Ohio's 2020 Presidential Primary

And comparisons to 2016

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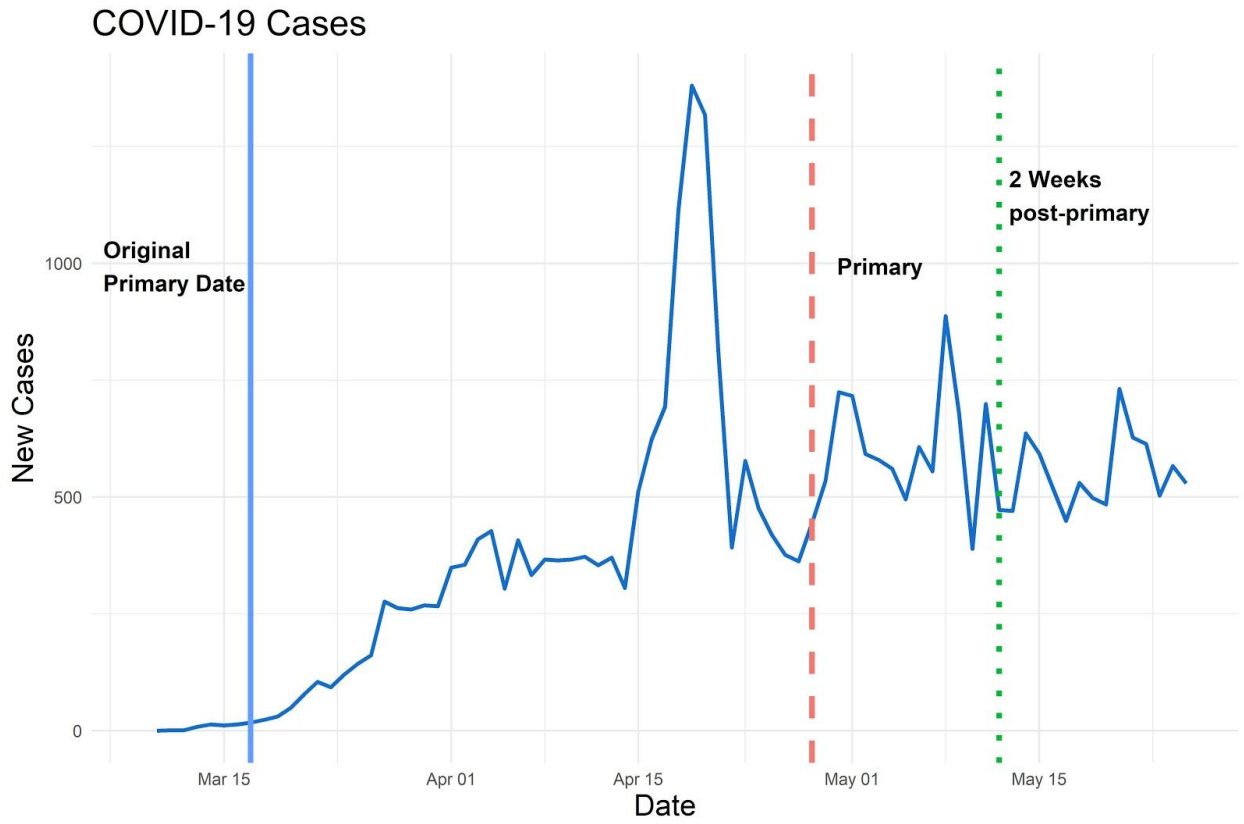
Introduction

Ohio's presidential preference primary was originally scheduled for March 17. However, on March 16, the election was postponed to April 28 due to fears surrounding the coronavirus.[1] The bill that codified how the postponed primary would be held, House Bill 197, transformed the primary into a vote-by-mail process. Under the bill, February 18, the original registration date for the primary, remained unchanged. Votes already cast in the primary, either in person or by mail, remained valid. For those who had not already voted, mail voting would remain the only option, as a general matter. (The only voters allowed to vote in person were people with disabilities and those without a permanent mailing address.) All eight million registered Ohio voters were mailed a postcard informing them of how to apply for a mail ballot.



Though the number of coronavirus cases in Ohio remained low before the original primary date in mid-March, cases spiked in mid-April, weeks before the new date for the 2020 primary. There was also a smaller surge in COVID cases just after the primary.

[1] The initial date for the primary was pushed back at the last minute, in a process that was fast-paced and often confusing. For a full accounting of this process, see the Ohio memo produced by the law student team at Stanford, also on the Healthy Elections website.

Ohio's 2020 primary included both Republican and Democratic contests. The Republican presidential nomination was essentially uncontested and Joe Biden had presumptively won the Democratic presidential nomination, after his main rival, Bernie Sanders, suspended his candidacy on April 8. There were also races for the U.S. House (in all of Ohio's congressional districts), contests for the state legislature, and local races in Cuyahoga, Fairfield, Franklin, Hamilton, and Lucas counties.

This report addresses the following questions:

- How did the pandemic and subsequent adoption of vote-by-mail affect turnout in Ohio?
    - Are there any differences between the Republican and Democratic parties?
- How did rates of absentee ballot rejections vary by county from 2016 to 2020?
- How did the move to vote-by-mail affect the rate of rejections for provisional ballots?
- How does past voting behavior predict participation in Ohio's 2020 primary?

Summary of Findings

- Turnout in Ohio's 2020 primary was only 20.8% of the voting-eligible population, 17 percentage points less than its 37.8% turnout in 2016.
    - Statewide, the number of Republican ballots cast was 60.2 percentage points less in the 2020 primary than 2016.
    - Statewide, the number of Democratic ballots cast was 26.5 percentage points less in the 2020 primary than 2016.
    - Compared to states that held presidential primaries in both 2016 and 2020, Ohio's drop in turnout was the steepest.
- Ohio saw a 444% increase in domestic absentee ballots from 287,843 in 2016 to 1,565,8080 in 2020.
- The pace of voter registration in Ohio does not appear to have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has in other states.
- The percentage of mail ballots not counted was 1.4% in 2020, down from 1.5% in 2016.
    - However, because the number of absentee ballots increased so much, the percentage of uncounted mail ballots, as a percentage of all ballots cast, increased six-fold, from 0.2% to 1.2%.
- The number of provisional ballots cast declined from 154,965 in 2016 to 34,948 in 2020.
    - The provisional ballot rejection rate increased from around 14.8% in 2016 to 29.1% in 2020.
        - As a percentage of all ballots cast, the provisional ballot rejection rate rose from 0.4% to 0.6%.
    - The most common reason for provisional ballot rejection in 2020 was ineligibility under House Bill 197.
- In the 2020 primary, Whites were overrepresented among voters, while Black and Hispanic Americans were underrepresented. This effect is larger when isolating analysis to Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Hamilton counties.

    - Statistical analysis performed on changes in the racial composition of the primary electorates from 2016 to 2020 could not establish that the composition had changed, using traditional statistical tests.·
- The 2020 primary electorate was significantly older than it was in 2016.

The following topics have not been analyzed in this memo, because of the lack of official reports on the subject. It is anticipated that this report will be revised in the future, as other data sources become available.

- Absentee ballots broken down by race
- Reasons for rejecting absentee ballots (or list of mistakes)
- Voting Mode by county

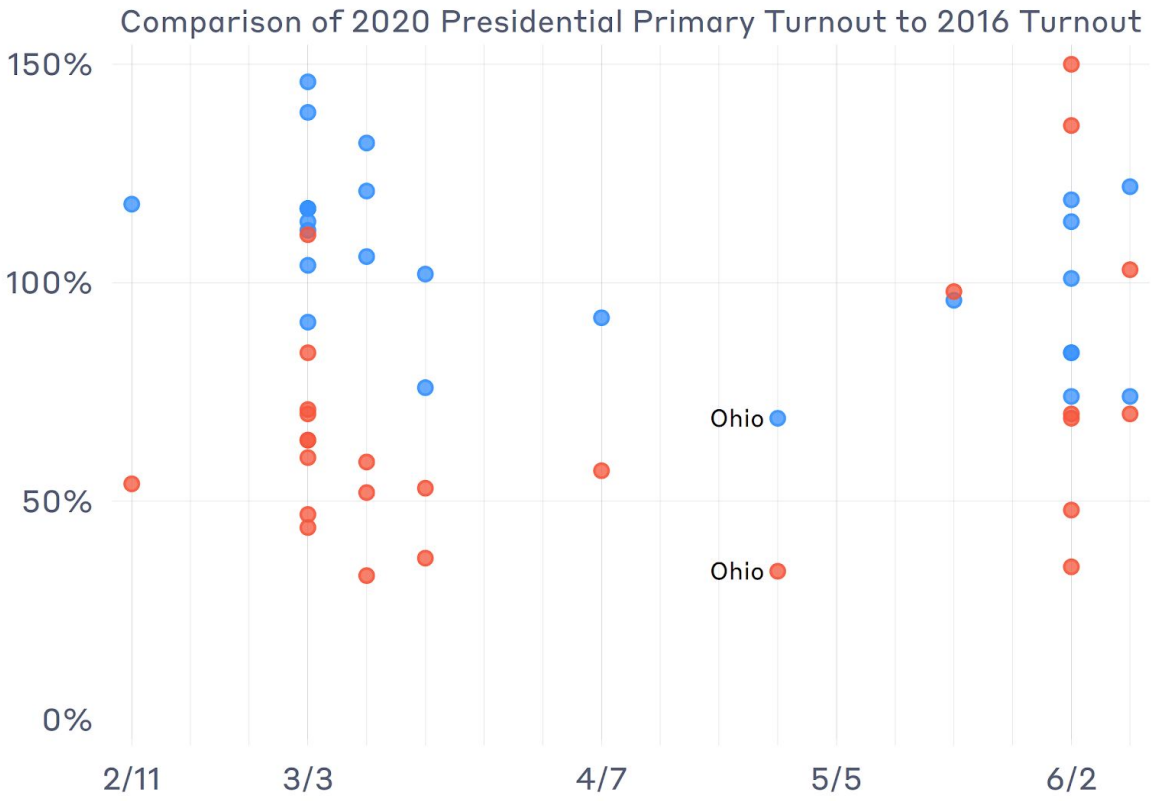
I. Turnout

Overall, 1.8 million voters turned out for the 2020 presidential preference primary (17.8% of the voting age population and 20.8% of the voting eligible population), compared to 3.3 million in 2016 (32.1% of VAP and 37.8% of VEP).[2] Stated another way, overall turnout declined by 44.5% from 2016 to 2020.

More Democrats (925,771) voted in the 2020 primary than Republican (801,143). The imbalance in turnout was due to the lack of competition for the Republican presidential nomination, compared to the continued contest--however nominal--on the Democratic side. (In 2016, turnout in the two parties' primaries amounted to 1.3 million for the Democrats and around 2 million for the Republicans.) Other state and local contests were also on the primary ballots in the spring, although the effect of these races only affected turnout on the margin.

The decline in Ohio's primary turnout was the most of any states, at least through June 9. This is illustrated in the accompanying graph, which plots turnout in each party's primary, as a percentage of turnout in 2016. Both parties had competitive primaries through most of the 2016 season, whereas that was only true for the Democrats in 2020, at least through early April. Therefore, it is not surprising that Democratic primary turnout in 2020 was comparable to that in 2016, whereas Republican turnout was generally down. (There were exceptions, of course.) Turnout in the Democratic primaries has actually been slightly above where it was in 2020, on average, whereas Republican turnout has been about one-third lower.

[2] Voting Eligible Population Turnout was sourced from the United States Election Project



Note: This graph shows turnout in 2020 primaries expressed as a percentage of 2016 turnout. States without primaries in 2016 and/or 2020 excluded.

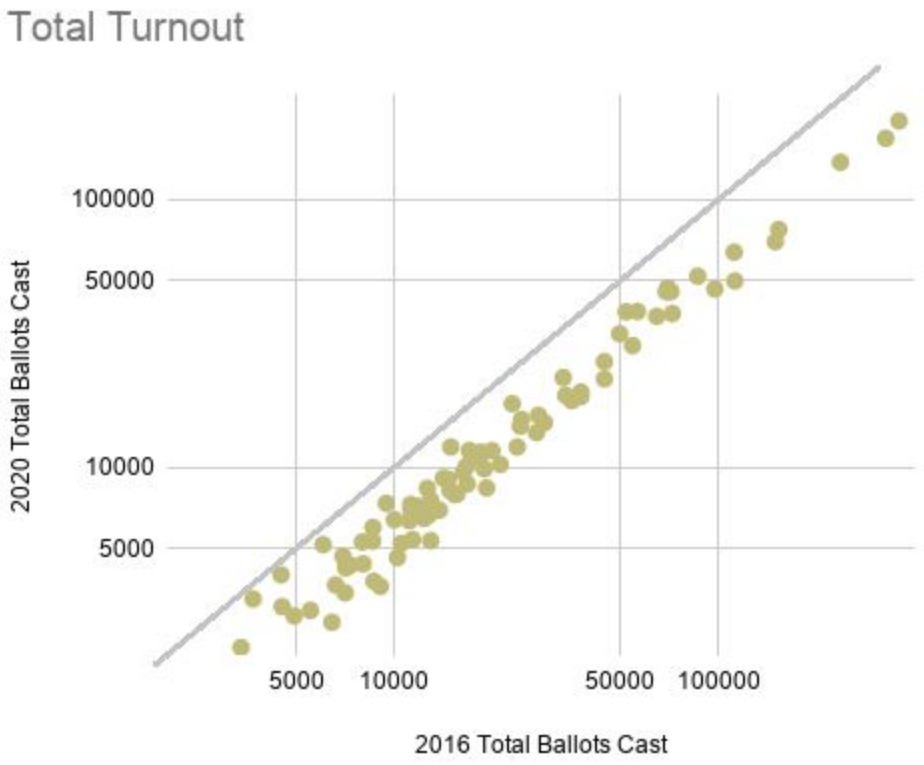
These generalities aside, turnout in the Ohio primary stands out. Among states that had primaries in both 2016 and 2020, Ohio had the lowest relative Democratic turnout (69% of 2016) and the second-lowest relative Republican turnout (34%, above only Missouri's 33%) Combining the two parties' turnout together, Ohio's was the lowest among states that had primaries for both parties in both 2016 and 2020.

Without fully researching the factors that led to relatively low turnout in other states, we cannot say that Ohio's turnout rate was *caused* by the unsettled circumstances surrounding the primary. However, it is notable that Ohio was the only state that raised such high barriers to in-person voting at the last minute. Under HB 197, which eventually governed in-person voting, early in-person voting was not extended, and only a small segment of the voting population was allowed to vote in person on the rescheduled Election Day. Anyone who had a strong preference for voting in person was out of luck, as were people who qualified for in-person voting but were unable to make it to the county election office to cast a ballot. Given the experience of other states that conducted their

primaries in the period when Ohio was originally scheduled to vote, it is reasonable to hypothesize, at least, that the conditions set by HB 197 for resuming voting reduced turnout in the Buckeye State.[3]

A. 2020 vs. 2016 Turnout by County

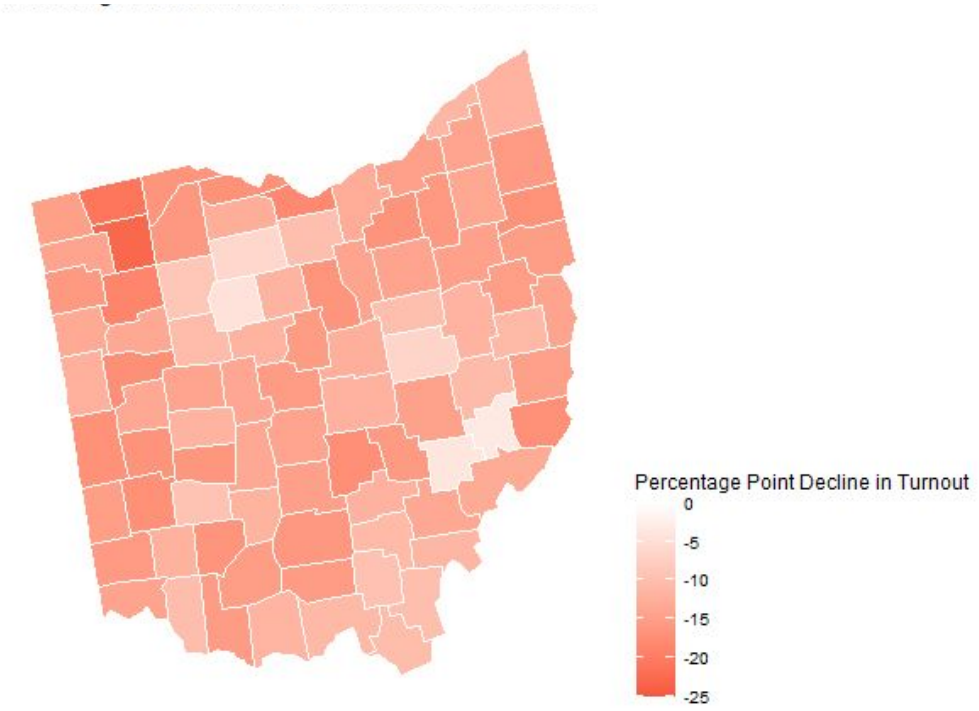
Turnout was down throughout the state, compared to the 2016. Turnout fell somewhat less among the smaller counties. Turnout among the 62 smallest counties, which contained a quarter of the voters in 2016, fell by 42% from 2016 to 2020. Among the three largest counties, which also accounted for a quarter of turnout in 2016, turnout fell by 46%.



Percentage Point Change in Turnout

Some counties saw steeper declines in turnout than others (though, notably *all counties saw a decline*). Henry and Fulton counties saw the sharpest percentage point declines (their 2020 turnout was more than 20 percentage points lower than their 2016 primary turnout). Noble and Morgan counties only saw a decline of just under 4 percentage points, the smallest decrease.

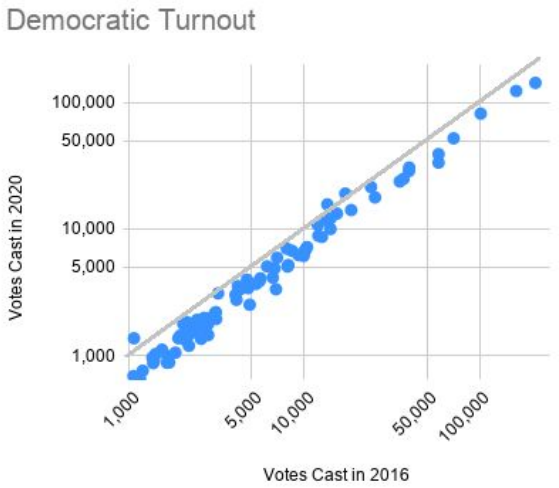
[3] This, of course, is not to second-guess rescheduling the voting for public health considerations.

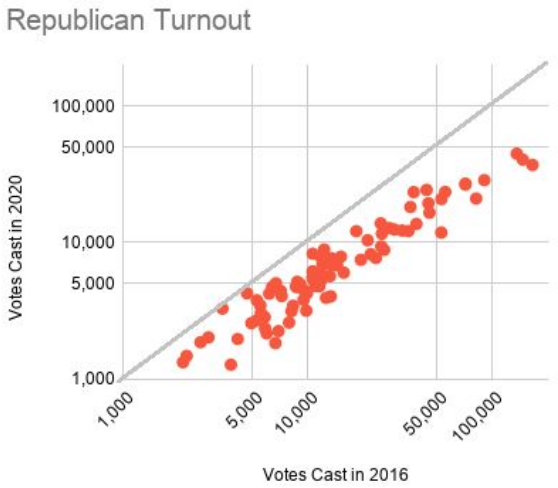


Note: The data in the map reflect the percentage change in the total number of votes cast in the 2020 primary, compared to 2016.

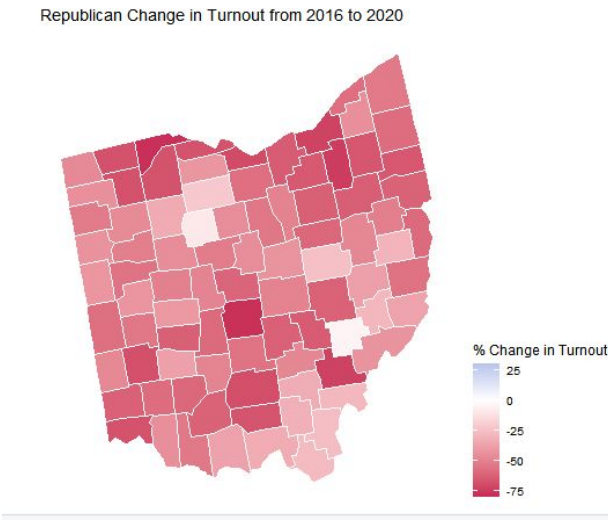
B. Change in turnout by party

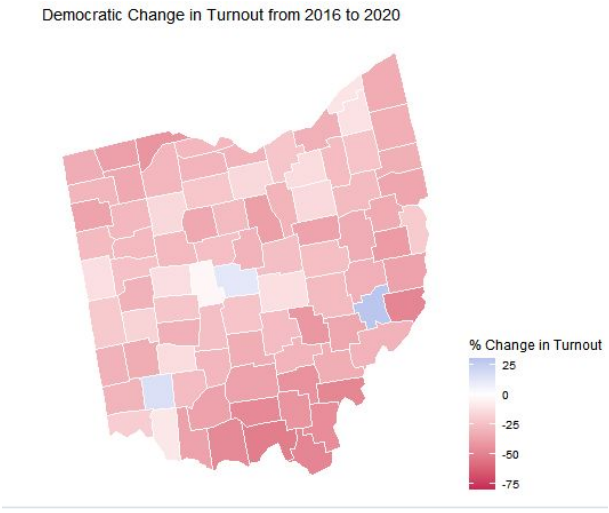
Turnout in both parties' primaries fell throughout the state, although there was greater variability in the GOP primary. Turnout in the Democratic primary was down 26.5% compared to 2016; turnout in the Republican primary was down 60.2%.





Note: The data in the map reflect the percentage change in the total number of votes cast in the Democratic and Republican 2020 primaries at the county level, compared to 2016.





Note: The data in the map reflect the percentage change in the total number of votes cast in the Republican (left) and Democratic (right) primaries, comparing 2020 to 2016.

Change in turnout: Republican Party

Statewide, the number of Republican ballots cast was 60.2% less in the 2020 primary than 2016, decreasing from 2,014,396 in 2016 to just 801,143 in 2020.[4] Part of this decrease can be explained by the lack of competition on the Republican presidential ballot.

There were no counties where the number of Republican ballots increased. Some counties saw much sharper declines than others. In terms of percent change, Lucas County saw 77.6% fewer Republican ballots cast in the 2020 primary (when 11,832 ballots were cast) compared to the 2016 primary (when 52,766 ballots were cast). The county with the smallest percent decline was Morgan County, with only a 4% decrease in Republican ballots cast from 3,438 ballots in 2016 to 3,287.

As the scatterplots above illustrate, turnout in the Republican primary was down the most in the largest (and most Democratic) counties in the state. Among the 62 smallest counties, turnout fell 48.7%. Among the three largest, it fell 72.6%.

Change in turnout: Democratic Party

The number of Democratic ballots cast statewide was 26.5% less in the 2020 primary than 2016, decreasing from 1,259,754 in 2016 to 925,771 in 2020.

The decline in Democratic ballots cast varied across the counties, but not as variably as turnout changes across counties in the Republican primary. And, unlike the Republican primary, the turnout decline was slightly greater in the smaller counties. Among the smallest 62 counties, Democratic turnout dropped 31.0%, compared to a drop of 26.1% in the three largest.

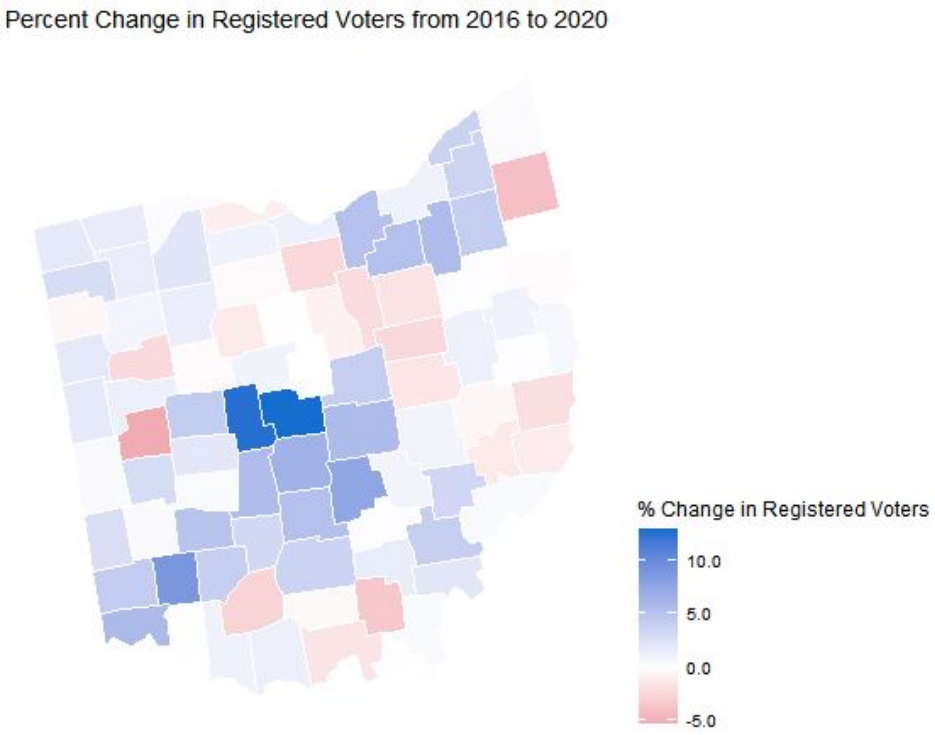
The only counties that saw an increase in Democratic ballots this primary were Delaware, Warren, and Noble counties. Noble County actually saw a substantial 29% percent increase in Democratic ballots cast (Noble County was also one of the counties with the lowest decrease in overall turnout from 2016 to 2020. It is also one of the smaller counties in Ohio. In 2016, just 1,062 Democratic ballots were cast in Noble County compared to 1,370 in 2020).

II. Voter Registration

There were 7.7 million registrants in Ohio for the 2020 primary, compared to 7.6 for the 2016 primary, for an increase of 2.8%.

[4] This report measures the percent change in ballots cast by Republican voters from the 2016 and the 2020 election. The reason we do not calculate turnout strictly is because of data limitations. The MIT Election Lab usually calculates turnout using the Voting Eligible Population (VEP). If that is not available (and it usually is not available below the state level), the Voting Age Population is the next choice (which we use above, for the counties), but this value is not calculated for each party. Barring any large dips or spikes in population, the percent change in the number of ballots cast from one election to the next should be a rough proxy for turnout change as measured by VEP.

Fifty-four of Ohio's 89 counties saw an increase in registered voters in 2020 compared to 2016, but most increases were small (under 5%). Registration numbers were sourced from reports provided on the Ohio Elections website. Specifically, the number of registered voters by county and statewide are included in turnout reports for both the 2016 and 2020 primaries.



Note: Mapped data record the change in the number of registered voters from 2016 to 2020.

The county with the steepest decline was Shelby County with a 5.4% decline in registered voters. The counties with the sharpest increases were Delaware and Union counties at almost 13%.

Ohio relies on a number of sources of voter registration. Between the 2016 and 2018 election cycles, 34% of new registration came from the department of motor vehicles, 21% from mail, 14% from in-person registration, and 31% from all other sources. Ohio adopted an online voter registration portal for the 2018 election cycle, making that potentially a greater source of registrations moving forward.

Sources of Ohio Voter Registration, 2015 -- 2018[a]	
Mail, email, etc.	21.3%
In person	14.3%
Internet	6.3%
Motor vehicle office	34.2%
Public assistance offices	9.5%
Disability service offices	0.1%
Armed Forces recruitment offices	<0.05%
Other state agencies	3.9%
Registration drives	10.0%
Other	0.3%
Total	5,880,840
[a]U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *The Election Administration and Voting Survey Comprehensive Report, 2016 and 2018.*	

Analysis of voter registration patterns in other states has suggested that the pandemic has caused a dramatic reduction in the rate of voter registration, compared to recent presidential elections. Because the registration deadline for voting in the Ohio primary preceded the rapid rise in infection rates that began in March, and because the subsequent HR 197 failed to open registration for the delayed primary, it is unlikely that the pandemic had a direct effect on registration for the primary.

Ohio began allowing voters to register online in 2016[5] as long as they could provide: 1) an Ohio driver's license or Ohio identification card number, 2) their full name, 3) date of birth, 4) address, and 5) the last four digits of their social security number.[6] If someone does not have that information, they must fill out a paper form and send it to their county board of elections.

Ohio residents may also register at their local BMV (Bureau of Motor Vehicles) and will be explicitly asked if they would like to register if they qualify.[7]

[5] https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/ohio-start-online-voter-registration-january/xWXJYMKH3R0xfod4WKRwII/

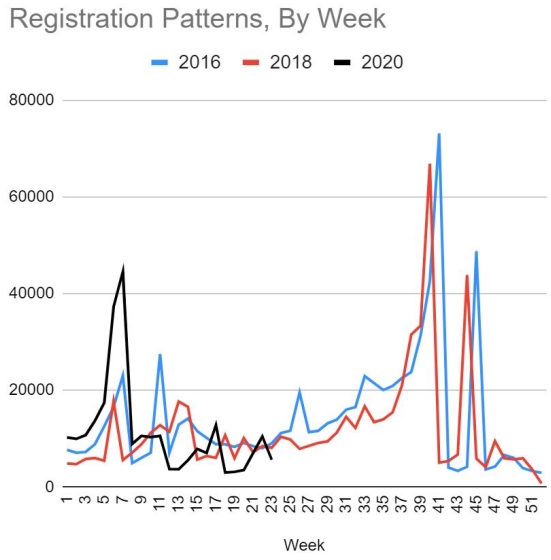
[6] https://ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/site/residents/resources/register-to-vote-or-update-your-registration

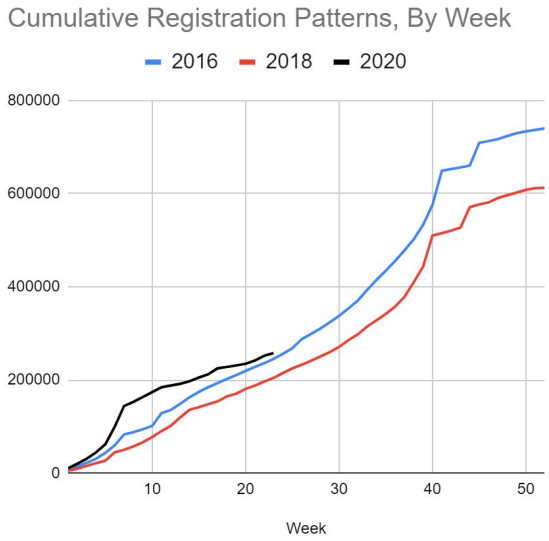
[7] https://www.bmv.ohio.gov/dl-other-voter-registration.aspx#gsc.tab=0

Because of the pandemic, the postponement of the primary, and BMV closures on March 18,[8] the Ohio primary in 2020 saw a markedly different registration pattern than the 2016 or 2018 primaries. The following figure graphs the number of new voter registrations in Ohio by week for the years 2016, 2018, and 2020. The graph on the left reports weekly numbers, the graph on the right reports cumulative registrations.

Unlike some other states we have analyzed, there is no evidence of a sudden decline of registrations in mid-March. However, it also appears that the voter registration dates in the Ohio voter file record the most recent registration transaction date, and not the original date. A future version of this report will be updated to reflect further investigation of the file.

The 2020 registration peak was at Week 7, just before the mid-February deadline to register for the primary. Then, there is a sharp decline at Week 8 and another less steep decline in Week 12, when COVID cases in the state first began picking up and Ohio BMVs closed down as a result. (They would not open again until May 26.[9]) Registration patterns begin to match those of other years after Week 10.[10]





[8] https://fox8.com/news/coronavirus/ohio-bmv-locations-reopening-tuesday-officials-still-urge-citizens-to-utilize-online-renewal-site/

[9] https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/resources/general-resources/BMV-Closures

[10] As of this writing, we have not confirmed whether the registration date in the Ohio voter file reflects the original date of registration, or the most recent update of the registration record. For that reason, the important patterns are relative week-to-week changes in each year.

III. Vote Mode

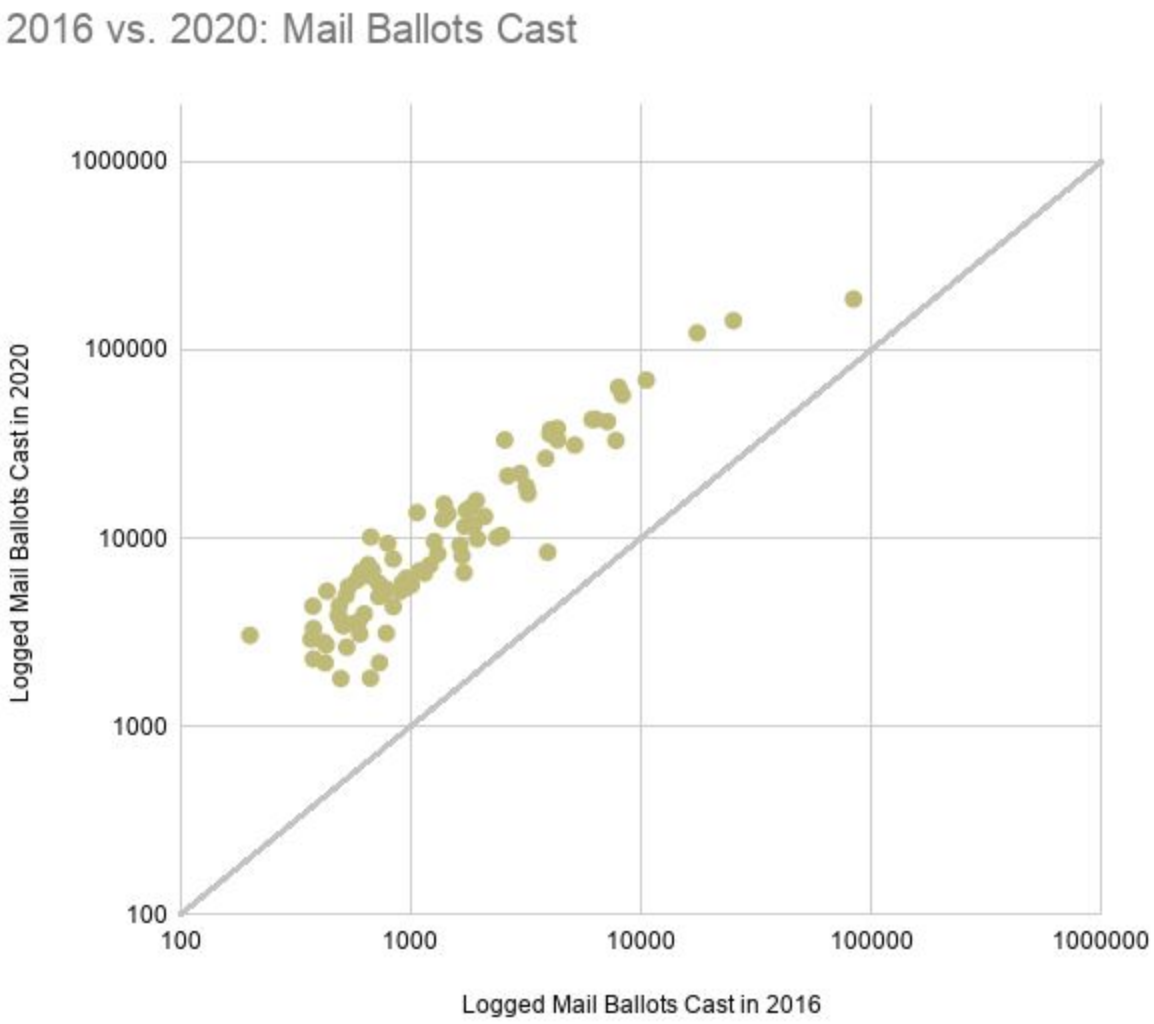
Voters in the Buckeye State used three modes to vote in 2016 and 2020: in-person on Election Day, in-person early, and absentee. Because of the circumstances surrounding the postponement of the 2020 primary, in-person Election Day voting was severely limited. Absentee ballot applications were mailed to all Ohio voters, leading to a dramatic increase in absentee balloting in 2020. Early in-person voting also increased significantly, despite the fact that it occurred only preceding March 17, the original primary date.

Due to the pandemic, Election Day in-person voting plummeted in the 2020 primary, making up only 0.2% of total ballots cast. However, early in-person voting still constituted 14.5% of votes cast in 2020 compared to 4.9% in 2016. Absentee voting surged, making up 85.3% of total ballots cast this primary.

	Percent of Votes Cast			
	Election Day	Early	Absentee	Vote Count
2016	86.4%	4.9%	8.7%	3,302,832
2020	0.2%	14.5%	85.3%	1,834,465

A. Absentee Ballots

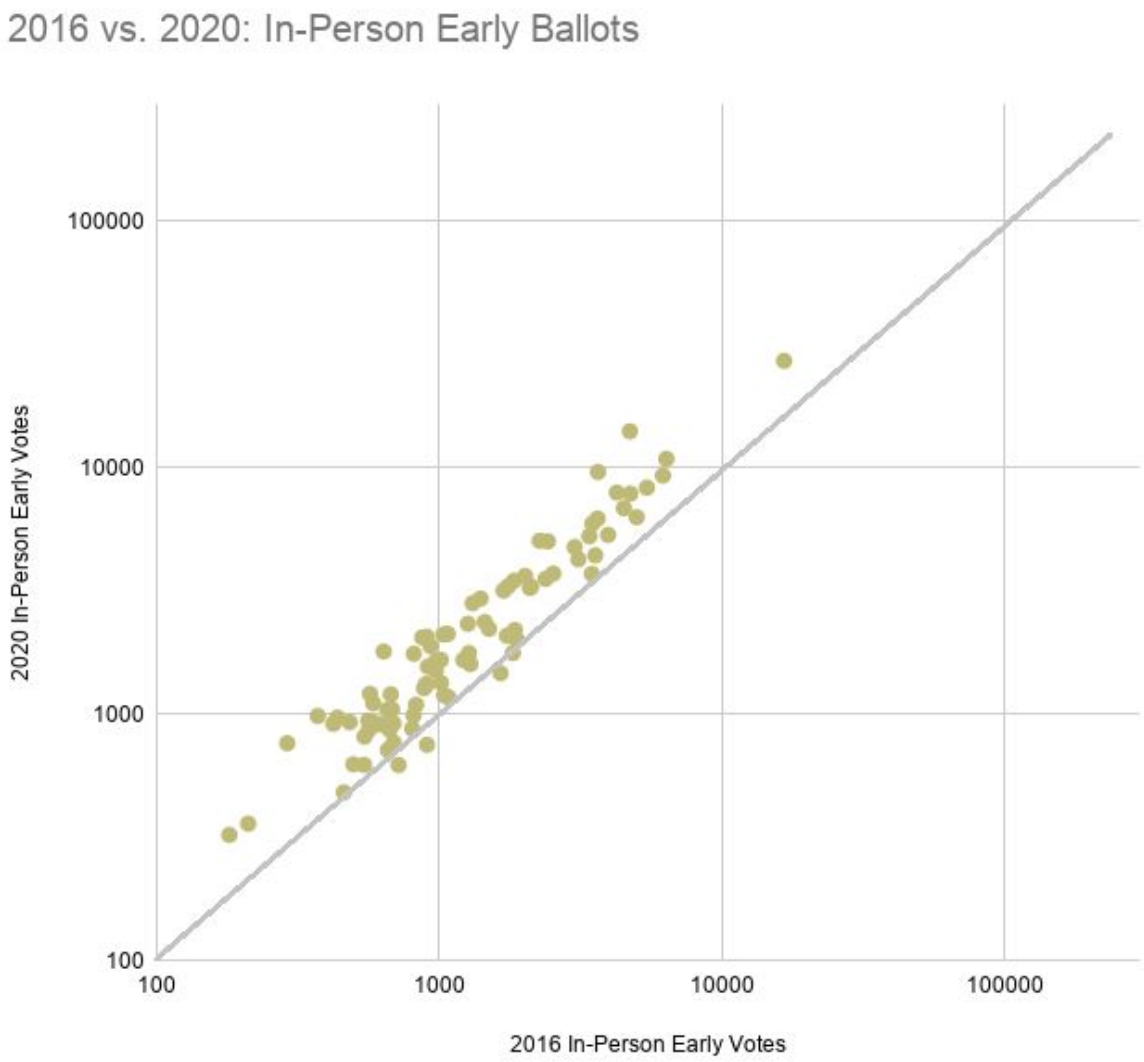
The number of mail ballots cast in the 2020 primary was 1,565,808, an increase from 287,843 in the 2016 primary (444% increase). This increase is despite the sharp decrease in turnout. There was no county that did not at least double its mail ballots cast from 2016 to 2020.



B. In-Person Early Voting

Although most Ohio primary voters opted to vote absentee, a non-negligible portion (14.5%) decided to vote early in person. There was a statewide increase in in-person early voting, with 63% more in-person early ballots cast in this primary (265,832 ballots) than in the 2016 primary (163,058). Eighteen counties[11] doubled the number of in-person early ballots cast this year compared to 2016. Hamilton County experienced the largest percent increase (197.2%) in ballots.

[11] Ordered from greatest percent increase to least (all counties have at least doubled the number of in-person early ballots cast from 2016 to 2020): Hamilton, Seneca, Meigs, Warren, Wyandot, Mercer, Coshocton, Clermont, Gallia, Morga, Champaign, Geauga, Hocking, Union, Lake, Defiance, and Shelby counties.

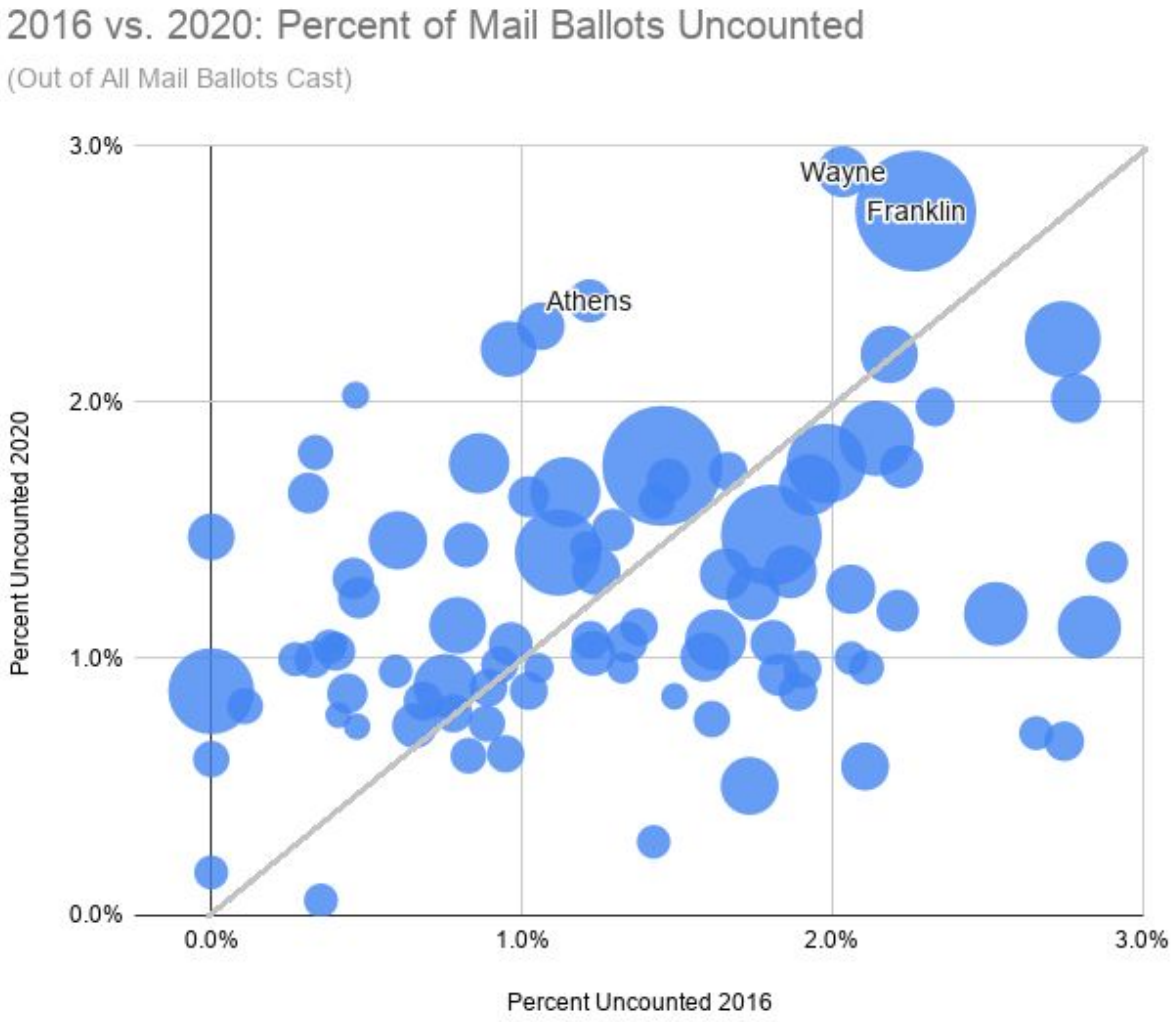


Of Ohio's 88 counties, only five saw a decline in in-person early voting: Henry, Monroe, Belmont Van Wert, and Carroll. None of these counties saw a decline of more than 200 ballots.

C. Non-counting Rate: Mail Ballots

When mail ballots are returned for counting, they may end up being uncounted for a variety of reasons. They may be rejected by the county election board for failing to meet a technical requirement, or they may arrive late.

The rate of uncounted ballots fell slightly from 1.5% in 2016 to 1.4% in 2020. Shelby County saw the greatest decline (2.1 percentage points) in its uncounted rate and Harrison saw the greatest increase (1.6 percentage points) between the two primaries. The counties with the highest rates of uncounted mail ballots in 2020 were Wayne (2.9%), Franklin (2.7%), and Athens (2.4%).



Of course, with many more ballots cast in 2020 compared to 2016, the percentage of uncounted mail ballots, *as a percentage of all ballots cast,* increased substantially in 2020, from 0.2% to 1.2%.

IV. Provisional Ballots

The story of provisional ballot usage in 2020 is complicated. On the one hand, a total of 34,948 provisional ballots were cast in 2020, down from 154,965 in 2016. This represents a drop from 4.7% to 1.9% of all ballots cast. However, the fraction of provisional ballots that were rejected nearly doubled, from 14.8% in 2016 to 29.1%. As a percentage of all ballots cast, rejected provisional ballots increased from 0.4% to 0.6%.

A. Reasons for Provisional Ballot Rejections

Consistent with the shift of voting from in-person in 2016 to (mostly) vote-by-mail in 2020, the reasons for casting provisional ballots were very different in the two years. In 2016, the most common reason to have a provisional ballot disqualified, by far, was if a voter cast a ballot but was not registered in Ohio, followed by voting in the wrong precinct.

	2016		2020	
Reason for Rejection	**Number**	**Pct. of all rejections**	**Number**	**Pct. of all rejections**
Ineligible to Vote Under House Bill 197	N/A	N/A	5,469	53.8%
Voter Not Registered in State	8,458	70.1%	2,218	21.8%
Ballot returned late	N/A	N/A	1,433	14.1%
Missing or incomplete date of birth	85	0.7%	182	1.8%
Did not provide ID	275	2.3%	152	1.5%
Did not sign provisional envelope	187	1.5%	151	1.5%
Voter already voted	289	2.4%	127	1.3%
Voted in Wrong Precinct	2,028	16.8%	116	1.1%
Ballot missing from envelope	129	1.1%	95	0.9%
Did not provide address	341	2.8%	89	0.9%
Non Matching Signature	102	0.8%	86	0.8%
Failed to provide full name	50	0.4%	20	0.2%
Challenge to Registration Upheld	10	0.1%	20	0.2%
Voted in Correct Polling Place but Incorrect Precinct	113	0.9%	2	0.0%

In 2020, the number of provisional ballots rejected because the voter was not registered in the state dropped significantly, both in number and as a percentage of all rejections. The most common reason for rejection, by far, was violation of House Bill 197, which established conditions under which voters could cast in-person ballots in the primary. One of the conditions was that the voter had to be registered before or on February 18 (the original voter registration deadline). Under the same law, ballots could be disqualified because voters cast them in-person when they did not meet qualifications: 1) having a disability, 2) lacking a permanent address, or 3) having requested an absentee ballot but never received it in the mail.

Ohio does not release a public file that identifies voters whose provisional ballots were rejected. Therefore, it is not possible to perform analysis on the demographic characteristics of those whose ballots were rejected.

V. Demographic Analysis

A. Estimated Racial Composition of the Voter File

In this section, we analyze turnout in the 2016 and 2020 primaries by race. Ohio does not include race on the voter file, so this analysis depends on an indirect statistical method to infer the racial characteristics of voters. This method, called the Bayesian Improved Surname Geocoding (BISG) method, relies on combining information about the voter's residential address and the voter's last name to estimate the voter's race. This method, originally developed for use in public health research, has recently been extended to the study of voting.[12]

Rather than geolocate every address on the Ohio voter file, which would have been needlessly time consuming and expensive, we performed the following analysis on a random sample of 10,000 drawn from the Ohio voter file.

Overall, the racial characteristics of voters in 2020 did not differ appreciably from those in 2016. In each year, whites were slightly over-represented in the electorate, compared to the overall registered voter pool. The estimated fraction of the electorate that was white in 2020 was slightly greater than in 2016, with the fraction from all other races falling somewhat. However, given the sample size, we cannot say that the racial composition was different to a statistically significant degree.

[12] For the original description of this method, see Marc N. Elliott, et al, "Using the Census Bureau's Surname List to Improve Estimates of Race/Ethnicity and Associated Disparities," *Health Services and Outcomes Research Methodology* 98, no. 2(2009): 69–83. The approach has been extended to political science by Kosuke Imai and Kabir Khanna, "Improving Ecological Inference by Predicting Individual Ethnicity from Voter Registration Records," *Political Analysis* (2016): 263 -- 72.

	2016		2020	
Imputed Race	**Voters**	**Nonvoters**	**Voters**	**Nonvoters**
White	82.4%	74.6%	83.1%	76.1%
Black	9.5%	14.2%	9.4%	13.2%
Hispanic	3.7%	5.6%	3.3%	5.3%
Asian	2.1%	3.0%	1.9%	2.8%
Other	2.3%	2.6%	2.3%	2.6%
Sample size	4,004	5,890	2,233	7,580

The table below looks at the racial breakdown of sampled voters who voted in the 2016 and 2020 primaries by party. The sample sizes for the 2016 primary are larger than the sample sizes for 2020 because more people voted in 2016. Therefore, the estimates for 2016 are slightly more reliable.

Both parties' primaries saw a slight increase in the percentage of voters who were White from 2016 to 2020 (this increase was twice as large for Democrats as it was for Republicans) and a decrease in non-White voters. However, as with the combined analysis, given the sample sizes, we cannot say that the difference in racial composition of the two parties' primaries was statistically significant.

	2016		2020	
Imputed Race	**Republicans**	**Democrats**	**Republicans**	**Democrats**
White	88.5%	72.4%	90.4%	76.9%
Black	4.1%	18.2%	3.6%	14.5%
Hispanic	3.2%	4.5%	2.8%	3.7%
Asian	2.1%	2.2%	1.2%	2.5%
Other	2.1%	2.6%	2.1%	2.5%
Sample size	2,476	1,528	1,031	1,202

The following tables look at the racial breakdown of voters divided by party for the 2020 and 2016 primaries in the three largest counties in Ohio. These tables were constructed by geocoding *all* addresses from Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Hamilton counties in the voter file. There were a total of 2,301,940 voters from these counties in the voter file, but only a fraction of this total voted in either the 2016 or 2020 primary.

Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Hamilton Counties

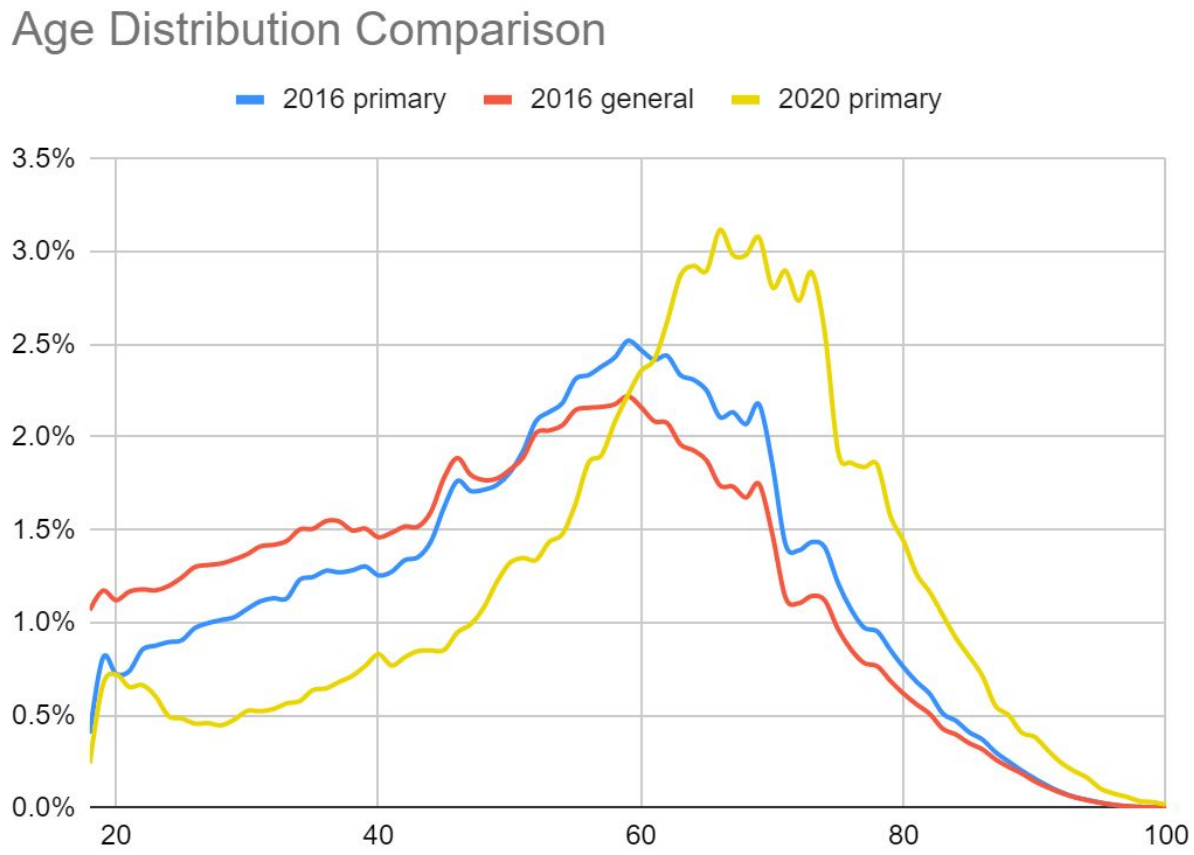
In Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Hamilton counties, both parties saw an increase in the portion of their electorate that was White this primary compared to the 2016 primary. This increase was markedly larger for the Democrats (who saw a 6 percentage point rise) compared to the Republicans (who only saw a 1.5 percentage point increase). Democrats also experienced a 6 percentage point decline in the portion of their electorate that was Black. The prevalence of other racial groups in the electorate remained relatively steady or only experienced small changes between the two primary dates.

	2016		2020	
Imputed Race	**Republicans**	**Democrats**	**Republicans**	**Democrats**
White	80.8%	56.2%	82.3%	62.3%
Black	8.0%	32.0%	7.8%	26.1%
Hispanic	4.7%	5.6%	4.2%	4.9%
Asian	4.0%	3.5%	3.4%	3.9%
Other	2.5%	2.8%	2.4%	2.8%
Sample size	412,652	446,217	122,053	349,753

B. Age Distribution of Primary Voters

One demographic characteristic that stands out in the 2020 primary is that the age profile of voters was significantly older in 2020 than in the past. In 2020, 59% of primary voters were sixty or older, compared to 52% in 2016. (The accompanying graph shows the age distribution of the electorate in the 2016 general election, for the sake of comparison. General election electorates tend to be younger than primary electorates.) At the same time, the (small) fraction of the primary electorate

that is under 30 shrank from 10.2% to 7.3%. The share of the middle age groups, from 30- 44 and 45-49, also shrank, from 18.7% to 11.9% and 30.7% to 21.5%, respectively.



Both parties saw a sharp increase in the proportion of their electorate that was over 60. This increase was near 16 percentage points. Similarly, both parties saw declines in those voters 18-29, 30-44, and 45-59. Most of these effects are the same in the Republican and Democratic parties. There is a steeper decline among the youngest cohort of voters in the Democratic primaries than the Republican races.

Republicans saw this share of the electorate decline by five percentage point between 2016 and 2020 while Democrats saw a three percentage point decline.

	2016 primary		2020 primary	
Voter Age	**Republican**	**Democratic**	**Republican**	**Democratic**
18-29	8.1%	13.7%	5.3%	9.0%
30-44	17.8%	20.1%	9.6%	13.9%
45-59	33.0%	26.9%	23.2%	20.1%
60+	41.1%	39.3%	61.9%	57.1%
Number	1,903,824	1,184,516	805,366	928,891

C. First Time Voters

A question that has arisen during the primary season is whether confusion that has attended the rescheduling of primaries, plus last-minute shifts in how the primaries were conducted, may have affected first-time voters. As a general matter, first-time voters do not vote in large numbers during primaries, although they make up a much larger proportion of the general election electorate. However, confusion over voting could push those participation levels down further.

This pattern is illustrated in the accompanying table which shows the percentage of voters in each primary and general election since 2008 who had previously not voted, according to evidence in the voter file.[13] The fraction of first-time voters in the 2020 primary electorate was 2.5%, down significantly from 2016 and 2008, but up from 2012. The reduction in first-time voters occurred in both parties, dropping from 4.7% to 2.8% among Democrats and from 3.0% to 2.0% among Republicans.

[13] The Ohio voter file contains information about voter history going back to 2000.

Percentage of First-Time Voters in Primaries and General Elections, 2008-2020.				
	Primaries			
	Democratic	Republican	Total	General Election
2008	6.0%	3.3%	5.2%	10.7%
2010	0.9%	1.0%	1.1%	2.3%
2012	1.1%	1.6%	1.5%	8.3%
2014	0.8%	0.9%	1.0%	2.0%
2016	4.7%	3.0%	3.7%	8.2%
2018	1.5%	0.9%	1.3%	4.0%
2020	2.8%	2.0%	2.5%	N/A

Conclusion

Ohio caught the national spotlight by cancelling its March 15th primary, despite having had only 36 cases of coronavirus, and despite other states going ahead with their primaries on the same day. After a period of political uncertainty about how voting would pick up, after the Election Day interruption, the state decided to strictly limit in-person voting and move the remainder of the primary to mail ballots, with few exceptions. This change in election administration made Ohio's 2020 primary markedly different from those before, and even most of those after.

Unsurprisingly, the net result of these policy decisions was to dramatically increase the number of mail ballots, even though the total number of ballots cast declined from 2016. As of this writing, Ohio's turnout drop compared to 2016 was the steepest among all states that held primaries for both major parties in both years.

Limitations to individual-level records about provisional ballot and absentee ballot administration in Ohio limit our ability to assess the degree to which individual voters were able to successfully cope with the abrupt transition to what was essentially a vote-by-mail election. The one

obvious effect seems to have increased the age of the voting population. This was not consequential for the outcome of the primary, at least for the presidential race.

Looking to November, a number of possibilities present themselves. First, of course, with a competitive two-party race for the presidency, turnout will be higher, with Repubilcan turnout especially increasing. General election electorates are less experienced than primary electorates. In other states we have studied that provide richer data documenting election administration, it appears that first-time voters have had a more difficult time successfully navigating the new voting environment. To the degree that Ohio had no obvious "meltdowns" in the primary, one explanation is that the presence of experienced voters limited the set of problems that might have emerged if this had been a general election.

It is most likely that the usage of mail ballots will decline in the general election, compared to the primary, at least as a fraction of the electorate. First, the state is unlikely to facilitate mail balloting in the general election, as they did in the primary. Second, inexperienced voters are more likely to vote in person than by mail. Nonetheless, even if the *percentage* of mail ballots declines, the *raw number* will likely increase even further. Ohio seems to have demonstrated an ability to handle the historic volume of mail ballots in the primary. Although a new record will likely be set again in November, we know that the growth in mail ballots won't be another 444%. Presumably, lessons learned by the state and counties in the primary will serve the state well in the fall.

Data Used

Election results (2020)
Election results (2016)
Historic voter files
Postal Service Report
Census American Community Survey Data is available at the Healthy Elections repository