Coronavirus—Impact on Elections

An overview of the potential impact of the coronavirus on the 2020 presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial elections.

July 30, 2020

Producer: National Journal Presentation Center
The coronavirus outbreak has already impacted the 2020 elections

**Changes to the election calendar**
- States have postponed their presidential and congressional primary elections in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.
- Some states have also opted to make their primaries all-mail elections.
- Although many states were able to easily decide to alter their primary dates, it is unlikely that the general election on Nov. 3rd will be postponed.
- Since the general election is set by federal law, Congress would have to enact legislation to change the date.

**The digital campaign trail**
- Campaigns have also had to suspend in-person rallies, fundraising events, and some organizing activities.
- In lieu of gatherings, candidates have opted to engage voters digitally.
- Joe Biden has launched a podcast and Sen. Bernie Sanders (VT) had regularly posted live speeches and hosted virtual events through Facebook.
- Congressional candidates will also have to turn to digital engagement as candidates self-quarantine and limit events.

**Voter turnout**
- Before the coronavirus outbreak, the 2020 election was expected to have a high voter turnout compared to recent elections.
- Turnout for Illinois’ primary on March 17th was lower by about 25% than the 2016 primary and Illinois did not have extensive early voting or voting by mail measures.
- Arizona’s turnout for the March 17th election increased from 2016 and has extensive early voting and vote by mail measures.

**Incumbent performance**
- The greater need for digital advertising due to lower in-person engagement is likely to favor incumbents and candidates with a financial advantage.
- Incumbents at the federal, state, and local level are also likely to be judged on how they prepared and responded to the coronavirus crisis.

Sources: New York Times, Roll Call, CNN. Ashley Thieme | Slide last updated on: April 2, 2020
State officials are beginning to consider expanding voting options for November in case COVID-19 still poses a threat.

### No-excuse absentee (mailed) ballot voting
- **29 states** and Washington, D.C. allow any voter who requests an absentee ballot to vote via mail without offering an excuse.
- 5 states have all-mail elections, meaning all registered voters are sent a ballot in the mail that they can use to vote; these states still maintain some in-person polling stations.

### Excuse-required absentee ballot voting
- **16 states** only award absentee ballots to voters who provide an excuse, which must be one of the specific excuses delineated by state law.
- Excuses often include but are not limited to: being out of the county on Election Day, having an illness or disability, or being of an elderly age.

### Early in-person voting
- **40 states** and Washington, D.C. will offer an early in-person voting option for the 2020 elections.
- State law dictates early voting details, such as time, location, and duration.
- Length of early voting periods range from 4 to 45 days; the average length across states is 19 days.

### Percent voter turnout by voting method in past general elections

- **Election Day voting**
- **Voting by mail**
- **Early in-person voting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Election Day</th>
<th>Voting by Mail</th>
<th>Early in-Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experts in voter turnout predict that **ballots cast by mail could double** in November 2020 from 2016 levels.

*Sources: NCSL, Vox, The Atlantic.*
A number of states have expanded voting options for elections due to COVID-19

Vote by mail rules for federal elections
AS OF AUGUST 11, 2020

Typical mail voting policy (outline)
- Automatic mail-in voting
- No-excuse absentee voting
- Excuse required for absentee voting

Changes to mail voting due to COVID-19 (fill)
- Automatic mail-in ballots due to COVID-19
- Automatic mail-in ballot applications due to COVID-19
- Eligibility expanded to allow voters to use absentee ballots due to COVID-19
- Extended mail-in ballot deadline
- Other process change
- N/A

Sources: Ballotpedia.
There are many policy options that could decrease crowding on Election Day

For states with excuse-required absentee ballots
- Expanding the list of acceptable excuses for receiving a mailed ballot in states that currently require an excuse
- Implementing no-excuse absentee ballots
- Prepare for an increase absentee ballots, regardless of expanding availability

For states with early voting
- Increasing the length of early in-person voting periods
- Keeping early voting locations open on Election Day
- Expanding the dates of early voting to include voting on the weekends and expanding hours of operation

For all states
- Relaxing rules associated with absentee ballot submission (e.g. requiring notarization)
- Consolidating polling locations to decrease the amount of poll workers needed
- Expanding curbside voting, whereby poll workers bring a ballot or ballot-marking device to the voter’s car, which is sometimes used for voters with disabilities

Debate on elections reform

Opponents
- President Trump has argued that mailed ballots result in increased voter fraud and will ultimately harm the Republican party
- Other members of the GOP are more opposed to the federal government dictating elections laws and taking power away from the states, where they argue it belongs

Supporters
- Democrats and elections experts point out that using mailed ballots does not cause voter fraud and officials must ensure people are able to vote safely
- Despite comments by Trump, the RNC has mailed voters urging them to protect themselves and use mailed ballots, and GOP governors have begun increasing access to mailed ballots in their states
Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Ron Wyden introduced legislation in March to federally mandate expanding voting options

**S.3529 — Natural Disaster and Emergency Ballot Act (NDEBA) of 2020**

**Bill overview**
- Ensures all states have at least a 20-day early in-person voting period and a no-excuse absentee vote-by-mail option
- Requires states to begin processing, but not counting, early votes 14 days before Election Day to avoid delays
- Guarantees the counting of all absentee ballots postmarked or signed before the close of polls on Election Day and received within ten days of Election Day
- Requires all voter registration applications submitted by mail or online at least 21 days prior to Election Day be deemed valid; states can choose a deadline closer to Election Day
- Requires states to provide downloadable and printable absentee ballots to voters who request but do not receive an absentee ballot by Election Day
- Requires a specific signature curing procedure for voters (in most states, signature verification is used to verify that an absentee ballot is sent by the intended voter)
- Authorizes necessary funds for reimbursing states for the costs of implementing the act
- Provides an additional $3 million to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC)

**Status in Congress**
- **Senate:** Read twice and referred to the Committee on Rules and Administration (3/18/20)

**Sen. Warren’s proposal**
- Sen. Elizabeth Warren released her own proposal at the beginning of April
- Though she supports passage of the NDEBA, she believes Congress should go further and require all states to mail every registered voter a ballot with pre-paid postage and a self-sealing envelope

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**Sen. Amy Klobuchar**
(D-MN)
Bill sponsor

**Sen. Ron Wyden**
(D-OR)
Bill sponsor

Co-sponsors: 36
Dem 35
Ind 1
GOP 0

Sources: Congress.gov; Office of Senator Ron Wyden.
Slide last updated on: July 30, 2020
The COVID-19 outbreak impacted both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions

### Changes to the Democratic primary calendar
- States have postponed their presidential primary elections in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak
- A number of states have primaries slated after the June 9th DNC deadline
- If a state does not complete its primary by the DNC deadline, current rules penalize the state by halving their number of national delegates
- A DNC official stated that states may be able to submit a waiver to dismiss the penalties
- In a March 17th statement, DNC chair Tom Perez encouraged states to implement all-mail voting and provide ballots to voters in lieu of postponing state primaries

### Presidential debates
- The last debate Democratic debate took place on March 15th between Sen. Bernie Sanders (VT) and Former Vice President Joe Biden; the debate was moved from California in order to reduce cross-country travel
- The debate had no live audience and neither candidate had a press filing center or spin room following the debate
- The first general election debate was scheduled for Sept. 29th in Notre Dame, IN but has been moved to Case Western University in Cleveland, OH due to the COVID-19 outbreak
- Case Western has announced it will establish “risk-mitigation procedures” including crowd limits and distanced seats

### National party conventions
- The DNC was originally planned for July 13-16 in Milwaukee, WI, but it was postponed to August 17-20; the DNC announced the convention would still be anchored in Milwaukee, but state delegations were urged not to travel to the city, and the convention would include live broadcasts and curated content from Milwaukee and other locations across the country
- The was originally planned for August 24-27 in Charlotte, NC, but the schedule was altered to have certain days take place in Jacksonville, FL; on July 23rd, Trump cancelled the Jacksonville event and announced he would be accepting the nomination in NC

Illinois

- Voter turnout in the Illinois primary was roughly 25% less than it was in 2016
- Voters experienced significant Election Day confusion due to last minute changes to polling locations and poll workers failing to show up
- Illinois is a state that does not make extensive use of early voting or vote by mail

Wisconsin

- Gov. Tony Evers (D) attempted to either conduct their Apr. 7 elections by mail or delay in-person voting to June 9, but both attempts were blocked by the either the Republican-controlled state legislature and the Wisconsin Supreme Court
- Citizens filed suit and won a one-week extension for returning their mailed ballots via a federal court order, giving them until Apr. 13
- However, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling the day before the election, meaning voters who had not received absentee ballots by Election Day would have to vote in person
- In the end, voter turnout in the election decreased by roughly 10% compared to 2016 levels
- Over one million absentee votes were cast, compared to 145,000 in the 2016 general election, and absentee ballots comprised roughly 80% of all votes cast

Florida

- Voter turnout in the Florida primary was greater than it was in 2016, which many elections officials attribute to heavy investment in early-voting systems and strongly encouraging voters to use early voting and vote-by-mail
- Compared to 2016, 140,000 more Democrats voted by mail and nearly 75,000 more voted early

Sources: The Atlantic; NPR; Axios; New York Times; FiveThirtyEight; CNN.
Voting begins soon for those who will cast votes by mail

When ballots begin being sent out in competitive presidential states

- 9/4
- 9/24 – 9/30
- 10/9 – 10/15
- 9/17 - 9/23
- 10/1 – 10/8

Sources: Cook Political Report

Slide last updated on: July 30, 2020

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The coronavirus outbreak is likely to impact congressional fundraising and races

**Competitive races in the house**
- The coronavirus outbreak caused states to delay spring primary and runoff dates, put the recruitment process for the House on hold, and limited fundraising
- This significantly benefits incumbents and puts recent entrants at a disadvantage
- Since the Democrats are on ‘defense’ in the House this cycle, they hold an advantage as a party

**Corporate PACs**
- PACs may have difficulty delivering on checks pledged to campaigns at in-person fundraisers
- Many Corporate PACs still rely on delivering checks (which may require more than one signature); this may prove difficult as more and more workers shift to remote work

**Party fundraising**
- Committees for both parties have had to emphasize online fundraising after cancelling events
- The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee’s executive director commented that the decision to cancel events “will cost us money...A large chunk of our fundraising will dry up”

**COVID-19 relief efforts**
- Some candidates are encouraging donations for coronavirus relief efforts
- ActBlue, the Democratic fundraising platform has received more than $5 million in donations focused on coronavirus relief
- Sen. Martha McSally (R-AZ), whose race is rated as a Toss Up, has suspended her fundraising and pledged to donate her paycheck to COVID-19 aid


Ashley Thieme | Slide last updated on: April 2, 2020
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