Rehearsal for November: An Analysis of Seventeen August State Elections

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In seventeen states with primary and runoff elections in August, the process went much more smoothly than in the earlier presidential primaries. Election administrators across these states worked hard ahead of the elections to pandemic-proof their voting regimes, often by expanding access to absentee balloting and revamping in-person voting to accommodate public health guidance. These preparations proved essential, as the August elections saw higher voter participation compared to past state primaries and runoffs, with a record number of voters relying on absentee balloting and early voting options. Despite record numbers at the polls, these elections saw only a fraction of the statewide turnout expected in November. Accordingly, the August primaries are not a perfect preview of what's to come: in the general election, greater turnout will much more aggressively test voting infrastructure. Although the ground continues to shift and much may change between now and November, the August state competitions provide important lessons for administering the general election.

Authors: Bree Baccaglini, Inesha Premaratne, Megan Selbach-Allen, Sawyer Skye Lucas-Griffin, Annika Khouri, Alex Stout, Amanda Zerbe

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Summary

In seventeen states with primary and runoff elections in August, the process went much more smoothly than in the earlier presidential primaries. Election administrators across these states worked hard ahead of the elections to pandemic-proof their voting regimes, often by expanding access to absentee balloting and revamping in-person voting to accommodate public health guidance. These preparations proved essential, as the August elections saw higher voter participation compared to past state primaries and runoffs, with a record number of voters relying on absentee balloting (e.g. in Wisconsin, Florida) and early voting options (e.g., in Tennessee, Minnesota). While voter turnout was high across all states, overall participation in August's primary broke historic records in many jurisdictions (e.g. Washington, Hawaii, Vermont, Minnesota, Michigan, Florida, Arizona's Maricopa county). The turnout figures across these states are impressive in the context of non-presidential primaries and runoffs, but are in many cases lower than turnout for the presidential primaries earlier this year, and represent a fraction of the turnout expected in November. Accordingly, the August primaries are not a perfect preview of what's to come: in the general election, greater turnout will much more aggressively test voting infrastructure.

Though successful August elections don't guarantee a successful November election, they provide some hope that lessons have been learned from the more error-prone presidential primaries. Most importantly, local election officials across these and other states have made policy changes to permit greater vote-by-mail access and adapt in-person voting options to pandemic conditions. (Since adjusting elections to the pandemic is not cheap, CARES Act funding greatly relieved local coffers by helping finance these costly adjustments). In all but one state, the August elections were a second bite at the apple for election officials, meaning that they had months to incorporate lessons learned ahead of the August primaries. In states like Georgia and Wisconsin, which experienced fairly troubled presidential primaries in the Spring, the improvements were widely recognized. That is not to say races across the board were not without some challenges. As with elections even before the pandemic, some voters experienced ballot delays and ballot rejections, and some jurisdictions saw poll worker shortages and technical mishaps. But the August primaries provide a glimmer of hope for November, when the pandemic will fully test the U.S. system of election administration.

For reference, the seventeen states with August competitions analyzed in this memo include:

State	August Election (Type)	Date
Arizona	State Primary	Aug 4
Kansas	State Primary	Aug 4
Michigan	State Primary	Aug 4
Missouri	State Primary	Aug 4
Washington	State Primary	Aug 4
Tennessee	State Primary	Aug 6
Hawaii	State Primary	Aug 8
Connecticut	State & Presidential Primary (*delayed from 4/28/20*)	Aug 11
Georgia	State Runoff	Aug 11
Minnesota	State Primary	Aug 11`
South Dakota	State Runoff	Aug 11
Vermont	State Primary	Aug 11
Wisconsin	State Primary	Aug 11
Alaska	State Primary	Aug 18
Florida	State Primary	Aug 18
Wyoming	State Primary	Aug 18
Oklahoma	State Runoff	Aug 25

I.   Voting By Mail

The risks associated with conducting in-person voting during the COVID-19 pandemic spurred many states to increase the availability and accessibility of mail voting options in the August primaries. Indeed, August saw a "tidal wave" of absentee ballots. While Washington and Hawaii already had a great deal of experience with vote-by-mail elections, most other states had to

meaningfully scale their absentee voting infrastructure and adopt new policies in response to the growing demand for a safe alternative to in-person voting. For many states, careful election preparation and adjustments laid the groundwork for August elections that largely ran smoothly *and* preserved access to the franchise despite the pandemic. The most significant positive interventions included expanding eligibility to absentee voting, automatically sending absentee ballot request forms to all registered (and/or active) voters, waiving burdensome ballot verification requirements, and expanding in-person drop-off options for mail ballots. Despite these efforts, election administrations and voters understandably still faced some challenges, especially regarding delayed and rejected ballots.

A. What Went Well

Expanding absentee eligibility

A few August primary states pared back restrictive criteria that limited absentee voting to those who could provide an excuse.

- **Connecticut**—which held its state and (delayed) presidential primaries on August 11—had previously restricted absentee-ballot eligibility to individuals physically unable to vote on Election Day (due to absence from the jurisdiction, military service, service as an election official, physical disability, or illness) and those with religious objections. However, on May 11, Governor Ned Lamont signed Executive Order No. 7QQ enabling no-excuse absentee voting due to COVID-19, 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 would extend no-excuse absentee voting to the November general election). Though the primary met some snags (officials realized a week ahead of the election that 20,000 ballots had mistakenly not been sent out), expanded access to absentee voting led to a ten-fold increase in absentee ballot requests and a record-breaking share of absentee voting.
- **Missouri** made a similar change and also witnessed elevated absentee turnout. On June 4, Governor Mike Parson signed SB 631, which enabled anyone in Missouri who did not already qualify for an absentee ballot to vote a mail-in ballot for the August 4 and November 3 elections. The legislation further exempted a statutorily defined class of at-risk registered voters (such as those most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19) from the state's ballot notarization requirement.
- **Tennessee** voters, too, were able to vote absentee in the August primary due to fears of COVID-19 due to a state court ruling *Lay v. Goins* this June. The court held in *Lay* that Tennessee had to provide an absentee ballot to any eligible voter who applied to vote by mail in order to avoid transmission or contraction of COVID-19. Further, the court held that any

qualified voter who determined it "impossible or unreasonable to vote in-person at a polling place due to the COVID-19 situation" should be eligible to check the box on the absentee ballot indicating that they were hospitalized, ill, or physically disabled and as such, were unable to vote in person. However, the state's Supreme Court ruled in August, a day before the state's primary, that this exception would not be available for the November election. Come November, voters will need an excuse—such as exposure-based quarantining, caretaking, or suffering from an underlying health condition—to vote absentee. The Secretary of State has already updated the application for the general election absentee ballot to remove the COVID-19 exception (and to add a reward for voter fraud tips).

Sending absentee ballot request forms to all registered voters

Often, voters eligible for absentee voting must proactively request that a ballot be sent to them. However, several August primary states relieved voters of this burden, and automatically sent out ballot request forms. These efforts made it easier for voters who wished to mail in their ballot to avail themselves of the option.

- In April, **South Dakota** Secretary of State Steve Barnett announced that "his office [would] mail absentee ballot applications to all South Dakotans registered in the statewide voter registration file, with the exception of voters that have already applied for the 2020 election cycle or voters in counties sending applications on their own."
- In May, **Michigan** Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson followed suit, issuing a press release describing how her office would send out ballot request forms for the August and November elections to all registered voters and include a prepaid return envelope. **Connecticut** likewise took that step, as did **Vermont**.
- **Alaska** made absentee ballot request forms more widely (but not universally) available: the Division of Elections launched an new online system for absentee registration, and proactively mailed request forms to all voters 65 years and older. (In July, a variety of public interest nonprofits sued in state court, arguing that selectively mailing older voters discriminated against younger voters, and requested that Alaska send request forms to all voters for the August and November elections. Though the case was not resolved before the August primary, its pending resolution may affect policies in November.)
- Officials also took action at the county level: some **Arizona** counties sent out mail ballot requests to all registered voters in their jurisdiction, and county officials in **Kansas'** Johnson county joined other populous counties (Wyandotte, Shawnee, Sedgwick and Douglas) in automatically issuing request forms to active registered voters.

- Voters in other states petitioned for still bolder action: in **Florida,** plaintiffs in *[Grimes v. Florida Department of State](#)* sued in May to challenge the state's requirement that a voter request a mail-in ballot, arguing that Florida should automatically send mail-in ballots with prepaid postage to all eligible voters (as California opted to do this year in light of COVID-19). Though the litigation was not resolved before the August primary, its outcome may affect policies for the general election.

Waiving burdensome verification requirements

Though many states (e.g. [South Dakota](#)) have kept notarization or witness requirements in place despite the pandemic, a few August primary states reduced or eliminated verification requirements.

- **Minnesota** is one of them. In mid-June, Secretary of State Steve Simon agreed to a [partial settlement](#) in *LaRose v. Simon*, a lawsuit brought against the state concerning (among other things) the state's ballot witness requirement. As a part of the settlement, Simon consented to waive the witness requirement for the August 11 state primary election. (The parties also [consented](#) to waive this requirement for the general election).
- **Missouri** also tweaked its notarial requirements. Though Missouri law requires all absentee voters to notarize the signature on their return envelope, the state legislature in [SB 631](#) relieved COVID-19-vulnerable populations of that requirement. The Governor also issued an [executive order](#) establishing that voters subject to the notary requirement could satisfy it through audio-video technologies, and did not need to appear personally in front of a notary. Though the bill did not waive fees associated with notarial services for mail-in (as opposed to absentee ballots), the Secretary of State did [post](#) links to notaries who volunteered to provide free ballot services. (Litigation [challenging](#) the existence and cost of the notarial requirement for mail-in ballots is ongoing, and may affect the notary requirement for voters in November).

In-person drop-off options

The August primary states offered an array of alternatives for voters who wanted to deposit their ballots directly with election officials instead of relying on the Postal Service and risking delay. Some states piloted or expanded existing ballot drop-box programs, which voters [embraced](#). (Unlike USPS mailboxes, county-administered ballot drop-off boxes are serviced directly by election officials, meaning that ballots deposited into these boxes by the close of the election period must be counted.). Other states set up drive-thru options, and permitted voters to hand deliver their absentee ballots to in-person voting locations—including voting centers. In general, these efforts—from boxes to

drive-thrus to voting centers—provided absentee voters greater control over when and how their ballots reached election officials.

- Though they had never used them before, **Connecticut** and **Georgia** each installed around 200 drop boxes this year, and Hawaii added a handful of boxes for its first all-mail election. (However, some Hawaiian lawmakers worried that the number of boxes was inadequate, especially given that many rural areas lack reliable USPS service). Election officials in **Michigan**, **Wisconsin**, **Arizona** and other states also added to their roster of existing drop boxes.
- In **Minnesota**, election officials piloted a "drive-thru" dropbox model where voters could deposit their absentee ballots into a secure receptacle without getting out of their car.
- Many voters who didn't want to entrust their absentee ballots to 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.
- Some August primary voters also dropped-off ballots at voting centers for the first time. (Unlike traditional polling places—which operate on election day and only serve the residents in a specific precinct—voting centers generally serve the entire county and offer voters a place to drop ballots or vote in-person). Although **Washington**—a universal vote-by-mail jurisdiction—has previously operated voting centers and did so in August without a hitch, **Hawaii** experienced its first all-mail election in August, and offered eight voting centers across all the islands for voters to drop ballots or vote in-person. **Arizona's** Maricopa county also successfully piloted voting centers in the August primary. (However, to avoid these locations getting overcrowded with absentee voters seeking the "I Voted" sticker, the county recorder sent out the popular stickers in all absentee ballot mailings.)

However, dedicated efforts are required to educate voters about their in-person ballot drop-off options. Without campaigns to make voters aware of drop-off boxes, drive-thru options, and in-person voting locations, voters who are concerned about timely delivery may be forced to nonetheless rely on snail mail. Some voters in **Milwaukee, WI** for example, reported confusion over where they could drop off their ballot in-person. Though "[m]ost of Wisconsin's 1,850 municipalities count absentee ballots at the polling place where the voter would normally vote…35 cities, villages and towns, including Milwaukee, count their absentee ballots at a central location." Inadequate signage may have contributed to the confusion.

Absentee ballot processing

Many August primary states were able to report the race results more quickly than in the presidential competitions due to election administration changes. That officials had fewer ballots to count certainly helped, but election administrators in several locales also took steps—such as adding staff or allowing ballot processing to begin ahead of time—to speed ballot processing.

- For instance, in **Madison, WI,** officials established a [rapid response team](#) of poll workers to help as needed with processing absentee ballots.
- In **Rochester Hills, MI,** the city clerk [tripled](#) the size of her absentee ballot counting board in anticipation of the deluge of mail ballots, which allowed the board to successfully count the 30,000 ballots their office received and tabulate the results by 11pm on Election Day. (The clerk, however, noted that they will need to scale operations further ahead of November to accommodate another 130,000 ballots).
- The director of **Alaska's** Division of Elections similarly retained [additional staff](#) to assist with absentee ballot counting, as the Department sent out more than seven times as many absentee ballots as usual (nearly [62,000](#) as of the day before the primary, compared to around 8,700 in the 2016 state primary).
- Finally, some jurisdictions permitted ballot processing to begin ahead of election day: in **Bulloch county, Georgia**, election officials started opening and processing absentee ballots a week before the election, and election officials in [Missouri](#) began five days before the election, which "lighten[ed] their load and speed[ed] up the publicly reported results on election night." **Arizona** lawmakers changed state law to allow local election officials to begin tallying absentee ballots [two weeks](#) ahead of Election Day (which, along with additional staffing in places such as Maricopa county, greatly reduced the crunch on August 4). **Minnesota** counties were likewise given an [additional week](#) to open and process absentee ballots, allowing them a two-week head start.

Notably, staff and time may not be the only constraints on prompt reporting: sufficient absentee ballot infrastructure is also critical. Though **Milkwalkee, WI** drastically improved its reporting time for August primary election results (officials announced results the morning—not days—after the close of the election), city officials [explained](#) that ballot processing machines (*not* people power) were a limiting factor. With few machines, [malfunctions](#) such as one that occurred on election night caused delays. As such, officials [hope](#) to procure more machines ahead of November.

B. Ongoing Challenges

In order to make Election Day as safe and successful as possible, states may wish to address the following issues.

Access to absentee voting

Not all states liberalized their absentee ballot rules for the August primaries. For example:

- Voters in **South Dakota** [were required](#) either to have their absentee ballots notarized or include a photocopy of acceptable photo ID. Similarly, voters in **Missouri** who did not qualify for the COVID-19 notarization exception were required to notarize the return envelope containing their ballot (though, as previously noted, an executive order permitted remote notarization).

- In **Oklahoma**, the legislature acted in May to *reinstate* a burdensome [notarization requirement](#) that had days before been struck down by the State Supreme Court. (Though the bill did allow August runoff voters to provide a [copy of their ID](#) in lieu of notarization due to the ongoing state of emergency, this exemption may not apply to the general election if the declaration is lifted).

- Meanwhile, **Alaskans** remained subject to the state's ballot witness requirement—but with a twist that caught both residents and officials off-guard. Rural residents faced a [surprise](#) when Postal Service staff informed them that they could no longer serve as absentee ballot witnesses while on-duty. Because the Division of Elections director was apparently not aware of the change ahead of election day reporting either, no policies were put in place to modify the witness requirement ahead of the August election. Though the policy change is national, Alaskans who are more isolated in rural regions may be particularly affected. (Until ballots are tabulated, the number of voters who were unable to meet the witness requirement will be unclear).

- Finally, voters in **Georgia** argued that their state imposed a different barrier to absentee voting: the state did not provide pre-paid postage on return envelopes. (But, a federal court [disagreed](#) that this amounted to limiting voters' access).

Missing and delayed absentee ballots

In many August primary and runoff states, voters who signed up to vote absentee never received a ballot. Others received their ballots late. In some cases, the absences and delays were attributable to delays and service changes at the Postal Service. Across all states experiencing delivery hurdles, people who never received their ballots had to choose between potentially compromising their health to vote in person or skipping voting entirely. And those who received ballots late in the game had to choose between cutting it close to the deadline by returning their ballot via USPS or rushing to drop off their ballots at an in-person drop-off location.

- For example, some voters in **Missouri** who requested absentee ballots received them [much later](#) than expected, due to USPS delays across the state.
- The same was [true in **Michigan**](#), where "some voters in Detroit had to wait weeks to receive their absentee ballot in the mail after requesting them."
- As of **Wisconsin's** primary day, according to one news report, [9,600 voters](#) had not received their requested ballots. (This happened despite steps local election officials in Milwaukee took after the troubled April primary to [cut out](#) the third-party delivery service it was using and to introduce intelligent mail barcodes, which helped to track ballots and flag delays).
- Missing ballots were also an issue in **Georgia's** most populous county, Fulton county. There, as in the presidential primary, some voters in the August 11 runoff [reported](#) never receiving their ballots.
- In **Connecticut**, which had never before conducted an election with significant mail-in voting, [significant delays](#) were caused by tropical storm Isaiah (which disrupted mail service) and by an administrator's error that led to 20,000 ballots being mailed late or not at all. (These delays prompted Governor 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. Typically, only ballots received by the end of Election Day are tabulated).

Rejecting absentee ballots due to delayed delivery, signature errors, and other reasons

In a select few August election states, voters' ballots were counted so long as they were postmarked by the close of polls and received within a certain timeframe. In **Alaska**, for instance, ballots were [counted](#) so long as they were postmarked by Election Day and received within ten days. (This, as well as a recently [reinstated anti-fraud provision](#) that prevents any mail-in ballots from being counted until a week after Election Day, may significantly delay final vote reporting). Similarly, **Minnesota** voters, due to the *LaRose v. Simon* settlement, were guaranteed that their ballots would be counted if received within two days of the election and postmarked by Election Day—a change that resulted in [8,400 ballots](#) being received and tabulated the Wednesday and Thursday after election day. (Though the settlement—which includes similar allowances regarding ballot receipt for the general election—was initially appealed, [the](#) [parties](#) ultimately consented to voluntary dismissal of the appeal in this and a related case).

However, voters in many August primary elections faced less forgiving deadlines: in order to be counted, absentee ballots in several states must be both postmarked *and* received by Election Day.

- In **Michigan**, nearly 6,500 ballots were [thrown out](#) because election officials received them after Election Day. (Though the League of Women Voters sued with other organizations in

May to force the state, among other things, to accept ballots postmarked by Election Day, the state Supreme Court declined to hear the case after an appellate court denied the plaintiffs' request. Unless the Supreme Court accepts the League's request to reconsider and rules in their favor, or—as the Secretary of State is urging—the legislature passes HB 5987—the "ballot in-hand" requirement will remain in place for the general election. This may negatively impact voters, as the Postal Service has specifically warned Secretary Benson that Michigan voters risk disenfranchisement due to the ballot request and return deadlines).

- **Florida** similarly has a strict deadline for mail-in ballots: current state law requires that ballots be submitted by 7pm on Election Day. Uncounted ballots from this primary have yet to be tallied, but there is some indication that Florida's strict deadline may have affected some voters: for instance, in Duval county, it was reported that at least 487 mail in ballots arrived too late to be counted. Meanwhile, some voters in Bay county were left confused as to whether their vote had actually been counted; some residents who voted absentee reported that the website had only been updated to say their ballot had been received, not counted.

- In addition to delays, missing signatures caused **Michigan** election officials to toss out more than 1,100 ballots. In general, signature errors—whether caused by missing signatures, or signature mismatch issues—are a significant cause of ballot rejection. Indeed, approximately 70% of the 23,000 votes rejected in the **Wisconsin** presidential primary were scrapped due to signature issues (including missing signatures, missing witness signatures, or missing witness addresses). Pending a final vote analysis, it remains to be seen how Wisconsin's August primary rejection rates will compare to past elections.

- Interestingly, signature rejections did not figure prominently in other August primary states (at least by the time of this writing). That may be due to effective cure policies in some states. In **Florida**, Supervisors of Elections are required to notify a voter if there is a mismatched signature or a missing signature, and to give them an opportunity to cure it by submitting an affidavit and a copy of their ID by 5pm the second day after the election. The provision appears to have enabled many (though not all) voters in the state to effectively cure signature issues with their ballots: for instance, in Florida's Hernando county, 72 of the 151 people in the county who had neglected to sign their ballots had cured the issue by the day before the deadline to do so. And, 69 of 146 people had cured a signature mismatch. Nonetheless, signature mismatch and signature cure policies may be a bigger issue in some August election states come November, depending on the outcome of litigation in Arizona and the implementation of a recent settlement agreement in Georgia.

II.   In-Person Voting

States saw a decline in in-person voting as voters disproportionately elected to vote by mail. Still, states made several adjustments to ensure safe, socially distanced facilities were available to voters who wished to vote in person. These adjustments ranged from the adoption of new voting venues, models, and sanitation measures to loosened ID requirements for in-person voting. Many state leaders also employed creative tactics and partnerships to ensure that polling locations were sufficiently staffed on Election Day. Despite these adjustments, in-person voting still faced some issues: voters reporting confusion over polling locations, and several states experiencing a shortage of poll workers. Some states also experienced challenges with registration and ballot printing, and with implementing appropriate sanitation measures (e.g., ensuring sufficient PPE). These challenges will likely be exacerbated in November when in-person voting locations service an even greater volume of voters.

A. What Went Well

Increasing and shifting in-person voting options to enable more socially-distanced voting

Several states that experienced voting delays during the presidential primaries—namely Wisconsin and Georgia—provided more in-person voting options for the August elections. **Wisconsin's** biggest cities increased the number of polling places available for the August primary after experiencing major lines and mass delays in April: officials in Milwaukee, **Wisconsin** [increased](#) the number of voting locations from five in April to 168 in August (roughly 95% of its regular sites); Madison added 23 new polling places since April [for a total of 89](#); and Green Bay offered [17 sites](#), up from two in the spring presidential primary. In **Georgia's Fulton county**—the county that experienced the biggest delays for its June 9 primary—officials [increased the number of polling sites available](#) from 164 in June to 174 in August.

States also shifted voting venues fairly nimbly to larger facilities that could better accommodate socially distanced voting.

- In **Fulton county, Georgia,** election officials partnered with the Atlanta Hawks to [transform Atlanta's State Farm Arena](#) into the state's largest-ever polling place. The arena opened for early voting on July 20th for the state's general primary runoff on August 11.
- In **Maricopa county, Arizona,** officials [secured larger facilities](#) like shopping malls and convention centers to serve as voting centers in order to allow for more physical distancing between voters and poll workers. And, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey further freed up suitable locations by signing [an executive order](#) allowing election officials to use state buildings for polling places.

- In **Vermont,** Barre City even repurposed a [municipal arena](#) where ice hockey players typically practice to serve as a new polling station.

Several states also saw success with adopting new models and/or new formats for in-person voting. For instance:

- **Maricopa county, Arizona**—the state's most populous county—saw marked success with in-person voting after adopting a [vote center model](#). The county's shift to this model [reportedly contributed](#) to decreasing the number of provisional ballots (down to [1,300](#) from 120,000 in 2012), shortening lines, and enabling more socially distanced in-person voting. The county also [leased](#) the vote centers itself so that it could have greater control over facility operations.
- Several jurisdictions—such as **[Detroit, Michigan](#)**, **[Huntington Vermont](#)**, and **[Callaway county, Missouri](#)**— also adopted "curbside" or "drive thru" models whereby voters could fill and cast ballots from their car without having to enter the voting facility.

Adoption of new sanitation practices to keep voters safe from COVID-19

Across the board, states made significant investments to ensure voting could proceed in sanitary and socially distanced conditions that would keep voters safe from COVID-19—often with CARES Act funding. For their part, voters noticed this investment: many voters reported that they felt safe voting in-person given the array of sanitation and other precautionary procedures their polling locations implemented.

- Voters in **Tennessee** [noted](#) that voting machines in polling locations were spaced apart, election cards were wiped down after every use, and that election workers supplied voters a coffee stirring stick to avoid touching the voting machines directly.
- Similarly in **Michigan,** the [Bureau of Elections provided safety equipment](#), such as gloves, disposable masks, spray disinfectants, disinfecting wipes, hand sanitizer and face shields, to clerk's offices, and established protocols for hygiene and social distancing.
- In [central **Florida**](#), most polling places also provided hand sanitizer and PPE and encouraged voters to bring their own pens. In **Florida's** [Santa Rosa county](#), polling locations used plexiglass at check-in stations; in [Broward county](#), voting booths were spaced out and traffic low; and in [Hillsborough county](#), voters were even given "souvenir" styluses to mark their ballots and take home so that the precinct could avoid voters re-using and sharing pens. A poll worker [from Miami](#) reported that every voter obeyed social distancing and entered the polling center with a mask.

- [Voters in Duluth and Superior Counties in **Minnesota**](#) also reported feeling safe after seeing new health protocols like sanitizing, social distancing, and plastic shield requirements enforced at polling locations. Plexiglass shields, extensive signage, and diligent sanitation also characterized polling stations in [Natrona county](#), **Wyoming**.
- In **Oklahoma**, election officials [received assistance](#) from the University of Oklahoma Health Science center in establishing protocols for disinfecting and spacing out voting surfaces.
- Some counties in **Kansas**, like [Sedgwick county](#), went even further, commissioning workers organized by a local cleaning business to consistently clean and sanitize polling places.

States had different requirements concerning masks. For example:

- All election officials [were required to wear masks](#) in **Tennessee** and [voters were encouraged to do so](#) as well. The same was true in **Michigan.**
- Both election officials and voters in **Minnesota** were [required to wear masks](#). This was true also of most polling places in [central Florida](#).
- [In **Kansas**](#), voters could not legally be forced to wear masks though masks were available for those voters who wanted them.

New initiatives and partnerships to increase availability of poll workers

Several states worked hard to combat poll worker shortages. For instance, **Tennessee** [launched a poll worker recruitment campaign](#) in June, and by mid-July had recruited nearly 3,000 volunteers. Several states also pursued new partnerships and put into place innovative policies to recruit and retain poll workers for Election Day.

- The Governor of **Arizona** issued an executive order allowing state employees to take [civic leave](#) on Election Day to serve as poll workers.
- Meanwhile, the **Wisconsin** National Guard [sent nearly 700 of its members to 40 counties](#) to deliver supplies for voting, help with setting up voting locations, and [perform poll worker duties at understaffed locations](#)—a move the WI Elections Commission [announced](#) made "a significant difference" in staunching the poll worker shortage.
- **Michigan** had one of the most innovative solutions for dealing with the shortage of poll workers. There, the Secretary of State's office [partnered](#) with the Detroit Pistons, and the team not only agreed to support voter awareness and engagement campaigns, but also to launch a program encouraging Piston employees to volunteer as poll workers in the August and November primaries.

Additional successes

- *Increased availability of early voting:* In **Arizona**, [Maricopa county](#) had 80 early voting centers available by August 1st, and 20 additional centers opened by August 2nd. In another county in Arizona, [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.

- *Loosened ID requirements for in-person voting:* **Kansas** has historically required a photo ID for voters who cast an in-person ballot. However, in light of significant closures, delays, and other COVID-19 related impediments, Kansas Governor Laura Kelly issued [Executive Order No. 20-55](#) allowing voters to use drivers licenses and other photo IDs that expire after March 12 and before September 15, 2020 to vote in both the primary and the general election.

- *Preparing back-up poll workers & offering incentives:* In **Arizona's Maricopa county**, officials trained "dozens" of [extra poll workers](#) to serve as substitutes in case of no-shows. Some jurisdictions in [Alaska](#) and [Wisconsin](#), in order to attract and retain volunteers, took the step of offering higher pay rates for poll workers. (However, at least in Alaska, the financial inducement did not overcome health fears, and some poll workers dropped out at the last minute anyway despite the hazard pay).

- *Special measures to ensure voting by Native communities:* In **Arizona,** the President of the Navajo Nation [issued an executive order](#) deeming voting an essential activity, which exempted tribe members from curfews and stay-at-home orders for the purpose of voting. In light of the pandemic-related closure of government buildings, Navajo tribal leaders were forced to creatively offer new voting venues. In Coconino county, leaders set up outdoor voting [tents](#) with mobile-hand washing facilities.

B. Ongoing Challenges

In order to make Election Day as safe and successful as possible, states may wish to address the following issues.

Poll worker shortages

A shortage of poll workers was by far the biggest challenge states faced in administering in-person voting. Multiple states struggled with poll worker shortages given the older demographic of most poll workers and fears of COVID-19 transmission. Despite the difficulties these shortages caused, many states were able to act fast in order to ensure sufficient poll worker capacity on Election Day and during in-person pre-voting.

- In **Michigan,** some polling places in Detroit did not open on time because there was an abnormal number of poll workers who did not show up—which election officials attributed to volunteers' safety concerns over COVID-19. Secretary of State Benson managed to send fifty extra volunteers to Detroit and thirty to Flint at the last minute, which ended up preventing major issues. In some Michigan counties, clerks reported that polling places opened on time but with the bare minimum number of poll workers needed to maintain the location. In light of these developments, Secretary Benson said that Michigan would need to recruit more poll workers for November.

- **Missouri** similarly reported a large number of cancellations and no-shows among poll workers in the St. Louis and Kansas City areas, though the state was able to dispatch alternate poll workers to fill in for no-shows.

- **Minnesota** reported struggling with poll worker retention because older individuals—the main volunteer pool— opted out this year due to concerns over COVID-19 transmission.

- In **Florida's** Seminole county, about 30% of core poll workers did not return for the primary election, and substitute poll workers ran low. The same was true in **Arizona**: some counties—like Mohave County—faced problems with staffing for early voting and Election Day voting locations. The county reported having to staff 37 polling locations with "skeleton crews" after retaining only 250 poll workers, compared to the usual 400.

- Exposure to COVID-19 also precipitated poll worker shortages and last-minute staffing changes in **Wisconsin,** where the Election Commission had to quickly replace four chief inspectors and three election inspectors after each inspector had direct contact with someone who had tested positive for COVID-19. And while Wisconsin successfully avoided staffing problems by activating the National Guard as described above, it is worth noting their assistance was required due to shortages: a week before the August election, the state was still 900 poll volunteers short.

- **Alaska**—a state that relies on in-person voting options due to unreliable mail service in some regions—volunteer shortages led to closures: on the eve of the primary election, the Director of Election announced that six polling locations would not open on Tuesday due to inadequate staffing, forcing residents there to vote at different locations or absentee at the last minute.

- In **Kansas,** a lack of poll worker volunteers also forced some voters to travel further than normal to vote due to voting location closures.

Voter confusion over polling locations

Voters across several states reported being confused as to their polling location due to last-minute changes.

- Officials in **Detroit, Michigan** were forced to [find 20 new polling locations](#) on relatively short notice after the city's public school system decided to hold summer classes in spaces the city planned to use as August voting locations. While Detroit sent memos to voters about the changes to their polling location, several residents still reported confusion, and others reported that they had not received any notice about the change to their polling location.
- **Arizona** voters in some areas, [like Maricopa county](#), also reported having trouble finding their voting location on Election Day due to changes to the county's voting model, which [substituted](#) 99 voting centers serving all county residents for the nearly 500 precinct-specific polling places in typical large elections. Furthermore, some locations were [not properly marked](#) so voters had difficulty finding them—a problem that was confounded by mobile display issues on the state's voter information portal. In [Amado](#)—a community located in Arizona's Pima county—voters also had to scramble because their longtime polling site moved 25 miles away without advanced notice due to miscommunication between the county and the venue. The county found an alternate facility at the last minute, but had little time to notify voters or post appropriate signage directing voters to the new location. This change may have affected turnout: though the county recorded 576 registered voters in the affected precinct as of August 3, only 15 in-person ballots were cast on August 4.
- In Jacksonville, **Florida** (located in Duval county), at least [one voting precinct was changed](#) at the last minute, causing confusion amongst voters. The county's Supervisor of Elections said that the location had only changed for one precinct (for the third time that year), and noted that two poll workers had been positioned outside the old precinct location to notify people of the relocation.

Technical issues

Some jurisdictions reported technical problems in administering in-person voting—an issue that can affect any election, held in a pandemic or not. In most cases, the technical challenges caused confusion or delay, but did not prevent people from voting.

- **Arizona** reported minor issues with online registration for in-person voting. The state's voter portal allowed roughly 2,100 individuals to register to vote even though they did not upload a copy of their Arizona driver's license or other acceptable documentation. The system flagged these individuals [as having insufficient documentation](#), and the state subsequently sent letters with a paper registration form to affected voters—but some voters said they weren't notified of this issue. Ultimately, those affected were permitted to vote so long as they had started the

registration process prior to the registration deadline and completed the process before the actual election.

- Meanwhile, in **Missouri,** election officials in St. Louis county reported that their [electronic poll books](#), which they used to check in voters, did not sync with the overall voter system during early morning voting, which made it difficult for officials to print out ballots for voters. Reports indicate that the technical issues lasted for at least the first hour of voting, affecting at least 50 of the county's roughly 400 polling sites. [Polling machine errors](#) in other counties like **Bibb county, Georgia** also reportedly led to voting delays and increased voting times.

- In **Palm Beach, Florida**, the county's method of transmitting in-person vote tallies from voting machines over the internet [failed](#) in some places, leading to hours-long delays in the vote counts. In some locations in the county, the thick walls in some school locations reportedly made it difficult for the voting machines to transmit the vote (and some rooms changed at the last second due to food drives, requiring workers to use rooms with poor internet connections). In other locations, new poll workers experienced difficulty connecting the necessary modems. When workers at affected locations went to process the machine's cartridges at a centralized tabulation center, however, poll workers sometimes forgot to bring the necessary cartridges or had problems accessing the facilities, compounding delays.

- Finally, new voting machines in **Laramie county, Wyoming** may have [misled](#) voters into thinking their ballot was submitted, when in fact it was not. The new machines generated paper ballots for voters to submit to poll workers in order to have their vote processed, but some voters walked away with the paper ballots and never turned them in. As a result, their vote wasn't received.

Other issues

- *Disproportionate challenges with voter access for Native communities.* In **Arizona**, some Native voters on reservations faced unique barriers to in-person voting. For example, [leaders of the Havasupai tribe](#) requested shorter voting times in order to limit the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission, leaving tribe members fewer opportunities to vote. Some Arizona tribes also had more limited access to early voting. For instance, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in southern Arizona hasn't had an early voting site since 2018, when it was [eliminated](#) without consultation with tribal leadership. Though the community has lobbied at least five times for its early-voting location to be reopened since its closure, the site has not been reinstated, and tribal members had to travel up to two hours round-trip off the reservation in order to cast an early vote. Restricted in-person voting options may have uniquely harmed Native communities, as some [reports](#) indicate that Native Americans have been more reluctant to utilize mail-in ballots due to cultural, historical, socioeconomic and language barriers.

- *Additional COVID-19 Challenges.* By and large, most reporting indicated that states did a fine job of adapting to ensure increased social distancing and sanitation to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. Some counties, however, did report challenges. For instance, Greene county in **Missouri** reported challenges with procuring the necessary PPE and other sanitation materials, like [spray cleaner](#).

III. Looking Forward to the November General Election

Although the ground continues to shift and much may change between now and November, the August state competitions provide important lessons for administering the general election. Based on our analysis, certain policies and procedures proved particularly effective in running safe, inclusive elections.

- To ensure successful absentee voting, election administrators did benefit (or could have benefited) from:
  - Educating voters around absentee ballot eligibility, signature requirements, cure policies, notary/witness requirements, deadlines for ballot receipt, drop-off alternatives, and the delays expected with tabulating absentee ballot results.
  - Clarifying that fear of contracting COVID-19 qualifies as an excuse for absentee voting.
  - Mailing absentee ballot applications to all registered voters.
  - Extending deadlines for receipt of absentee ballots postmarked by Election Day, especially given stresses on the Post Office.
  - Installing of drop boxes to allow voters maximum control over their mail ballot.
  - Hiring additional personnel to assist with absentee ballot processing and tabulating.
  - Allowing ballot processing and tabulation to begin ahead of the election to minimize delays in announcing election results.

- To ensure successful in-person voting, election administrators did benefit (or could have benefited) from:
  - Disseminating information on in-person voting locations, especially where locations have moved.
  - Investing heavily in poll worker recruitment.
  - Securing more polling stations and larger venues (such as government buildings, shopping malls, and sports arenas) to enable safer, socially distanced in-person voting.

- Offering innovative models for in-person voting, such as voting centers, drive-thru options, and expanded curbside options.
- Providing adequate sanitation materials at polling stations (such as gloves, masks, disinfecting wipes, hand sanitizer, etc. for voters and election officials) and setting up voting locations to physically accommodate social distancing.
- Making special arrangements for certain populations—such as hard-hit Native American communities living on reservations—to maintain access to in-person and absentee voting options.