taken actions to influence public opinion ahead of the November 3 US presidential election.

Washington had accused Iran of sending "spoofed" emails to Americans "designed to intimidate voters, incite social unrest, and damage" President Donald Trump less than two weeks before the crunch vote.

According to the US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe, Iran had also distributed a video that implies that people could send in fraudulent ballots, including from outside the United States.

Also pointing the finger at Russia, Ratcliffe said both Tehran and Moscow seek to "communicate false information to registered voters that they hope will cause confusion, sow chaos, and undermine confidence in American democracy".

Both Tehran and Moscow dismissed the accusations as "absolutely groundless."

The US announcement came after registered Democratic voters reported receiving personally addressed emails in the name of the Proud Boys militia, and from an internet domain linked to the Proud Boys.

A number of voters in Florida and other key battleground states said they had gotten the messages.

"You will vote for Trump on election day or we will come after you," the emails said.

Ratcliffe, with FBI Director Christopher Wray beside him, did not explain how the Russians and Iranians had obtained the voter information, or how the Russians might be using it.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Belarus opposition wins EU parliament rights award

The European Parliament yesterday awarded the Sakharov Prize for human rights to the movement opposing President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, led by the exiled Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. "It is an honour to announce that the women and men of the democratic opposition in Belarus are the 2020 Sakharov Prize laureates," tweeted European Parliament President David Sassoli. "They have on their side something that brute force can never defeat: the truth. Do not give up on your fight. We are by your side." Belarus has been gripped by unprecedented protests since Lukashenko claimed victory in an August election over Tikhonovskaya. Every Sunday, tens of thousands of Belarusians, despite the risk of arrest and the threat of live ammunition, take to the streets to oppose Europe's longest serving leader.

Pope backs civil unions for gay couples

Pope Francis on Wednesday voiced support for same-sex couples, calling them "children of God" and saying they should be allowed to have legally recognised civil unions, in a radical shift from previous pontiffs. The pope, whose opposition to gay marriage remains unchanged, said in a documentary premiered at the Rome Film Festival: "These are children of God, they have the right to a family. What we have to create is a law of civil union, they have the right to be legally protected. I have defended that," he said in film-maker Evgeny Afineevsky's "Francesco".

Egypt kills 49 in 'outrageous' mass executions: HRW

Egypt executed 49 prisoners in just 10 days in October, Human Rights Watch said yesterday, calling for authorities to "immediately halt" carrying out death sentences. "Egypt's mass executions of scores of people in a matter of days is outrageous," HRW's Joe Stork said. The rights group said it calculated the number killed between October 3 and 13 on announcements in pro-government newspapers, as executions are not typically announced, HRW said. Of the 49 killed, 15 were men convicted for alleged involvement in political violence.

Russia gives Snowden permanent residency rights

Russia has granted US whistleblower Edward Snowden permanent residency rights, his lawyer said yesterday, a step towards Russian citizenship if he wants it. Snowden, 37, fled the United States and was given asylum in Russia after leaking secret files in 2013 that revealed vast domestic and international surveillance operations carried out by the US National Security Agency where he was a contractor. US authorities have for years wanted Snowden returned to the United States to face a criminal trial on espionage charges brought in 2013.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Thai protest ban lifted

Protesters give PM three days to quit

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday rolled back an emergency decree aimed at ending months of protests against the government and monarchy that had only inflamed anger and brought tens of thousands of people onto Bangkok streets.

A government statement published in the official Royal Gazette said that as of 12 pm it would mean an end to measures that include bans on political gatherings of five or more people and publishing news that could affect security.

"The current violent situation that led to the announcement of the severe situation has eased and ended to a situation in which government officials and state agencies can enforce the regular laws," the statement said.

The only specific incident given for the ban was one in which Queen Suthida's convoy was jeered by protesters, but it came after protests that are the biggest challenge in years to Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Protesters who have given Prayuth a three day deadline to quit said that withdrawing the measures was not enough.

"He's still seeking to stay in power while ignoring all the people's demands. The emergency decree shouldn't have been issued in the first place," Sirawith "Ja New" Seritiwat, one of the leaders, said.

Dozens of protesters - including many of the most high profile protest leaders - were arrested during the crackdown.

Among them was Patsaravalee "Mind" Tanakitvibulpon, who was released yesterday after being arrested a day earlier.

Protesters say Prayuth rigged an election last year to keep hold of power he seized in a 2014 coup. He says the election was fair. Protesters accuse the monarchy of enabling years of military domination and want to curb the king's powers.



One of Thailand's protest leaders, Patsaravalee "Mind" Tanakitvibulpon arrives at court after she was arrested yesterday in Bangkok, yesterday. Inset, Royalists wearing yellow shirts hold pictures of Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn during a rally to support the monarchy in Bangkok.

PHOTO: REUTERS



2nd wave gloom darkens

Ireland in second lockdown as Germany faces record cases

AGENCIES

Businesses closed across Ireland yesterday for a second national coronavirus lockdown, as record infection surges in Germany and Italy helped to spread gloom across the continent.

The virus has killed more than 1.1 million people and prompted an economic downturn -- the International Monetary Fund predicting a 4.4 percent drop in global output for 2020. At least 41,304,020 cases have been registered worldwide.

On Wednesday, 6,509 new deaths and 462,751 new cases were recorded worldwide. The countries with the most new deaths were the US with 990, followed by India with 702 and Brazil with 566.

Most European governments have been reluctant to reimpose national stay-at-home orders, after previous restrictions led to deep recessions and widespread bitterness.

But Ireland's five million people have been ordered to stay at home for six weeks, with non-essential businesses told to shut up shop, among other rules.

Germany and Italy are both facing record surges, registering their highest one-day tallies since the pandemic began. Italy has ordered curfews in regions that cover the capital Rome and business hub Milan.

Most European countries have already banned large gatherings and made face masks compulsory in certain areas.

In Belgium, which has one of the worst records of virus infections per person, Foreign Minister Sophie Wilmes is being treated in intensive care after testing positive.

Meanwhile, the Indian state of West Bengal reported its biggest daily tally of new COVID-19 infections as thousands of people thronged the streets for a major Hindu festival that began last week.

West Bengal's health ministry reported 4,069 new COVID-19 cases late on Wednesday. India currently has a total of 7.71 million cases, the second highest in the world.

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro said Wednesday his government would not in fact purchase a Chinese-developed vaccine against Covid-19, a day after his health minister announced a deal to buy millions of doses.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

India's West Bengal hits record daily cases amid festival

Bolsonaro shoots down plan to buy Chinese vaccine



Hindu devotees wearing personal protective equipment perform Dandiya, a traditional dance, in front of an idol of Hindu goddess Durga at a "pandal" or a temporary platform, on the first day of Durga Puja festival in Kolkata, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

AFGHAN OFFENSIVE AGAINST TALIBAN

11 kids killed as air strike hits Madrasa

AGENCIES

An air strike by the Afghan military that hit a religious school, locally called as madrasa, killed 11 children and a prayer leader, local authorities said yesterday, in an account disputed by the national government.

The assault in a village in the northeastern province of Takhar on Wednesday came amid clashes between suspected Taliban fighters and Afghan security forces in the area, according to provincial police spokesman Khalil Aseer. "The air strike was carried out when the victims were busy studying the holy book," Aseer said, adding a prayer leader was killed alongside the 11 students. He said 14 people were wounded.

But the ministry of defence -- who confirmed the strike was carried out by the Afghan air force -- denied it had left civilians dead. "Twelve Taliban including several of their commanders were killed," it said.

The ministry of defence said it had appointed a team to probe allegations of civilian casualties.

Heavy fighting with the Taliban in Takhar since Tuesday has left at least 25 security personnel dead. Despite joining peace talks with the Afghan government in Qatar last month, the Taliban have only increased violence in a bid to wield leverage in the negotiations.

Saad Hariri named new Lebanon PM

AGENCIES

Dashing hope of protesters, three-time Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri was named to the post for a fourth time yesterday and immediately promised a government of technocrats committed to a French-backed reform plan.

He faces the grueling task of forming a cabinet in a country still reeling from the aftermath of a massive explosion that ripped through the capital in August. The country is mired in a



financial meltdown, political infighting and widespread anger at Beirut's ruling elite.

Hariri said he would "form a cabinet of non politically aligned experts with the mission of economic, financial and administrative reforms contained in the French initiative roadmap".

Hariri, who has previously led three governments in Lebanon, stepped down almost a year ago under pressure from unprecedented protests against the political class.

If Hariri succeeds in creating the next government, he will be taking on the premiership for a fourth time. A staple of the country's political class, Hariri is the son of the assassinated former PM Rafik Hariri and is the most high-profile Sunni Muslim political leader in Lebanon.

Lebanon is grappling with its worst economic crisis in decades and still reeling from the port blast that killed more than 200 people and ravaged large parts of Beirut in August.

\$1.8 BILLION ARMS SALE TO TAIWAN

China threatens retaliation

US tightens rules on more Chinese media outlets

AGENCIES

China threatened yesterday to retaliate against the latest US arms sale to Chinese-claimed Taiwan, as the island welcomed the weapons package but said it was not looking to get into an arms race with Beijing.

The Trump administration has ramped up support for Taiwan through arms sales, adding to tensions between Beijing and Washington, already heightened by rows over the South China Sea, Hong Kong, human rights and trade.

Responding to the US approval of a potential \$1.8 billion arms sale to Taiwan, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said during a daily news briefing that such sales "seriously damage China's sovereignty."

The latest US arms package includes sensors, missiles and artillery, and further congressional notifications are expected for drones made by General Atomics and land-based Harpoon anti-ship missiles, made by Boeing Co, to serve as coastal defence cruise missiles.

In another development, the US has tightened rules on six more Chinese

media organizations, saying that they are propaganda outlets that answer to the state.

The fresh move against Chinese media was met with anger in Beijing, which said it would take "necessary" countermeasures, without specifying which US outlets it might target inside its territory.

It was the third round of US designations of Chinese outlets as "foreign missions," which requires them to report details on their US-based staff and real estate transactions to the State Department. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told a news conference Wednesday that the affected outlets will face no restrictions on their reporting.

The six organizations newly designated as foreign missions are Yicai Global, Jiefang Daily, Xinmin Evening News, Social Sciences in China Press, Beijing Review and Economic Daily. The State Department earlier enforced rules on nine better-known outlets including the Xinhua news agency and China Global Television Network.

China has denounced the regulations and retaliated by expelling US citizens who work for major news organizations including The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.