

What Happened?: In 2020, Iowa moved from swing state to safe state.



For many years Iowa has been considered a swing state and a bellwether state, indicating the political direction of the country as a whole. The 2020 general election, however, saw Republican successes across US House and State Legislative races. [Andrew Green](#) writes that the GOP has flipped the state from 'swing' to 'safe' by making gains among rural Iowans and by winning far more voters on election day, despite Democrats having an advantage in early voting numbers.

- *Following the 2020 US General Election, our mini-series, [‘What Happened?’](#), explores aspects of elections at the presidential, Senate, House of Representative and state levels, and also reflects on what the election results will mean for US politics moving forward. If you are interested in contributing, please contact Rob Ledger (ledger@em.uni-frankfurt.de) or Peter Finn (p.finn@kingston.ac.uk).*

Iowa's status as a swing state in American national elections took yet another blow during the 2020 general election. While most polls showed Iowa as a toss-up state in both the [presidential](#) race and the [US Senate](#) race between incumbent GOP Senator Joni Ernst and Democratic candidate Theresa Greenfield, and Iowa Democrats were optimistic about their chances to win back the [Iowa State House](#), Republican candidates up and down the ballot claimed victory on election night. All in all, it was a very good night for Iowa Republicans and left Iowa Democrats assessing the future of the party in the Hawkeye State. Most importantly for observers of American national elections, however, 2020 most likely signals the end of Iowa's run as a "bellwether" state in US presidential contests.

What Happened in Iowa in the 2020 election?

Turnout in the 2020 election was extremely high in Iowa. In fact, more than [1.7 million](#) voters cast a ballot either early or on election day in the state exceeding the previous turnout record by set in [2012](#). Due to the pandemic, the number of Iowans who voted early or by absentee also set a record with over [one million](#) in the state voting before election day was up by nearly 350,000 compared to [2016](#). Generally speaking, [higher turnout elections are thought to favor Democrats in US elections](#), but higher levels of turnout drove up vote totals for both Democratic and Republican candidates in the state and thus did not yield any advantage to Democratic candidates on the Iowa ballot. Ultimately, President Trump won the state by over eight points nearly matching his margin from 2016 (9.4 percent). Senator Ernst was reelected to the US Senate by nearly [seven points](#).

At the US House level, Iowa Republicans flipped [two seats](#). In Iowa's First District, Republican State Representative Ashley Hinson defeated two-term Democratic Representative Abby Finkenauer by 2.5 percent. In Iowa's Second District, Republican State Senator Mariannette Miller-Meeks, in her fourth attempt to win election to the US House, defeated former State Senator Rita Hart by six votes out of a total of nearly 400,000. After recounts in every county in the district and a [contest filed with the US House Committee on Administration](#), [Hart withdrew her contest](#) in late March and Miller-Meeks formally succeeded former Democratic Representative Dave Loebsack who retired after serving seven terms in the US House. The only incumbent to win reelection to the US House was first-term Democratic Representative Cindy Axne (IA-3) who narrowly defeated former Republican Representative David Young. Young was running to regain his seat after being defeated by Axne in 2018. And in IA-4, Republican State Senator Randy Feenstra was elected to the US House after defeating former Republican Representative Steve King in a contested primary. In the general election, Feenstra defeated Democratic candidate J.D. Scholten by nearly 25 points.

The most surprising results of election night came from races for the Iowa State Legislature. As mentioned above, many Iowa Democrats were optimistic about their chances of taking back control of the Iowa State House for the first time since 2010. Going into election night, Democratic candidates for the Iowa State House had [campaign fundraising advantages](#) in many of the districts that were deemed competitive in the cycle. In a night where Democrats thought they may make gains, Iowa Republicans won six additional seats in the chamber increasing their majority to [59 over 41 Democrats](#). Iowa Republicans also held serve in the Iowa State Senate and control the chamber 32-18. By doing so, Iowa Republicans continue to control the two elected branches of state government.

In an [USAPP liveblog post](#) on election day, I mentioned that I would be watching two major factors in the statewide races on election night. One was the vote margin statewide in rural Iowa counties, which make up much of the state, versus the six most urbanized counties in that state that Hillary Clinton won in 2016. As discussed in my book on Trump's win in Iowa in 2016, *From the Iowa Caucuses to the White House*, in order to win the state in 2020 Iowa Democrats needed to improve on their vote share in the six urban counties that Clinton won in 2016 but also needed to win back some of those rural Iowa voters who were willing to vote for former President Barack Obama in the preceding two election cycles and not lose the rural vote by 30 percent as Clinton did in 2016.

In the end, Biden did overperform Clinton's [two-party vote share margin](#) in each of the six counties. His margin was greater than Clinton's by 1.2 percent in Black Hawk County, 3.2 percent in Johnson County, 4.3 percent in Linn County, 3.3 percent in Polk County, 2 percent in Scott County, and 4 percent in Story County. But the gains he made in the six urban counties that he won were offset by gains made by Trump in more rural areas of the state. In rural county after rural county, Trump improved upon his 2016 two-party vote share margin over Clinton. According to [exit polls of Iowa voters](#), Trump enjoyed a 28 point advantage among rural Iowa voters down only two points from 2016. The results in the two statewide races suggest that rural Iowans not only stuck with Trump and Iowa Republicans, but that the Republican coalition in rural Iowa actually increased from 2016-2020. The continued buildup of rural support was key to Republican victories in 2020 and will continue to yield advantages for Republicans in subsequent election cycles.



"Election Day 2020" (CC BY 2.0) by Phil Roeder

The second factor I was watching on election night was the vote margin between early voters and those who cast their ballot on election day. In a 2018 journal article, Seth C. McKee, Daniel A. Smith and M. V. (Trey) Hood III [found](#) that late deciding voters in 2016 supported Trump more so than Clinton. Additionally, an analysis by the [Pew Research Center](#) found that 60 percent of Trump supporters preferred in-person voting on election day while 58 percent of Biden supporters preferred to vote by mail. It was clear on election day that Iowa Democrats had banked more than 117,000 more absentee ballots than Republicans had, and assuming that most of those votes were for Biden and other Democratic candidates, the unknown factor was what would election day turnout look like for Trump and Iowa Republicans. In short, it was massive. According to election data from the [Iowa Secretary of State's office](#), Biden banked nearly 161,000 more early votes than Trump did (569,478 to 408,848). But Trump's election day margin was nearly 300,000 votes larger than Biden's early vote margin was (488,824 to 189,583) which more than made up for and exceeded the early vote lead Biden had established prior to November 2nd.

Democrats face an uphill battle in Iowa

In the end, Iowa is now best placed in the “Safe Republican” column. As [Laura Belin](#) notes in a 2020 Iowa election analysis on the *Bleeding Heartland* blog, “we [Iowa Democrats] need to approach the 2022 races for governor and US Senate without any illusions. We aren’t on level ground with Republicans. We start out at a significant disadvantage” Along with two dominant performances in the state by former President Trump, Republicans continue to control five out of Iowa’s six Congressional seats (both Senate seats and three of four House seats). Additionally, Republicans will maintain control of state government for at least another year and a half. The upcoming 2022 election cycle will include a gubernatorial race in which incumbent Republican Governor Kim Reynolds most likely runs for reelection. Republican Senator Chuck Grassley’s term will also expire in 2022. At 87 years old, some wonder whether he will run for an eighth term in the US Senate. Grassley has indicated that he will [decide](#) later this year. Regardless of whether Grassley retires, both Reynolds and the Republican nominee for US Senate will be considered the favorite going into the election cycle. However, both races will afford Iowa Democrats an opportunity to recruit candidates and deliver a message that resonates with Iowa voters once again. That will be a tough task up and down the ballot.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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