

# The 2020 Primary Elections

**March 10, 2020**

***Abstract:***

The first state primaries and caucuses of the 2020 elections cycle were held at around the same time as a new coronavirus was beginning to spread through the United States. The pandemic did not threaten to derail the Republican presidential nomination process, because Donald Trump faced no realistic challenger. The same was not true on the Democratic side, which began with more than two dozen potential candidates. If the pandemic had hit most severely about a month earlier than it did, the Democratic nomination process might have fallen into disarray. As it happened, Joe Biden had all but sewed up the nomination by the time the pandemic posed serious threats to the voting process. Many other races were on the primary ballots, though, and the experience of election administrators over the spring and summer of 2020 running those primaries became invaluable for developing best practices for the general election in the fall.

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## I. Introduction

The pandemic hit the United States just as the 2020 presidential primary season was underway. The sporadic chaos of the primary season provided a chilling and cautionary tale for what the nation might expect in November if it failed to adapt the election infrastructure to the pandemic. In many respects, the United States dodged a bullet, as the Democratic and Republican nominations were largely wrapped up by the time states executed their lockdown orders. Still, each of the spring or summer primaries, whether held for President or lower offices, served as a learning experience for election officials to prepare for the transition to increased mail balloting and reconfigured polling places for the general election.

## II. Rapid Coronavirus Response

The presidential nomination process began in Iowa, the state that has, by tradition, started its prolonged caucus voting process before any other state. As the Iowa caucuses got underway February 3, 2020, there were [11 confirmed cases of coronavirus reported in the United States](#). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services had declared the spread of the virus a [national public health emergency](#) but said the [“risk to the American public remains low at this time.”](#)

There were no reported cases of coronavirus in Iowa as large groups of citizens gathered for several hours throughout the state on the evening of February 3 to caucus for a Democratic nominee. Similarly, there were no reported cases in New Hampshire when a record number of voters flowed into polling places on February 11 to vote in the nation’s first primary of 2020. And there were no coronavirus cases reported yet in Nevada for its caucus on February 22 or in South Carolina for its primary on February 29.

By the time of “Super Tuesday,” March 3, just one of the 14 states holding primaries that day had recorded a case: [California](#), with 40 cases. Just one week before Super Tuesday, the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) announced that public health officials had identified in California the nation’s first case of the coronavirus in a person who had not been traveling out of the country or had any exposure to someone already known to be infected with the coronavirus.

California’s [presidential primary](#) on March 3 took place as scheduled, but the state primary still suffered coronavirus-related delays. On March 20, one day after issuing an executive order

directing all California residents to stay at home because of the pandemic, Governor Gavin Newsom issued a second [executive order](#), extending the deadline by which election officials had to certify and audit their March 3 results. For upcoming special election primaries, the order called on election officials to mail absentee ballots to every registered voter in their counties.

All 14 states scheduled to hold their presidential primaries on Super Tuesday held them as planned (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Vermont). By this time, most competitive candidates in the Democratic presidential field had thrown their support behind one candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden. But six states primaries scheduled for March 10 (Idaho, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Washington) and three of four primaries scheduled for March 17 (Arizona, Florida, and Illinois) stayed on schedule.

The primary schedule began to shift after March 11, when the [World Health Organization](#) declared the spread of coronavirus to be a pandemic, and on March 13, when President Trump signed an [executive order](#) declaring the outbreak in the United States to be a “national emergency.” On March 13, Louisiana’s governor also issued an executive order, postponing all public events—including the April 4 primary. On March 14, Georgia’s governor called for a [state of emergency](#) and the next day, Georgia’s [secretary of state](#) suspended in-person early voting (which had begun March 2), postponed the March 24 primary until May 19, and directed that absentee ballots be mailed to every Georgia voter.

[Ohio’s first three cases](#) of coronavirus on March 9 had jumped to [50 by March 16](#). At 10:12 p.m. on the night before the March 17 primary polls were set to open, Ohio Health Director Dr. Amy Acton closed all polling locations to help stop the spread of the coronavirus. The state then switched to an all mail ballot process and extended the time to vote through April 28. (Limited in-person voting was available at 88 of the state’s usual 4,000 polling places on April 28 for voters with disabilities and those without a home address).

Overall, 34 states and the District of Columbia were able to conduct their presidential primaries on the date originally scheduled. Rescheduling the exceptions, which included the battleground states of Georgia, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, sometimes came with political complications.

Most states with presidential primaries scheduled later than March 17 rescheduled them for dates in May or June, and several limited voting to primarily or exclusively vote-by-mail. The exceptions were Wisconsin, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oregon. Oregon did not need to make changes to its primary process; the state had been conducting its elections by mail only for years and was able to keep its May 19 primary date. Kansas stayed with its May 2 primary date

but switched to all mail voting. [Nebraska's secretary of state bragged](#) that “Nebraska Voters refused to allow the coronavirus pandemic to prevent them from exercising their right to vote” and stuck with their May 12 date. But only 15 percent of those voters showed up on Election Day; 78% used an early voting option and 16% voted by mail.

The governor of Wisconsin, one of the key battleground states in the presidential election, signed an [executive order](#) on April 6 to change the date of the state’s primary from April 7 to June 9. But the state legislature asked the state supreme court to block enforcement of the order and six hours later, [the court did so](#). (The Republican National Committee challenged another part of the executive order at the U.S. Supreme Court, asking the Court to stay enforcement of an extended deadline for receipt of mail ballots, from April 7 to April 13. The Court, in its [first coronavirus-related ruling](#), granted the stay on a 5-3 vote.)

Another major battleground state, Pennsylvania, changed its primary date from April 28 to June 2 by vote of the state legislature on March 24. Pennsylvania’s Department of State issued [updated guidance](#) for staffing and managing polling places for its rescheduled primary.

Nationally, the number of coronavirus cases had jumped to [over 7,000 by March 17](#), and most remaining states began pushing back the dates of their primaries to May and June and even August. State political and election leaders were seeking time to mitigate the increasing threat to public health of having hundreds of thousands of voters congregate in public voting spaces. By the end of March, governors in [most states had issued mandates](#) for their citizens to stay at home except to secure groceries or other critical needs. And most states sought ways to reduce the need for in-person voting and increase the use of absentee balloting.

Absentee balloting addressed two coronavirus-specific problems: The first, and most obvious, was the need to ensure polling places could accommodate the recommended six-feet of space between voters in line and in the voting booth. This often required states and local governments to relocate or re-design existing polling places. The second challenge was to staff in-person voting places at a time when a previously reliable pool of poll workers—senior citizens—would be less likely to serve. In the past, senior citizens had been a reliably available population of temporary workers to staff polling places. Now, they were among the most vulnerable to the life-threatening respiratory illness.

While many of these issues were common to almost every state during the primaries, some problems and solutions were unique to individual states or counties within states. Cuyahoga County, Ohio, took the temperature of voters coming into the polls and required those who had a fever to [vote outdoors](#). Statewide, Ohio's secretary of state partnered with the Ohio Grocer Association to allow voters to pick up absentee ballot request forms at participating [grocery stores](#). In New York, officials tried to [cancel its primary](#), but a judge mandated it be held as scheduled. Iowa sent out [pre-filled postcards](#) to every active registered voter that could be mailed back to request absentee ballots, raising concerns about breach of privacy. And the governors in several states, such as [Wisconsin](#) and [Iowa](#), called out the National Guard to help with logistical needs in running primary voting during the coronavirus crisis.

Added to these challenges were concerns that arise during every primary season but were exacerbated by the threat of the coronavirus. There were conflicts over where funding would come from for all the additional expenses incurred from printing more ballots and finding new polling places; disagreements over how and when absentee ballots would be verified and counted; and partisan political fights and litigation throughout the primary process. The challenges of the 2020 primary voting, and the innovations adopted to address those challenges, served as important lessons for states as they prepared for the November general election.

### III. Expansion of Absentee Balloting

From February until mid-March of 2020, about 11.3 percent of voters used an absentee ballot in primary voting. But after many governors issued stay-at-home orders, that percentage jumped to 51.5 percent for the rest of the primary season, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). For states unaccustomed to such a significant percentage of voters using absentee balloting, the primaries required some adjustments. According to the [Brennan Center](#), "at least nine states sent actual mail ballots to all active registered voters during at least one of the primaries," and 19 others sent absentee ballot request applications.

#### A. Coping with the Challenges of Increased Absentee Voting in the Primaries

All states saw a sharp increase in mail ballots. In D.C., more than 92,000 of its voters requested absentee ballots during its primary — 15 times the usual number. [D.C. officials scrambled](#) to keep up, resorting to delivering some ballots by hand and others by email to meet the

unprecedented demand. Many other states encouraged voters to use absentee ballots but also found it difficult to get absentee ballot materials to voters in a timely manner. In Maryland, more than one million absentee ballots never arrived to registered voters or arrived too late to mail back, according to the [Washington Post](#).

More than 1.1 million voters used absentee mail ballots in the [2020 Georgia primary](#), compared to only 37,000 who used them in the 2016 primary. One week after the June 9 primary in Georgia (which had been rescheduled from its original date of March 24), there were still [tens of thousands](#) of absentee ballots waiting to be counted. In addition to the sheer volume of ballots, much of the delay was caused by [human error](#) in filling out the absentee ballots, thus requiring ballot-by-ballot review by election officials to resolve discrepancies.

In some states, encouraging voters to use absentee ballots became a politically contentious issue between political parties and even among members of the same political party. When the Georgia secretary of state, a Republican, announced plans to mail applications for absentee ballots to the state's 6.9 million registered active voters, the state Republican Party objected. It said sending out ballot applications added to the administrative burden of local election officials and could lead to voter fraud. Republicans in the state senate introduced legislation to prevent the secretary from sending out unsolicited absentee ballot applications in the future. Democratic legislators opposed the bill, and it was eventually [withdrawn](#) in the House.

A similar scenario played out in Minnesota. The state held a [primary](#) specifically for the presidential nomination on March 3, just days before the state confirmed its [first coronavirus case](#). This was Minnesota's first primary since changing over from the use of the caucus format, and turnout in 2020 was almost three times what it was for the caucuses in 2016.

[Minnesota](#) also had a primary date scheduled for August 11, to choose candidates for a U.S. Senate seat. In preparation for this second primary, under the growing coronavirus pandemic, Minnesota's Secretary of State Steve Simon, a member of the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party, urged state legislators to pass a [bill](#) that would allow every registered voter in Minnesota to automatically receive a ballot in the mail. Republican state lawmakers [opposed](#) the secretary's proposal and instead proposed adding new polling places.

Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate, a Republican, announced in March that he would exercise the office's emergency powers to mail absentee ballot applications to all of the approximately two million active registered voters for the state's [June 2 primary](#). This primary, too, involved a hotly contested U.S. Senate seat. In [his statement](#), Secretary Pate said his office would mail out the ballot applications because the "safety of voters while casting their ballots is our top priority" and "it is important for Iowans to make their voices heard by voting. The safest way to vote will

be by mail.” The vote-by-mail promotion resulted in [record voter turnout for the June primary in Iowa](#). But it drew the ire of the Republican-controlled state legislature. Republican leaders ushered through a bill requiring that, in the future, the secretary of state had to get permission first from a special Legislative Council. The bill passed and the Republican [governor signed it](#). When the secretary of state requested permission to proactively send out ballot applications for the November general election, the Republican-led Legislative Council [approved the request](#).

The Iowa voter outreach prompted other political clashes. Two counties mailed ballot applications that already had each voter’s personal information (including their voter identification number) filled in. The purpose was to make it easier for voters to request an absentee ballot.

Secretary Pate instructed counties that the ballot application forms had to be blank, and the Republican Party filed lawsuits to stop the two counties from using the pre-filled applications. Republican leaders said requiring voters to fill out their own applications helped prevent voter fraud. But the state’s Democratic Party said it made it harder for voters to request ballots because many voters would send them back without including their “voter identification number.” The Democratic Party filed lawsuits to enable counties to send out pre-filled applications and/or make it easier for election officials to fill in any missing data themselves by looking up a voter’s identification number in their own records. In October, the [Iowa Supreme Court](#) upheld the secretary’s requirement that voters fill in the applications themselves; it also ruled that election officials could seek to fill in any missing data by contacting the voters themselves.

“The purpose of both requirements,” stated the court, in [League of United Latin American Citizens of Iowa v. Iowa Secretary of State](#), “is to protect the integrity and security of the absentee ballot system by requiring the individual requesting an absentee ballot to provide personal identification information to verify his or her identity.”

## B. Reforming “Excuse” Requirements for Absentee Balloting

Most states, even states that did not pro-actively encourage voters to use mail ballots, made clear that any voter who was concerned about the coronavirus pandemic and wanted to avoid going to a polling place on election day could use a mail ballot. Some states, including many with [primaries in August, pared](#) back restrictive criteria that previously limited absentee voting to voters who could provide a specific excuse. Connecticut, which held its delayed state presidential primary on August 11, had previously limited the use of absentee ballots to

individuals who would [state, under penalty of perjury](#), that they needed an absentee ballot for one of five excuses:

- “(1) My active service in the armed forces;
- “(2) my absence from the town in which I am eligible to vote during all of the hours of voting;
- “(3) my illness or physical disability;
- “(4) the tenets of my religion which forbid secular activity on the day of the primary, election or referendum; or
- “(5) my duties as a primary, election or referendum official.”

On May 11, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed Executive Order No. 7QQ enabling “no-excuse” absentee voting due to the coronavirus, [saying](#) “[n]obody should need to make a decision between their health and their right to vote.” On July 31, the governor also signed [legislation](#) that extended no-excuse absentee voting to the November general election. The rule change for the Connecticut primary hit a snag when officials realized a week ahead of the vote that election officials had mistakenly neglected to mail out 20,000 ballots. Nevertheless, expanded access to absentee voting led to a [ten-fold increase](#) in absentee ballot requests and a record-breaking number of absentee voting.

According to the [Brennan Center](#), “only five states—Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas—did *not* let every person who feared spreading or contracting coronavirus cast a mail ballot during at least one of their primaries...”

Louisiana generally limited the use of absentee mail ballots to four categories of voters: service members stationed outside the state, citizens living overseas, people over 65 years of age, and people with physical disabilities. Any voter seeking to use the “[physical disability](#)” excuse had to submit a “Disabled Application” form and submit either “proof of disability” that the voter was physically unable to go to the polls or a physician’s letter “certifying that the voter by reason of their disability is homebound.”

In order to vote by mail in the [Texas primaries](#), a voter also had to submit a written application, identifying one of the following reasons for the request: They would be absent from their county of residence throughout the duration of the voting period ([§ 82.001](#)), had a disability ([§ 82.002](#)), over the age of 65 on election day ([§ 82.003](#)), confined in jail ([§ 82.004](#)), or participating in the address confidentiality program administered by the attorney general ([§ 82.007](#)). “Disability” was defined by the election law as having “a sickness or physical condition that prevents the voter from appearing at the polling place on election day without a likelihood of needing personal assistance or of injuring the voter’s health” ([§ 82.002\(a\)](#)). The [Texas Supreme](#)

[Court](#) declared in May that a lack of immunity to the coronavirus did *not*, in and of itself, meet this definition of “disability,” but the court added that state election officials “have no responsibility to question or investigate a ballot application that is valid on its face.”

During the 2020 primaries, three of the five states which initially did not allow fear of contracting the coronavirus as a legitimate excuse to request an absentee ballot amended their policies.

[Mississippi](#) did not allow absentee ballots for voters with a fear of contracting the coronavirus during its delayed primary in June, but later in the year the state amended its policy to allow absentee ballots for anyone “who is under a physician-imposed quarantine due to coronavirus during the year 2020 or is caring for a dependent” under such a quarantine.

Missouri made a similar change, allowing voters to obtain an absentee ballot if they could [attest to either having the coronavirus](#) or being in one of eight specific at-risk groups for “severe” complications should they develop COVID-19. On June 4, Governor Mike Parson signed [SB 631](#), which enabled anyone in Missouri who did not already qualify for an absentee ballot to do so for the August 4 and November 3 elections. The application required that the voter’s signature be notarized, but the legislation exempted from the notary requirement anyone in the statutorily defined class of at-risk registered voters.

Tennessee voters were able to obtain absentee ballots for that state’s [August primary](#) by citing fears of coronavirus infection, after a state court [held](#) in June that Tennessee had to provide an absentee ballot to any eligible voter who asked to vote by mail in order to avoid transmission or contraction of the coronavirus. Further, in *Lay v. Goins*, the court held that any qualified voter who determined it “impossible or unreasonable to vote in-person at a polling place due to the coronavirus situation” should be eligible to check a box on the absentee ballot indicating that they were hospitalized, ill, or physically disabled and, as such, were unable to vote in person. However, a day before the state’s primary, the state Supreme Court [ruled](#) that this exception would not be available for the November general election. For November, voters would need a specific excuse, such as exposure-based quarantining, caretaking, or suffering from an underlying health condition—to vote absentee.

### C. The Primaries as a Learning Experience for Voters and Administrators

For many voters who obtained absentee ballots during the 2020 primaries, voting by mail was a new experience. They needed to get up-to-speed on deadlines for requesting ballots, where

and how to make those requests, deadlines for returning them, as well as the specific instructions for filling out the official envelopes in which the ballots were returned. According to [an analysis by National Public Radio](#), an “extraordinarily high number” of absentee ballots were rejected during the 2020 primaries—558,000, up 75% from 318,000 in the 2016 general election. The [Washington Post](#) counted 534,000.

Design complications with the absentee balloting process often confuse voters. In 16 states, after the voter marks their preferred candidates on the ballot, they are instructed to put the ballot in a special internal envelope—sometimes called a “secrecy sleeve”—and seal it. Then, the voter puts the secrecy sleeve into the official return envelope. State law in some of the 16 states that provide voters with a secrecy sleeve call for the rejection of any ballots returned without the secrecy sleeve—so-called “naked ballots.” Before Pennsylvania’s June 2 primary, the Department of State issued a directive saying that there was no statutory requirement to reject “naked ballots,” and some counties chose to accept ballots returned without an inner envelope. But in a September 8 decision, the [Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled](#) that the legislature, in setting up the law, “intended for the secrecy envelope to be mandatory.”

In most cases, the legal necessity of secrecy sleeves depends on whether other required voter authentication requirements—such as the location for voter signatures—are printed on the secrecy sleeve itself, rather than the outer envelope. In states, such as [Kentucky](#) and [New Hampshire](#), where the inner envelope doubles as a voter certification document or a place for the voter’s signature, the ballot will be rejected without one. In the 2020 primary, Kentucky rejected around [2,000 absentee ballots](#) because they did not include the inner sleeve. In states, such as Georgia, where the inner envelope is there just to protect the confidentiality of the ballot, “naked ballots” were [typically not rejected](#) during the primaries.

In New Jersey, each absentee ballot package [contains](#) an outer envelope, an inner envelope that requires a signature, a page with general information, and the ballot itself. Although each county designs its specific ballot, all absentee ballot packages use an inner envelope that requires a signature. Because the inner envelope is needed for signature verification, a ballot submitted without this inner envelope results in ballot rejection. During the 2020 primary, out of about 40,000 absentee ballots that were rejected, about 6,000 ballots (about 15%) [were rejected](#) for omitting signature certifications.

Absentee ballots had other instructions, too, concerning the external return envelope. In order to ensure that each absentee ballot came from a verifiable registered voter, ballot materials usually instructed voters to put their signature on a specific line of the return envelope. In some states, this process also required the voter to have a witness and/or notary sign the return envelope on another specific line, attesting to the fact that the identified voter did complete the

absentee ballot. And some states required voters to include a copy of their driver's license or other government-issued identification.

The most common reasons for rejection were lateness and issues regarding signatures. A [report by the Michigan](#) secretary of state said that, of the 10,694 absentee ballots rejected during the primary, 6,405 were rejected for arriving after the deadline and 1,438 did not have the required voter signature. Among the other reasons for rejection were 31 instances of voters having failed to put their ballots in their return envelopes, 787 instances of the voter's signature not matching the signature election officials had on file, and 846 voters' ballots were rejected because the voter died before election day. In [Georgia's 2020 primary](#), less than 1% of return ballots were rejected, but 27% of rejected ballots were not counted because of signature issues. And approximately [70% of the 23,000 votes](#) rejected in the Wisconsin [presidential primary held in August](#) were scrapped due to signature issues.

In [New York](#), particularly New York City, a skyrocketing number of COVID-19 cases less than two months before the June 23 primary, triggered an unprecedented demand for absentee ballots, so much that [printing firms](#) could not keep up with the demand for ballots. Then, there were complaints that ballots were arriving without return envelopes. One in five absentee ballots cast by New York City voters was rejected, many because they arrived too late or arrived without a postmark.

In many states with August primaries and runoff elections, voters who signed up for absentee ballots reported never receiving a ballot or receiving a ballot too late to mail it back by the deadline. In some cases, the missing or delayed ballots were attributed to delays and service changes at the U.S. Postal Service. An internal audit by the USPS of "Election and Political Mail" during primaries and special elections between April and June of 2020 in seven postal service areas across the country found that about 1.6 million pieces of election mail were undelivered. The USPS report said that represented about eight percent of 20.2 million pieces of election mail processed during that time.

The [Postal Service](#) said the problems were often related to ballot design. Many ballot return envelopes had no barcode tracking capability. For others, the size of the ballot envelope made processing by postal machines difficult. The requirement by many states that ballot envelopes be postmarked slowed down the service of absentee ballots, leaving "insufficient time for the Postal Service to process and deliver" the election mail.

Delivery problems had serious consequences in some states. In Michigan, nearly 6,500 ballots were [thrown out](#) from the March 10 primary because they were not received until after election day. In Ohio, two weeks after the state's April 28 primary, two postal workers delivered more

than 300 absentee ballots found sitting in a postal warehouse. According to an [investigation by ProPublica](#), an independent, non-profit investigative news agency, “voters and election officials have been confronting the new reality of the Postal Service: delivery times slowed by years of budget cuts and plant closures.” The investigation found “significant delays and mistakes in delivering ballots in Indiana, New Jersey, Maryland, Ohio, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C.” during the primaries.

Connecticut, which had never before conducted an election with significant use of mail voting, experienced [significant delays](#) (including disruption of mail service) due to power outages caused by tropical storm Isaiiah and by an administrative error that led to 20,000 ballots being mailed late or not at all. (These delays prompted Governor Ned Lamont to take [executive action](#) guaranteeing—for the August primary only—that the state would count all ballots postmarked by election day and received within two days.)

## D. Legal Uncertainty

For most first-time absentee voters, the 2020 primary was the first time they navigated the ballot return process. But even long-time users of absentee ballots had to keep track of changes in many procedural requirements prompted during the coronavirus pandemic. For the March primary, Missouri law required all absentee voters to have their signature on the return envelope notarized; but, by June, the state legislature had passed [SB 631](#) to exempt coronavirus-vulnerable populations from that requirement for the state’s [August primary](#). The governor also issued an [executive order](#) enabling voters subject to the notary requirement to satisfy that requirement through audio-video technologies, rather than appearing in person before a notary.

In the [Wisconsin primary](#), a federal district court [required](#) election officials to waive the witness signature requirement for voters who live alone if the voters included a note explaining why they were unable to obtain a witness signature. Just two days later, however, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit [stayed](#) that portion of the district court’s order. The effect of the stay was not effectively communicated to all voters, and Madison election [officials, for example, were forced to throw out at least 142 absentee ballots](#) in which voters had included a note, believing it would excuse them from the witness signature requirement.

Although the spread of coronavirus did not drastically alter Michigan’s March 10 presidential primary, it propelled the state to significantly alter its election system immediately following the March election. Officials put emergency [policies](#) in place specifically to handle the May 5 municipal elections and introduced additional proposals for the August primary and November

general election. While some localities resolved to carry out municipal elections as scheduled, about half of jurisdictions with May 5 elections [postponed them to August](#).

### E. Drive thrus, drop boxes, and drop offs

As states grappled with the rise in mail-balloting, they considered alternatives to the U.S. Postal Service for receipt of absentee ballots. Vote-By-Mail states, such as Oregon, have successfully employed alternatives to the U.S. Mail for many elections, and in some states a minority of “mail” ballots are actually sent through the mail. However, the topic of ballot “drop boxes” proved to be a controversial one stretching through the primary season into the general election and afterward.

During the 2016 general election, nearly [one in six voters](#) nationwide cast their ballot using drop boxes, which had become an increasingly popular option for voters during the 2020 primaries. While some states have successfully used ballot drop boxes for years, the coronavirus pandemic expanded the practice throughout the United States, particularly as election officials began expressing concern about the U.S. Postal Service’s capacity to reliably deliver absentee ballots on time. Although some states, such as Tennessee, still prohibited the use of ballot drop boxes, citing risk of voter fraud, at least 34 states used ballot drop boxes in 2020.

Some states piloted or expanded programs of setting up official election “[drop boxes](#).” Unlike U.S. Postal Service mailboxes, these county-administered ballot drop off boxes are serviced directly by election officials, who count every ballot deposited. Drop boxes come in a variety of forms. Some are staffed, others are not. Some are placed indoors, whereas others are outdoor boxes that are locked, anchored, tamper-proof, and often monitored by [24-hour video surveillance](#).

Other states set up drive-thru options, permitting voters to hand deliver their absentee ballots outside polling places. In Minnesota, election officials piloted a “[drive-thru](#)” drop box model in its August 11 primary that enabled voters to deposit their absentee ballots into a secure receptacle without getting out of their cars. Many voters who didn’t want to entrust their absentee ballots to drop boxes also had the option of dropping off their ballots with election officials at in-person voting locations. In Wisconsin, election officials reported that many voters came to [hand deliver](#) their ballots at early voting locations the week leading up to the election.

## F. Delays and Disputes Over Ballot Counting

The now-infamous disputes over ballot-counting in the 2020 general election were previewed in the primary elections. The high rate of absentee balloting caused delays and disputes in states without a long tradition of absentee balloting. In [Wisconsin](#), the Elections Commission met days after the April 7 primary to discuss how to count absentee ballots whose postmarks were missing, illegible, or did not include a date. This issue resulted in [political gridlock](#)—Democrats on the commission wanted a method of counting that would have included more absentee ballots without date stamps, while Republicans wanted a method that would have counted fewer. The Elections Commission [ultimately decided very little](#) and left it to each municipality to determine whether ballots were postmarked timely.

New York's high rate of absentee voting resulted in a counting delay, with two races [left undecided](#) for six weeks. These delays—in the 12th and 15th Congressional Districts—were due in large part to the fact that mail ballots take longer to process and that more than 10 times the number of voters used absentee ballots in these primaries than in past elections. Since each mail ballot must be opened and verified, the counting process can be cumbersome and lengthy. Furthermore, some officials described a [lack of sufficient BOE staff](#) to process the ballots.

Due to a settlement in a lawsuit, *LaRose v. Simon*, Minnesota voters were guaranteed that their ballots would be counted as long as they were postmarked by election day and received by election officials within two days of the election—a change that resulted in [8,400 ballots](#) being received and tabulated the Wednesday and Thursday after election day.

## IV. Voting in-person in the 2020 primaries

Although mail voting increased substantially in the primaries held after the initial pandemic surge, a substantial number of voters still voted in person. Election officials needed to find ways to ensure sufficient, adequately staffed polling places that allowed for voting while maintaining social distance. For many states this required an increase in the use of voting centers and non-traditional polling places, as well as expansion of opportunities for in-person early voting.

## A. Increased use of early voting

Each state sets its own rules concerning how many days it will provide for early voting and how many days before election day it will occur and will stop. According to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), 43 states and the District of Columbia provided an early voting option going into the 2020 primaries. (The states making no provision for early voting in the 2020 primaries were Connecticut, Delaware, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, and South Carolina.) Kentucky was one of those no early voting states going into the primaries but, on April 24, Governor Andy Beshear signed an [executive order](#) permitting what he called “in-person absentee voting” to begin two weeks ahead of the state’s delayed primary.

In Arizona, the state’s most populous county, [Maricopa County](#), had 80 early voting centers available by August 1, and 20 additional centers opened by August 2, ahead of the state’s [August 4 primary](#). In [Coconino County](#), voters could participate in emergency early voting if they completed a form stating that they had an emergency and needed to vote early. Importantly, voters did not have to disclose the specifics of the emergency or prove that they had health-related vulnerabilities.

Many voters who did not want to entrust their absentee ballots to the postal service or drop boxes also had the option of dropping off their ballots with election officials at in-person early voting locations. In Wisconsin, election officials reported that many voters came to [hand deliver](#) their ballots at early voting locations the week leading up to the election.

## B. Ensuring a Sufficient Number of Polling Places

The pandemic required states reconsider each aspect of the in-person voting experience. They needed to make sure polling places could ensure social distancing, that poll workers were adequately trained, and that voters could cast their ballots in ways that limited the potential for contagion. They also needed to plan for an uncertain number of in-person voters given the late and significant rise in absentee balloting.

In [South Carolina](#), [hundreds](#) of established polling sites were [consolidated or relocated](#). Although election boards stated they would [notify](#) impacted voters, many voters were unaware of the changes until election day. For voters who did not have access to cars and who relied on public transit or relatives for rides, the polling place changes were particularly difficult to overcome and disproportionately affected Black voters and voters with low incomes. For example, in Richland County, six out of the ten precincts that experienced the [greatest increase](#)

[in distance](#) between the original precinct location and the new voting location had majority Black voters.

[Nevada](#) provided for only limited in-person polling sites, recommending it be used only for voters with disabilities who needed help casting their ballots and voters who registered online after the May 21 registration deadline to receive a mail ballot for the June 9 primary. [In 15 of Nevada's 17 counties](#), only one in-person voting location was available. Clark County, home to 74 percent of the state's population, offered 3 locations, down from 172 in the 2018 primary and 265 in the 2016 primary. Nye County offered only [two locations](#).

[Texas](#) had steadily reduced the number of in-person voting places in the state, eliminating 750 between 2012 and 2020. Of those, 542 served 50 counties with the largest growth in Black and Latinx residents. Only [34](#) were in the 50 counties with the *smallest* growth in Black and Latinx residents. The cuts in some counties (such as [Harris County](#) and [Travis County](#)) resulted in lines that forced primary voters in 2020 to wait as long as three to six hours to cast ballots. At Texas Southern University, the city's historically black college, voters were still in line at 1 a.m., [six hours after polls closed](#), on the March 3 primary. The Texas Civil Rights Project [explained on social media](#) that this was a predictable trend across Harris County elections. The county clerk released [a statement](#) acknowledging the lack of sufficient polling locations and its impact on marginalized communities, stating, "It is clear that the history of marginalized communities being left behind in the voting process has led to polling deserts in areas of Harris County."

Many places that normally served as polling places in [Georgia](#) were [closed](#) due to the coronavirus pandemic. [These locations](#) included senior centers, schools, churches, and municipal buildings. Fulton County, the state's most populous county, lost [more than 30](#) of its typical 198 polling locations for primary voting. As election day drew closer, the number of closed polling places continued to rise, ultimately resulting in [more than 10 percent](#) of Georgia's polling places closing. Some local officials noted having no other alternative given their current financial and operational situations. However, in Fulton County, election officials partnered with the Atlanta Hawks of the National Basketball Association to [transform Atlanta's State Farm Arena](#) into the state's largest-ever polling place. The arena opened for early voting on July 20 for the state's primary runoff on August 11.

For its March 17 Democratic [presidential primary](#), Arizona's largest county, Maricopa County, cut more than [one third](#) of its usual number of polling locations (about 80 locations), [leaving it with only 151 voting locations](#). However, the remaining polling places were converted into "vote centers" where any county voter could vote, regardless of the location of their original voting place. The voting centers also served as drop off locations for absentee ballots. Maricopa County additionally had to relocate five polling places away from senior living facilities.

## C. Ensuring Safe Polling Places

During the primary election period the CDC, for the first time, issued [guidance](#) concerning operation of polling places during the pandemic. This guidance covered everything from protecting the health of poll workers to sanitizing voting machines to physical distance of voting booths. States issued their own guidance in this vein while also experimenting with other means of voting with social distancing.

Pennsylvania's Department of State, on April 28, released [updated guidance](#) for staffing and managing polling places for its [rescheduled primary](#) on June 2. The guidance included recommendations for:

- Remote training for poll workers, including online Q&A sessions and pre-recorded videos
- Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as gloves and masks, for poll workers
- Physically marking out spaces six-feet apart to guide voters standing in line to maintain a safe distance
- Posting poll workers as “greeters” at polling sites to alert voters to the need to follow social-distancing protocols
- Making hand sanitizer available to poll workers and voters, on entry and exit, from polling places
- Maintaining separate check-in and polling areas at voting centers where several precincts were “consolidated” to share the same polling place.

In early May, Pennsylvania released further guidance, requiring a [minimum of five poll workers](#) at each polling place regardless of how many precincts it serves. In Pennsylvania, Philadelphia election officials teamed up with a nonpartisan group to sponsor a “[Voteswagon](#)” van to drive around in various communities in Philadelphia to gather absentee ballots.

[In Wisconsin and other states](#), some jurisdictions enabled “curbside voting,” where [poll workers wearing protective face shields](#) accepted ballots from voters who drove up in their cars. Some Milwaukee polling places [offered curbside early voting](#), while the City of Burlington [used a drive-through polling place system](#) in lieu of all in-person voting. Madison offered curbside voting for those who could not enter polling places due to illness or disability.

Arizona's Native American community also took helpful measures to support in-person voting. The executive director of the Navajo Department of Health issued an [emergency order](#) (EO No.

2020-009) declaring voting an essential activity. That exempted voters of the Navajo Nation from curfews and stay-at-home orders while they pursued the right to vote. In light of the pandemic-related closures of government buildings traditionally used for in-person voting, Navajo leaders developed creative new voting venues. In Coconino County, for example, leaders [set up outdoor voting](#), and the secretary of state's office sent mobile-hand washing stations. Other Native voters on reservations had limited opportunities for early voting, however. The Pascua Yaqui Tribe in southern Arizona [has not had an early voting site since 2018](#), when election officials in the Pima County Recorder office canceled the site without consulting with tribal leaders. Canceling the site forced many tribal members to travel up to two hours round-trip on public transportation to vote early.

## D. Ensuring Sufficient Numbers of Poll Workers

The challenge of recruiting adequate numbers of poll workers during the pandemic became clear during the primary elections. When Wisconsin faced a shortage of 7,000 poll workers statewide for its primary, Governor Tony Evers took the unprecedented action of mobilizing 2,400 members of the Wisconsin National Guard to serve as poll workers in 71 out of 72 Wisconsin counties. Even so, Milwaukee election officials had to slash the number of voting places for the April 7 primary from 186 to five. Arizona's poll worker deficit was alleviated when the governor issued an executive order allowing state employees to take civic leave on election day to serve as poll workers. And Michigan's secretary of state's office partnered with the Detroit Pistons professional basketball team to launch a program encouraging Pistons employees to volunteer as poll workers in the August primary. These and other accommodations are discussed further in our separate report discussing [poll worker recruitment](#).

## V. Conclusion

For the 2020 primaries, run-offs, and special elections leading up to the November general election, the coronavirus pandemic required state and local election officials in most states to re-configure the existing infrastructure for voting. They had to greatly expand the capacity for voters to use absentee ballots—mail and drop off—and they had to reconstruct in-person polling places to ensure voters could exercise their rights without endangering their health. Officials had to accomplish all this in a year when voter turnout was unusually high and when the public's understanding of the coronavirus disease and prevention was only just beginning. Many, if not most, of the adaptations made by election officials during these primaries were carried over to the general elections. These adaptations made it possible for the nation to

prepare for a general election with record-setting turnout despite the most significant public health crisis in a century.

## Appendix A: List of 2020 Primary Reports

This report draws extensively from research which first appeared in coverage of the primaries by the Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections Project. Our researchers wrote over 30 of memos analyzing state primary elections, published on our site through the summer and fall:

### **August Primaries**

[“Rehearsal for November: An Analysis of Seventeen August State Elections,”](#) Bree Baccaglini, Inesha Premaratne, Megan Selbach-Allen, Sawyer Skye Lucas-Griffin, Annika Khouri, Alex Stout, Amanda Zerbe (August 26, 2020)

### **Arizona**

[“Arizona’s 2020 Elections in the Wake of COVID,”](#) Mike Norton, Zahavah Levine, Sophia Danielpour, Rebecca Smalbach, and Joven Hundal (August 4, 2020)

[“Arizona’s Election Readiness after the August 4 Primary,”](#) Zahavah Levine, Ali Bloomgarden, Joven Hundal and Sophia Danielpour (September 25, 2020)

### **California**

[“The 2020 California Special Elections,”](#) Jacob McCall, Justin Abbey, Alex Finan, and Anna Milstein (July 8, 2020)

### **Florida**

[“Florida Election Analysis,”](#) Diana Cao (June 24, 2020)

[“Florida Elections in the Wake of COVID-19,”](#) Mikaela Pyatt, Annie Warnke, Emily Handsel, Jose Gandara (July 22, 2020)

[“Florida ‘General Election Readiness’ Memo,”](#) Lane Corrigan, Chasity Hale, Emily Handsel, Mikaela Pyatt (September 28, 2020)

### **Georgia**

[“The June 2020 Georgia Primary Election,”](#) Aryn Frazier, Mikayla Harris, Valerie Rincon, and Nicolas Sligh (July 28, 2020)

[“Georgia Primary Election Analysis,”](#) Kevin DeLuca (September 15, 2020)

### **Iowa**

[“The 2020 Iowa Primary,”](#) Tait Anderson, Andrew Freiwald, Michael Jacobs, Jenny Liu, Kimberly Valladares (August 3, 2020)

### **Kentucky**

[“Kentucky Election Policies and Readiness,”](#) Miye D’Oench, Axel Hufford, Kai Kato, Lusha Jetley, and Anastasiia Malenko (July 10, 2020)

[“Kentucky Election Analysis,”](#) Diana Cao, John Curiel (September 10, 2020)

### **Maine**

[“Maine Election Analysis,”](#) Jesse T. Clark (September 3, 2020)

### **Michigan**

[“Michigan and the Road to November,”](#) Lauren Libby, Elizabeth Jongeward, Sara Watson, Evan Kanji, Tess Stewart, Serena Cervantes and Maira Martinez (September 18, 2020)

### **Minnesota**

[“The 2020 Minnesota Primary,”](#) Michael Jacobs, Spencer McManus, Yegina Whang, Carlos Martinez (August 6, 2020)

### **Nevada**

[“The 2020 Nevada Primary,”](#) Ken Kuwayti, Thomas Hopkins, Sean Kang, Max Levy (July 10, 2020)

### **New Hampshire**

[“New Hampshire’s 2020 Elections in the Wake of COVID-19,”](#) Miye D’Oench, Axel Hufford, Lusha Jetley, and Anastasiia Malenko (June 26, 2020)

### **New Mexico**

[“The 2020 New Mexico Primary,”](#) Michael Jacobs, Spencer McManus, Susana Herrera, Melody Wong (July 17, 2020)

### **New York**

[“New York’s Primary Election: Challenges in the Lead-Up to November,”](#) Georgia Rosenberg and Campbell Jenkins (August 23, 2020)

### **North Carolina**

[“North Carolina Election Analysis,”](#) Blair Read (July 19, 2020)

[“North Carolina’s 2020 Election Preparations,”](#) William Janover, Kyra Jasper, Campbell Jenkins, Christopher Middleton, Megha Parwani, Sandy Pecht, Georgia Rosenberg, Indy Sobol (August 27, 2020)

### **Ohio**

[“The 2020 Ohio Primary,”](#) Jennifer Friedmann, Mohit Mookim, Michelle Ly, Cristopher Maximos, VinhHuy Le (June 25, 2020)

[“Ohio’s 2020 Presidential Primary,”](#) Pia Deshpande (July 27, 2020)

### **Pennsylvania**

[“The 2020 Pennsylvania Primary Election,”](#) Jerry Yan, Nicole Collins, Bill Wermuth, Jeffrey Rodriguez, Mateo Massey, Sarah Maung, Sreya Guha (June 25, 2020)

[“Pennsylvania Election Readiness,”](#) Jacob McCall and Jules Ross (August 17, 2020)

[“Pennsylvania Election Analysis,”](#) Diana Cao, Angelo Dagonel, Pia Deshpande (August 20, 2020)

### **South Carolina**

[“The 2020 South Carolina Primary,”](#) Colette Mayer, Aaron Bray, Theresa Tan, Tiffany Allen, and Tom Abate (July 20, 2020)

### **Texas**

[“Texas 2020 Elections: Preparations and Considerations,”](#) Kenneth Kuwayti, Sarah Stothart, Michelle Larg, Hanna Balcha and Zachary Quinlan (July 10, 2020)

[“Texas Primary Election Analysis,”](#) Kevin DeLuca and Blair Read (September 14, 2020)

### **Wisconsin**

[“Wisconsin’s 2020 Primary in the Wake of COVID-19,”](#) Grace Scullion, Peter Prindville, Lexi Rubow, Bea Phi, Jef Rodriguez, Joaquin Garcia, Alison Cohen (June 30, 2020)

[“Wisconsin Election Analysis,”](#) John Curiel and Angelo Dagonel (August 6, 2020)

[“Wisconsin’s August 11 Partisan Primary Election,”](#) Bronte Kass, Bea Phi, Joaquin Garcia, and Daphne Thompson (September 16, 2020)