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Anne Cafer, Meagen Rosenthal, & Katherine Broten

Voters are deeply engaged in the 2020 election cycle. Turnout for the presidential primary has far surpassed that of 2016 (Corsaniti et. Al 2020). Although President Trump lacks a serious contender for the Republican presidential primary, 14 million Americans have cast ballots in the election, nearing the 18 million cast in the more competitive 2012 Republican primary (Corsaniti et. Al 2020).

This upward trend in civic engagement poses serious questions on how to maintain a safe environment amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Two main areas of concern have emerged: a decrease in in-person voting due to fear of contracting the virus and possible spread of the virus at physical voting locations. In this analysis, we present data collected from primary elections from around the country and different issues and possible solutions that have emerged.
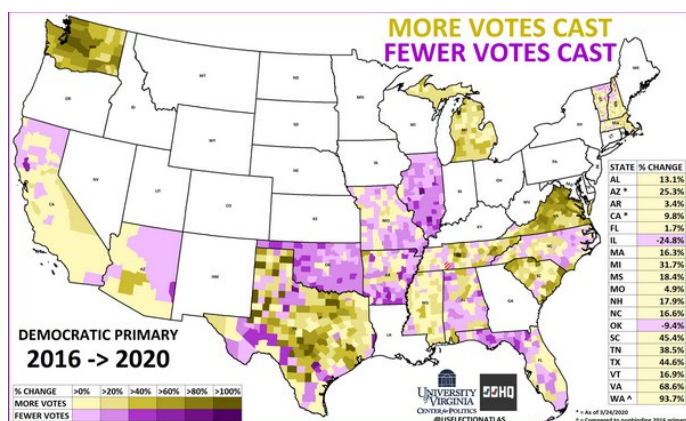
COVID-19
CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019
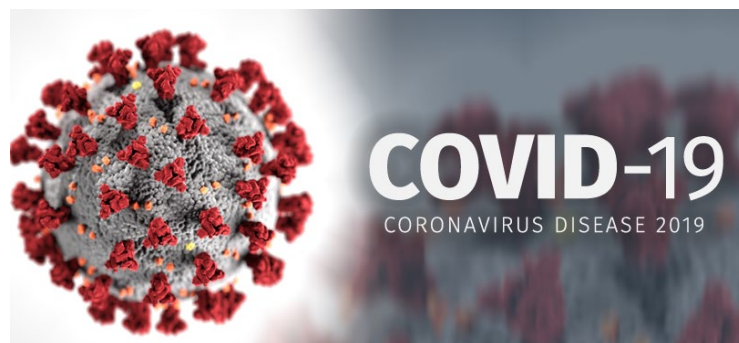
Key Recommendations

❶
Mail ballots directly to voters

❷
Increase access to and allowances for absentee voting (including fear of contracting COVID-19)

❸
If mandating in-person voting: increase number of polling stations & enforce social distancing.

MORE VOTES CAST
FEWER VOTES CAST

STATE	% CHANGE
AL	13.1%
AZ *	25.3%
AR	3.4%
CA *	9.8%
FL	1.7%
IL	-24.8%
MA	16.3%
MI	31.7%
MS	18.4%
MO	4.9%
NH	17.9%
NC	16.6%
OK	-9.4%
SC	45.4%
TN	38.5%
TX	44.6%
VT	16.9%
VA	68.6%
WA ^	93.7%

DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY
2016 -> 2020

% CHANGE	>0%	>20%	>40%	>60%	>80%	>100%
MORE VOTES						
FEWER VOTES						

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* = As of 3/24/2020
^ = Compared to nonbinding 2016 primary

Highest Recorded Percentage of Americans Say COVID-19 Situation Is Getting Worse

"What's your impression of the coronavirus situation in the U.S. today?"

■ % Getting a lot worse/Getting a little worse ■ % Getting a lot worse

GALLUP PANEL, 2020

Average daily cases per 100,000 people in the past week

8   24   40   56   Few or no cases

Double-click to zoom into the map.
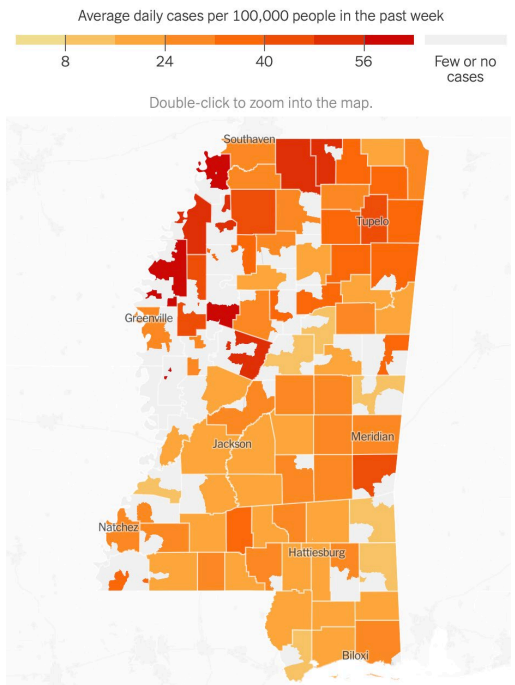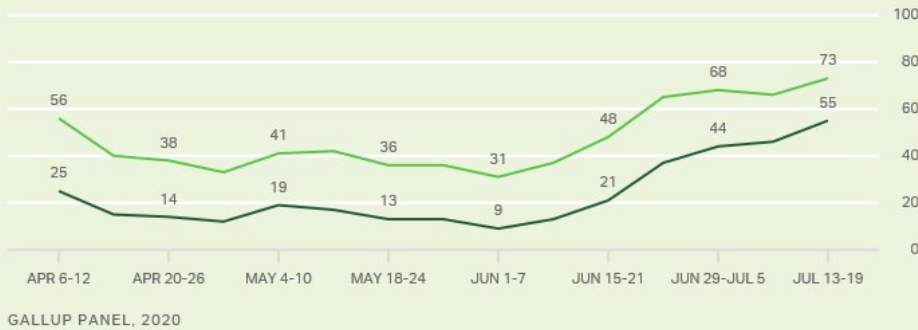
In March, when COVID-19 cases were first on the rise in the US, the state of Illinois held their primary elections. Confusion and fear surrounding the virus lead to widespread misinformation about polling locations and hours. Consequently, voter participation in many Illinois counties was down significantly. In DuPage County outside of Chicago, less than 15% of registered voters cast ballots, a historically low figure (Vesoulis 2020). Furthermore, Ohio saw the biggest decrease in voter turnout compared to previous elections in the nation. Many attributed this to the election date being changed several times and a lack of clear guidance from either the governor's office or the state legislature (Corsaniti 2020). This mirrors our own data collected in rural Mississippi that a lack of knowledge surrounding voting procedures is a considerable factor in why citizens don't vote. Changes in polling places and voting procedures due to COVID-19 adds an additional layer of confusion and can be linked to low voter turnout.

Wisconsin made national headlines when the state Supreme Court ruled that primary elections must be held in person, regardless of safety concerns. Again, this led to confusion and chaos, with the city of Milwaukee scaling down from 180 polling locations to only 5. Those attempting to vote were faced with long lines and had difficulty maintaining the advised 6 feet of distance (Chen 2020). A study conducted shortly after the election found a statistically significant correlation between election day and the spread of the virus. The Wisconsin Department of Health attributed at least 52 new cases of coronavirus to voters and poll workers (Reinmann 2020). The study also found that counties with fewer polling locations, longer lines, and more voters per location went on to have higher positive test rates than less densely trafficked locations (Reinmann 2020).

Absentee ballots and mail in voting has emerged as a popular alternative to in person voting. Approximately 70% of Americans favor allowing anyone who wants to vote by mail (Pew Research Center 2020). Indeed, voting by mail has been increasingly popular during the 2020 election cycle. Florida saw a significant decrease in in-person voting compared to 2016, but vote by mail ballots brought numbers back up to normal levels (Vesoulis 2020). Georgia, one of the few states to mail ballots to every registered voter, saw a 68% increase in voter turn out in the Democratic presidential primary compared to 2016 (Corsaniti 2020). In some states, a valid excuse is required to obtain an absentee ballot. In Tennessee, for example, the Supreme Court ruled that fear of contracting coronavirus was not a valid excuse, although those who have tested positive, believe they have been exposed to the virus, or care for someone with or experience an underlying health condition may obtain an exemption (Timms 2020).

Mississippi has been one of the hardest hit states in the nation, largely due to the high percentage of its citizens who fall under "high risk populations". As of Tuesday, August 18th, at least 73,207 cases and 2,128 deaths have been reported since the start of the pandemic (New York Times 2020). Our research suggests that many rural voters in Mississippi already identify lack of knowledge and information as a significant barrier to voting. Mississippi residents cited lack of motivation, mobilization, and information as key contributors to non-voting. Confusion surrounding in person voting has negatively affected turnout in other states, and will likely do the same in Mississippi. Additionally, states that had high in-person turnout saw an upward trend in the spread of the virus. Mississippi has already proved itself especially vulnerable to the spread and repercussions of the virus, and in-person voting could potentially exacerbate this issue.
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The additional barriers to civic participation presented by the COVID-19 pandemic can only exacerbate not only the spread of the virus, but demonstrated causes of low voter turnout. States that mailed ballots to registered voters saw higher participation rates and avoided a potential spread at the polls. States that choose to have in person voting either saw depressed rates or a spike in cases traced to polling centers. Widespread access to absentee ballots can help decrease misinformation that depresses turnout and avoid potential outbreaks at polling locations.

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By The New York Times   Updated August 24, 2020, 8:17 P.M. E.T.
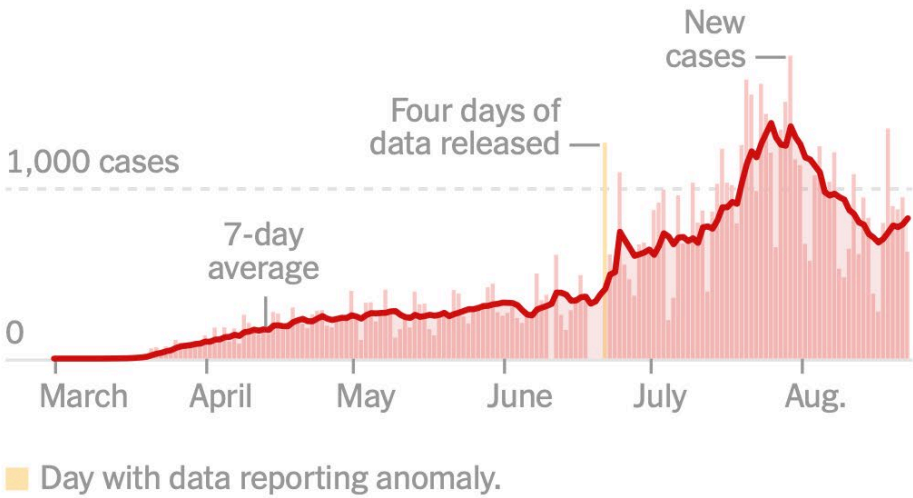
TOTAL CASES
78,405

DEATHS
2,248

Includes confirmed and probable cases where available

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