

Florida Voter Registration: Updated Analysis

September 9, 2020

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Introduction

In the months leading up to March 2020 — before COVID-19 really began to alter daily life in the United States — [voter registrations in 2020 had been outpacing 2016](#). However, voter registrations fell across the country amid concerns about the coronavirus pandemic. Social distancing measures took a toll on traditional voter registration practices, such as in-person canvassing and registrations from motor vehicle departments.

Florida's own voter registration data shows the same trend, with registrations dipping in March 2020 to fall below 2016 levels, then nosediving further in April. While numbers started coming up in May and rebounded in June and July, not all groups of voters recovered at the same rate. The state is also still coming down from a spike in infections in July, which may impact voter registration as we get closer to the election. In a state where races are sometimes won or lost by very thin margins, small differences in voter registration and turnout can be especially key.

This report examines the 2020 voter registration trend in Florida by registration source, by race, and by party.

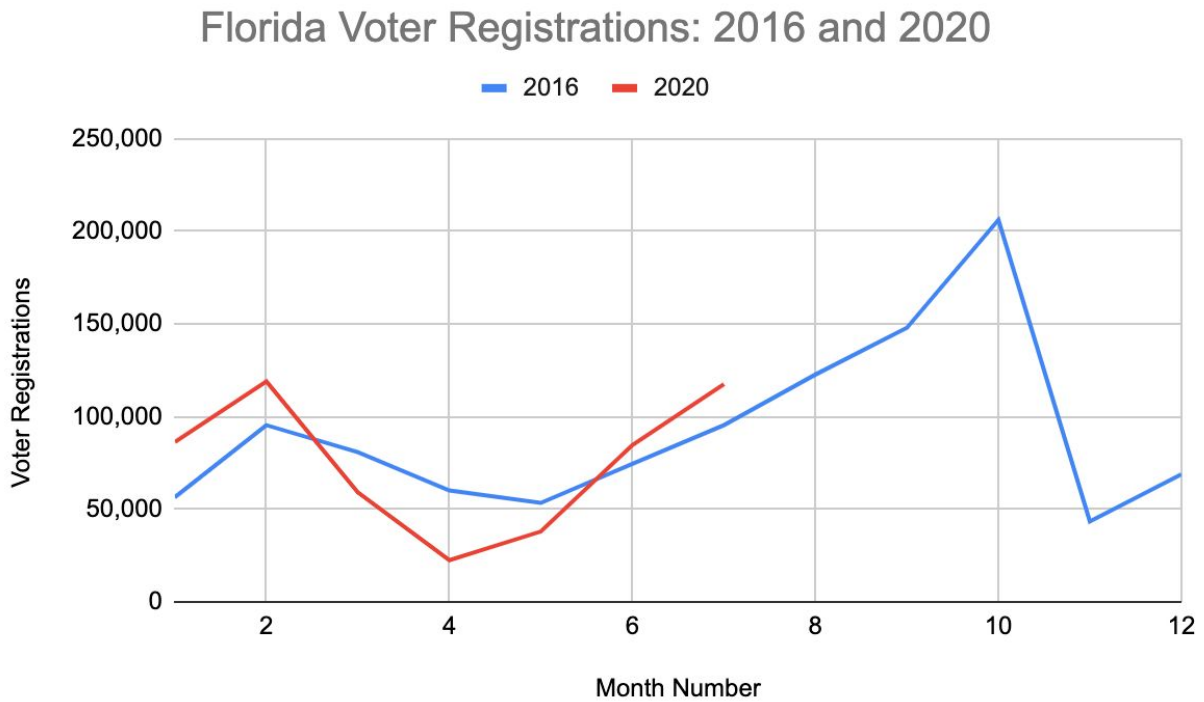
A Note on Data

The data from this report come from two major sources. The first is the voter file, which allows close demographic analysis, by race and party especially, up to the publication date of the file. The publication date of the file used in this report was August 4, 2020. A drawback of the voter file is that it does not appear to be possible to distinguish truly new registrations from those that may have simply had updated information, from the registration date in the file. The state, however, publishes monthly [reports on new registration activity](#), which we rely on for statistics about the sources of registration and net changes in party registrations. These reports sometimes lag a month behind the release of the voter file. For this report, the monthly reports of registration activity were current as of July.

Overall Trend

In 2020, Florida voter registration statistics suggest that emergency precautions, social distancing, and general concern around the coronavirus pandemic dampened voter registration activity in the state for several months from March through May.

The following figure uses data provided by the Secretary of State and graphs the number of new voter registrations in Florida by month, comparing registrations in 2016 to the data available for 2020. Note that registrations at the beginning of 2020 actually outpace 2016, but dip in March 2020 before falling still further in April. While June and July 2020 looks to have once again overtaken 2016, Florida began battling a severe spike in infections in July, and the long-term impact of COVID-19 on voter registration is not yet clear — the continued severity of the virus may prove to be a sizable obstacle to recovering what was looking to be a record turnout before the pandemic.



Sources of Registration

Most voter registration in Florida is handled through the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV). Over the four-year period running from calendar years 2016 to 2019, the DHSMV was the source of [57% of Florida’s 3.1 million registrations](#). Since 2016, Florida has also allowed for online voter registrations, which have made up roughly a third of registrations. Another 11% of registrations came through third-party voter registration drives. The number of

DHSMV registrations is fairly equal from year to year, but third-party registrations mostly happen in federal election years.

This year, amid concern about the spread of novel coronavirus, many Floridians began avoiding public spaces in March, and many government offices — including local driver’s license locations — closed to the public, with repercussions for voter registration. Third-party voter registration efforts led by advocacy groups that have historically relied on door-to-door campaigns or public event spaces to reach eligible voters have found those avenues closed to them this year as well. On April 1, 2020, Governor Ron DeSantis issued a statewide stay-at-home order, further enforcing distancing.

Statistics reported by the Secretary of State provide more insight into which sources of voter registration have seen declines since the onset of COVID-19. As the following table shows, compared to 2016, registrations started declining in March across all sources, with the exception of third-party registrations, which also started declining in April. In April 2020, registrations were down nearly 40% compared to April 2016. DHSMV numbers began to recover in May, and by June, monthly registration numbers for 2020 once again outpaced 2016, with an especially large increase in online registrations.

Registrations brought in by third party groups have yet to recover from being interrupted by the pandemic. In 2016, third party registrations surged in July; in 2020, they were barely above June numbers. Registrations dropped off at the office of Supervisors of Elections have also failed to rebound.

Total voter registration as of the end of July 2020 was about 11,000 registrations greater than 2016.

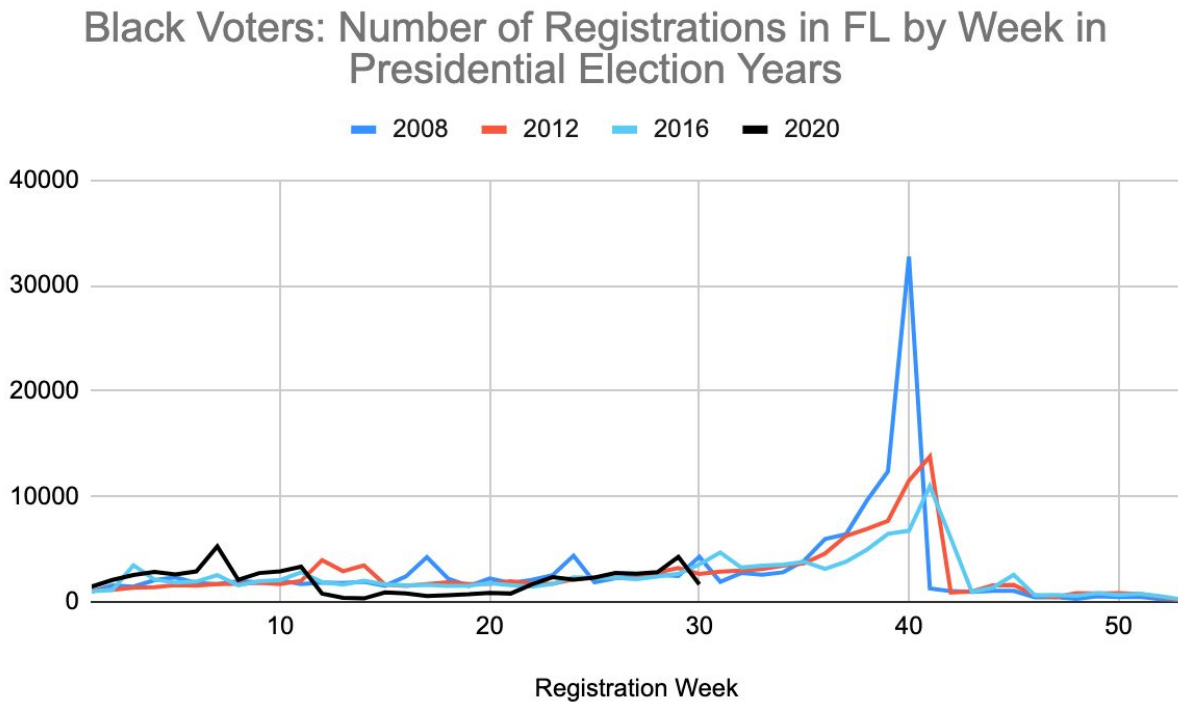
Source of Voter Registrations, First Seven Months of 2016 and 2020

	DHSMV	Mail	Third Party	Online	SOE ^a	Other	Total
	2016						
January	35,940	9,332	1,196	0	8,888	1,097	56,453
February	40,882	25,346	4,232	0	20,161	4,725	95,346
March	40,654	19,502	3,016	0	15,100	2,551	80,823
April	34,629	12,456	3,806	0	7,958	1,254	60,103
May	33,978	7,276	4,919	0	6,180	1,049	53,402
June	42,221	15,744	8,425	0	6,653	1,468	74,511
July	44,201	19,298	18,000	0	11,454	2,442	95,395
	2020						
January	42,498	9,750	14,144	10,482	8,769	602	86,245
February	39,971	11,724	17,401	38,476	9,939	1,450	118,961
March	24,484	5,145	9,418	14,897	4,725	415	59,084
April	4,869	9,423	133	7,712	312	68	22,517
May	24,603	5,095	105	7,590	559	45	37,997
June	40,499	11,653	1,245	28,597	2,467	191	84,652
July	43,071	19,339	1,965	47,473	5,161	499	117,508
	Difference						
January	6,558	418	12,948	10,482	-119	-495	29,792
February	-911	-13,622	13,169	38,476	-10,222	-3,275	23,615
March	-16,170	-14,357	6,402	14,897	-10,375	-2,136	-21,739
April	-29,760	-3,033	-3,673	7,712	-7,646	-1,186	-37,586
May	-9,375	-2,181	-4,814	7,590	-5,621	-1,004	-15,405
June	-1,722	-4,091	-7,180	28,597	-4,186	-1,277	10,141
July	-1,130	41	-16,035	47,473	-6,298	-1,943	22,113

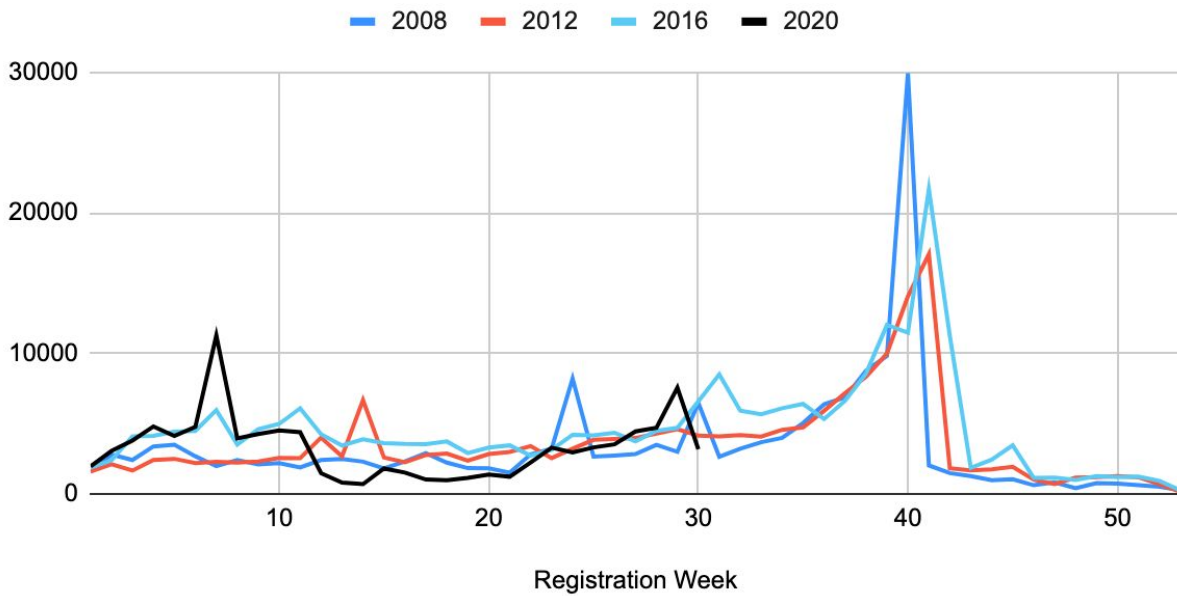
^aRegistrations dropped off at the office of county Supervisors of Elections.

Differences in Registration by Race

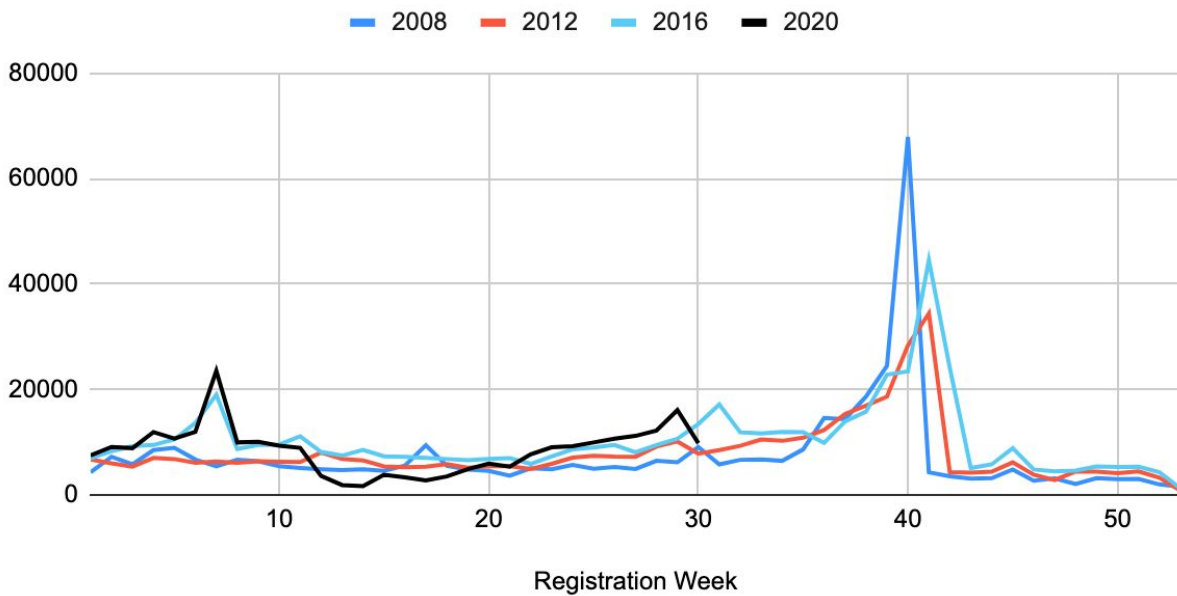
The decline in registrations has not affected all groups equally. Registration numbers for white voters appear to have rebounded more quickly from a drop in 2020 compared to registration rates of Black and Hispanic voters.



Hispanic Voters: Number of Registrations in FL by Week in Presidential Election Years



White Voters: Number of Registrations in FL by Week in Presidential Election Years



Differences in Registration by Party

The state reports net changes in voter registration, by party, each month, which is shown below for 2016. That these numbers do not reflect new registrations by party each month; rather, they quantify the change in registrations from month to month, after accounting for people removed from the registration rolls.

From what we can see below, net registrations for both parties began to rebound in June. Democrats continue to outpace Republicans in net new registrations, but that is entirely due to registrations that occurred in the first three months of the year. For the last two months reported, Republican net registrations have outstripped Democratic registrations.

Net Partisan Change by Month		
Month	Republican	Democrat
January	32,492	53,237
February	38,388	76,011
March	24,786	29,938
April	-5,955	-17,786
May	3,711	-6,154
June	37,520	20,788
July	46,086	34,336
TOTAL	177,028	190,370

Conclusion

[Election experts](#) have expressed concerns about issues with voter registration amid the pandemic, with traditional avenues of reaching eligible voters deemed unsafe and motor vehicle departments closed to the public.

In Florida, the decline in voter registration activity from the months of March through May suggests that those concerns have not been unfounded: Emergency precautions, social distancing, and general worry around the coronavirus pandemic dampened voter registration activity in the state

across registration sources, and although registration rates have seen a rebound in June and July, the state continues to battle infections from a severe spike in July.

Additionally, the dearth of registrations has not impacted all groups equally. Registration numbers for white voters in Florida appear to have kept pace with 2016, but registration rates of Black and Hispanic voters have rebounded without catching up to where they were four years prior.

The long-term impact of COVID-19 on voter registration is not yet clear. Historically, the pace of registrations picks up as November draws near, so the same trend could make up for the declines seen in 2020 so far, but the challenges of registration during the pandemic and the continued severity of the virus may also prove to be sizable obstacles to recovering what was looking to be a record turnout before the pandemic, especially among minority voters.