

Lessons from the Primary Elections — Executive Summary

The 2020 presidential primary season was among the most challenging in recent history. State and local officials were required to conduct elections under extraordinary circumstances, including a global pandemic, a related economic crisis, and in the latter part of the primary season, widespread civil unrest. Many state and local officials rose to the occasion and managed to conduct primary elections with relative success. There were also significant failures that left voters disenfranchised and risked the health of voters and election workers alike.

The National Task Force on Election Crises is a diverse, cross-partisan group of experts formed to ensure a free and fair 2020 presidential election. In order to learn from the experiences during the primaries and improve for the general election, the Task Force has issued this report with analysis of what worked well—and what didn't—during the primaries, along with recommendations for November. The goal is to help state and local officials, as well as the media, prepare for what is likely to be a historic general election.

EARLY VOTING WAS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF MAKING VOTING SAFER AND MORE ACCESSIBLE.

Early voting is critical to lessening the pressure and risks associated with in-person voting on Election Day, and offers an alternative to voters who are not willing or able to vote by mail. Challenges during the primaries included insufficient early voting periods and other restrictions, as well as problems of poll worker recruitment and retention. For November, election officials should ensure reasonable early voting periods, eliminate unnecessary restrictions, and promote the availability and benefits of early voting widely.

ABSENTEE VOTING PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN VOTING DURING A PANDEMIC.

Record numbers of people voted by mail during the primaries, which was in a sense itself a success. But it also led to serious challenges, including ensuring timely ballot delivery and return, accommodating voters with differing needs, and high rates of ballot rejection. For November, election officials should prepare for continued wide-scale voting by mail, including by eliminating or modifying excuse requirements, making it easier for voters to request and return absentee ballots, investing in ballot tracking technology, allowing ballot return through secure drop-boxes and other means, and processing mailed ballots before Election Day.

IN-PERSON VOTING ON ELECTION DAY CONTINUED TO BE A CRUCIAL OPTION FOR MANY VOTERS.

Eliminating or restricting in-person voting options can lead to disproportionate burdens on certain communities, which was a significant problem during the primaries. In addition to jurisdictions that cancelled in-person Election Day voting entirely, the challenges included poll worker recruitment, retention, and training, polling place closures, long lines to vote, and insufficient communication with voters and poll workers. Success in November will depend on early and aggressive poll worker recruitment, ensuring adequate training and supplies, and other measures to anticipate and mitigate these problems.

OFFICIAL COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA COVERAGE WERE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT.

Before, during, and after Election Day, election officials and the media should ensure that voters are informed of any changes to their rights or obligations in a timely fashion. It will also be important to educate the public on the mechanics of the election, and to manage expectations around the likely time frame for counting votes and reporting results. And the media should take care to provide context when reporting on election results, including any alleged irregularities, while also avoiding “calling” the election before the results are certain.

The National Task Force on Election Crises specifically recommends the following:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS:

Early Voting

- ✓ Maximize the early voting period
- ✓ Eliminate restrictions on early voting
- ✓ Promote early voting widely

Absentee/Mail Voting

- ✓ Qualify the COVID-19 pandemic as an “excuse” for absentee voting
- ✓ Proactively mail absentee applications to voters
- ✓ Make it easier to request absentee ballots
- ✓ Send absentee voting applications and ballots with postage prepaid
- ✓ Waive witness and notary requirements
- ✓ Allow voters to apply for absentee ballots as early as possible
- ✓ Extend deadlines for returning absentee ballots
- ✓ Expand and promote the use of ballot drop-boxes
- ✓ Promote early absentee voting applications and ballot returns
- ✓ Begin processing ballots as early as possible
- ✓ Recruit additional personnel to process ballots
- ✓ Extend canvassing and certification deadlines
- ✓ Ensure that volunteers and staff are adequately trained
- ✓ Invest in ballot-tracking and USPS barcodes
- ✓ Coordinate with the U.S. Postal Service in advance

In-Person Voting on Election Day

- ✓ Plan ahead for safe and equitable polling place locations
- ✓ Keep as many polling places open as possible
- ✓ Consider carefully consolidated voting centers when necessary
- ✓ Keep polling places open as long as possible
- ✓ Develop and advertise health and safety protocols in advance
- ✓ Aggressively (and creatively) recruit poll workers
- ✓ Ensure poll workers are adequately informed and trained
- ✓ Maximize check-in locations and create dedicated lines for voters with absentee ballot problems
- ✓ Expand curbside or drive-up voting
- ✓ Prepare for increased provisional voting
- ✓ Utilize the national guard only if necessary
- ✓ Exempt voting activities from curfew orders

Official Communications

- ✓ Keep voters informed
- ✓ Manage the public’s expectations
- ✓ Educate the public on election procedures and processes

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MEDIA:

- ✓ Prioritize experts and election officials as sources
- ✓ Educate the public on how presidential elections work
- ✓ Distinguish between absentee voting and universal vote-by-mail
- ✓ Avoid speculating about absentee voting preferences
- ✓ Report critical election information and prioritize local coverage
- ✓ Manage public expectations about the timing of election results
- ✓ Avoid speculating about the reasons for long lines on Election Day
- ✓ Ensure accurate coverage on election night and thereafter
- ✓ Provide context when reporting on irregularities
- ✓ Avoid calling the election until the outcome is clear

The full report and recommendations can be found [here](#).