

The COVID-19 Pandemic, the Election Calendar, and Voter Turnout in the 2020 Presidential Nomination^{1†}

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ABSTRACT

In early 2020, the chaotic Democratic presidential nomination dominated media headlines in the United States. Shortly after Super Tuesday though, the novel coronavirus, which soon became a worldwide pandemic, began commanding attention and the Democratic nomination race nearly vanished from the headlines and minds of voters. Yet these two events are intricately related, particularly for the twenty-six states that were scheduled to hold their primaries in mid-March or later. Some states held primaries as planned, while other states scrambled to postpone their primaries or implement or expand vote-by-mail procedures, confusing voters, igniting legal challenges, upending the primary calendar and delegate selection procedures, and taxing election administration agencies. In this descriptive project, we examine the coronavirus and how it relates to the dynamics and competitiveness of the race, nomination calendar, and voter turnout. Our results suggest that the pandemic and rescheduled contests did not dramatically reduce voter turnout.

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As the official start of the 2020 nomination season drew closer, it appeared it would be an exciting, hard-fought, likely drawn-out endeavor to nominate the Democratic candidate that would compete against President Trump in the November election. Many aspects of the race seemed well-posed to stimulate turnout, including the switch by many states away from caucuses in favor of primaries, a more backloaded calendar, the number of candidates in the race, the Democrats' out-party status, and animosity towards the incumbent president. Yet, just as former Vice-President Joe Biden was beginning to establish his position as the front-runner in early March, the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the nomination. As the race was settling into a two-person contest between Biden and Senator Bernie Sanders and then Biden looked more and more certain to become the Democratic nominee, the cost-benefit calculation for voters should have changed dramatically. As the benefits to voting, notably the likelihood of one's vote affecting the outcome, dwindled, the costs of voting during a pandemic dramatically increased. Several states rescheduled their contests, opting to hold them in June or later, well beyond when the race was competitive, voting instead after Biden had already emerged as the de facto nominee. For states that opted to keep their contest date, holding them in late spring, voters were faced with navigating stay-at-home orders and uncertainty and risk about the novel coronavirus. Therefore, we expect turnout to drop dramatically in the latter half of the nomination season.

In this project, we examine how these competing factors affected voter participation, both overall and across states, in the 2020 Democratic nomination. What began as a historically strong and diverse field with potential for a contested convention ended on a quiet note in relatively short order. Given this small window where the race was competitive and the disruption caused by the pandemic, our prior expectation would be to see voter turnout drop precipitously. Yet, as

we show in the analysis that follows, that is not what we find. We demonstrate that turnout was high in 2020, but remained high, even after the pandemic disrupted the nomination and Biden emerged as the de facto nominee.

How the 2020 Nomination Race Unfolded

The 2020 Democratic presidential nomination race to defeat President Donald Trump attracted one of the deepest pools of potential nominees, featuring nearly thirty candidates. Before winning the nomination, former Vice-President (and former U.S. Senator) Joe Biden defeated a considerable number of current or former elected officials including eight U.S. Senators, seven U.S. Representatives, four governors, four mayors, and a former Cabinet Secretary.² By any definition, this field included several quality candidates with realistic chances of securing the nomination. The race also reflected the most diverse field of viable candidates with several prominent candidates of color, women, and the first serious candidate from the LGBT community.

With all of these candidates in the race, no clear front runner emerged in the lead up to the 2020 nomination season, which signaled the deep divisions within the party. Though Biden enjoyed a modest lead throughout most of the polls before the first contests (while briefly trailing Senator Elizabeth Warren in national polls), he failed to garner significant traction in gaining early endorsements (Real Clear Politics 2020; Bycoffe and Dottle 2020). Meanwhile, Senator Bernie Sanders dwarfed Biden's fundraising numbers and far outraised the rest of the field

² Senators include Bennet, Booker, Gillibrand, Gravel, Harris, Klobuchar, Sanders, and Warren. Representatives include Delaney, Gabbard, Moulton, O'Rourke, Ryan, Sestak, and Swalwell. Governors include Bullock, Hickenlooper, Inslee, and Patrick. Mayors include Bloomberg, Buttigieg, DeBlasio, and Messam. Julian Castro formerly served as U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. This does not include independently wealthy or notable candidates like Steyer, Williamson, and Yang.

(Nilsen 2020). The narrative of the race was framed frequently about “electability.” Activists sought to find a candidate that could energize voters, unite the party, *and* defeat President Donald Trump, but there was little agreement about who that was.

In the early stages of the race, there was considerable uncertainty about who would emerge as the nominee. Biden had a shaky start earning a dismal fourth and fifth place finish in Iowa and New Hampshire, respectively. Both Senator Bernie Sanders and South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg claimed the momentum after coming in first and second place in the first two tightly-fought contests. After Sanders earned a decisive victory in Nevada, the race remained unsettled. Increasingly, the idea of a contested convention seemed “possible” and fear of what a Sanders’ nomination might do to the party’s prospects grew more visible (Lerer and Epstein 2020; Phillips 2020).

South Carolina Representative James Clyburn’s pivotal endorsement helped Biden secure his first victory in the Palmetto State on February 29th (Owens 2020). As a result, the field rapidly began to clear as Senator Amy Klobuchar and Buttigieg conceded and endorsed Biden, consolidating support among the more “moderate” factions within the party. At this point in the race, a diverse field of nearly thirty candidates had dwindled to only five remaining candidates with delegates (Biden, Sanders, Warren, Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Representative Tulsi Gabbard).

After his South Carolina victory, Biden’s campaign received an outpouring of support headed into Super Tuesday and saw a huge spike in endorsements including from prominent members of the party who finally “decided” (Cohen et al 2008; Hilton 2020). On March 3, 2020, just three days after the South Carolina primary, Biden experienced significant success winning the majority of contests on Super Tuesday. Warren and Bloomberg soon dropped out of the race,

effectively leaving a two-person struggle. Though Sanders remained in the race, Biden's momentum and string of successes in early March suggested that Biden had a clear path to earning a majority of the pledged delegates.

Right as the race reached this pivotal moment, the COVID-19 pandemic fully disrupted the nomination calendar. On March 13th, just ten days after Super Tuesday, President Trump declared COVID a national emergency (Trump 2020). As a result, media coverage of the primary race was subsumed by coverage of the pandemic and voters shifted their attention away from the race (Bond 2020; Jurkowitz 2020). As the number of positive cases began to surge, states began implementing stay-at home orders and other public health measures. Many states rescheduled their contests for later in the nomination calendar while others made noticeable changes to how they conducted elections. While this was ongoing, Biden won every remaining contest until Sanders dropped out of the race on April 8th.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we first examine known factors associated with voter turnout in presidential nomination contests. Next, we explore an emerging literature to explore how the pandemic might affect voting behavior. Finally, we present our exploratory analysis of the relationship between COVID-19, the nomination calendar, and voter turnout.

Electoral Rules and Voter Turnout

Broadly, we know that "rules matter" in that the patchwork diversity of how nominations vary across states and parties can shape voter behavior, including the number of voters that choose to participate in the process (Jewitt 2019, Norrander 2020). For example, states that employ open primaries compared to closed primaries experience higher levels of voter participation (Jewitt 2019). Additionally, states that utilize primaries compared to caucuses enjoy

higher rates of voter turnout (Jewitt 2014; 2019). Given that the 2020 Democratic nomination season featured the lowest number of caucuses in the post-reform era (Cohn 2019), we would expect increased levels of voter turnout.

But part of what makes rules matter is whether voters are aware of them and directly observe their impact. While voters can observe whether they are participating in a primary or caucus or whether they had to previously register with their party to participate, they are less likely to be aware of the often byzantine rules of delegate allocation. Recent research suggests that whether states utilize winner-take-all or proportional delegate rules has no impact on voter turnout (2019). This finding echoes how a voters' experience at the polls is associated with confidence and behavior but not other components of election administration (Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Bullock et al. 2005; Hall et al. 2007, 2009; Claasen et al. 2008; Flavin and Shufeldt 2019).

In addition to the rules and electoral administration shaping behavior, the context of the race matters as well. Oftentimes, the invisible primary shapes the options well before voters get a chance to cast a ballot (Cohen et al. 2008; Norrander 2020). As we previously discussed, the invisible primary did not winnow the 2020 field, leaving voters with many viable candidates to choose from. The reason why so many candidates chose to run and remained in the race is at least two-fold. First, party elites failed to coordinate on a single candidate as many candidates had pockets of support reflecting the ideological and demographic diversity within the field and divisions within the party. Second, enthusiasm (and voter turnout) is generally greater for the out-party (Atkeson and Maestas 2016). President Trump was historically unpopular and once impeached (at this point) making it very attractive for potential candidates to throw their hat in the ring, as Democratic voters were intent on removing Trump from office. Since research

indicates that races with a higher number of candidates are associated with high levels of voter turnout (Aldrich et al. 2019; Jewitt 2019; Norrander 2020), we would anticipate a race like 2020 with a large field of candidates to produce higher levels of turnout.

The rules and the context of the race truly meet when we consider the schedule of the nomination calendar. Increasing attention has been paid to the concept of frontloading, or “the tendency for states to move their primary or caucus toward the beginning of the nomination season, resulting in a clustering of contests early in the season” (Jewitt 2019, 56). The generalized fear of frontloading is that it truncates the calendar, rewards front-runner candidates with financial and organizational advantages, and leaves many, especially those located in states that hold later contests, without a chance to meaningfully participate in the process (e.g. Steger 2000; Mayer and Busch 2004; Atkeson & Maestas 2016).

Importantly, scheduling a race *early* is not necessarily associated with higher levels of voter turnout. Frontloading is relevant in that it shapes the competitive nature of the race. States that have their contests later in the process but during the competitive stage of the calendar experience higher levels of voter turnout (Jewitt 2019). The 2020 calendar was less frontloaded compared to previous years (DeSilver 2020). In fact, prior to the pandemic, states actually moved their nomination contest backwards (not forward) compared to previous years (Putnam 2021). This may have led one to expect that the competitive portion of the 2020 nomination would stretch on for some time. However, as is described in detail below, the pandemic disrupted the calendar, with many states moving their contests even later in the season. States with contests later in the calendar are also more likely to have their presidential primary in conjunction with primaries for other state offices, which is also associated with higher levels of voter turnout (Jewitt 2019; Norrander 2020).

To briefly summarize, there were many reasons to suspect that voter turnout in the Democratic nomination should be relatively high. States increasingly were utilizing primaries instead of caucuses (Cohn 2019) and making them open to more voters. The rules surrounding the 2020 nomination were designed in a way that is associated with higher turnout. Likewise, the contours of the race point in a similar direction. The invisible primary failed to winnow the field ahead of the contests leaving many viable candidates to compete for the nomination. The calendar was less frontloaded giving voters more opportunity to participate during the competitive portion of the race. Yet, as we will describe in more detail in the following sections, the COVID-19 pandemic changed many of these dynamics, and with it, our expectations.

COVID and Voter Turnout

Emerging research on the effects of the pandemic suggests that the pandemic reduced support for particular politicians and shaped voting preferences. Areas with higher rates of cases and fatalities are associated with lower levels of support for Donald Trump and Republicans at other levels of office as well (Warshaw, Vavreck, and Baxter-King 2020; Baccini, Brodeur, and Weymouth 2020). In the Democratic nomination contest, fear of the virus is associated with a “flight to safety,” moving supporters away from Bernie Sanders and toward Joe Biden (Bisbee and Honig 2021). Yet, we do not have a clear sense of how the pandemic affected the number of people who chose to participate in the Democratic nomination process, which was interrupted by the pandemic.

Theoretically, we would expect a global pandemic to significantly alter the individual cost-benefit analysis voters utilize as to whether to go to the polls or not (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Even in a contested primary, the likelihood that any one voter’s ballot will determine the outcome is miniscule. While primary voters might perceive real benefits of their

preferred candidate winning, the ideological differences between Democratic candidates is dwarfed by the ideological difference between Democrats and Republicans in the general election. The costs of participating in an election during a pandemic, given great uncertainty, could be lethal.

The potential risk or fear of getting COVID or spreading the disease to others should be associated with lower levels of turnout for good reason. First, the pandemic disrupted elections beyond the United States (see Landman and Splendore 2020). Fear of catching the virus or higher rates of positive COVID-19 cases were associated with lower levels of voter turnout in a diverse collection of countries including Brazil, Spain, France, Nigeria, and Malawi (Vazquez-Carrero, Artes, Garcia, and Jimenez 2020; Fernandez-Navia, Polo-Muro, and Tercero-Lucas 2021; Haute et al 2021; Constantino, Cooperman, and Moriera 2021; Nwankwo 2021; Chirwa et al 2021).

The relationship between voter turnout and the virus also likely goes in both directions. For example, higher levels of voter turnout in Italy were associated with the spread of the virus (Cipullo and Le Moglie 2021). In the U.S. case, Flanders, Flanders, and Goodman (2020) identified that in-person voting turnout in the state of Michigan during their March 10th primary was associated with higher rates of COVID-19 infections. Counties that experienced higher voter turnout reported a higher number of positive cases in the two weeks following the primary. They reported a weaker connection in Missouri and null results in Mississippi, findings they attribute, in part, due to a lower infection rate heading into the primaries.

Yet we lack a systematic analysis of how COVID-19 affected turnout during the primaries in the United States. Based on studies relying on case studies of specific geographies, preliminary results suggest that it may have dampened turnout here as well (Yoder et al. 2020;

Scheller 2021; Morris and Miller 2021). For instance, during Texas' July 14th primary, only voters over the age of 65 could cast an absentee ballot (and thus vote-by-mail) without an excuse. Yoder et al. (2020) find that while the number of people choosing to vote absentee in Texas tripled compared to previous elections, turnout itself did not drastically change.

Examining Florida, which kept its March 17th primary as scheduled, Scheller (2021) uncovers that individual voters were less likely to turn out as their age and the positive COVID-19 rate in their county increased. Finally, Morris and Miller (2021) reveal that consolidating polling places in Milwaukee in response to COVID-19 was associated with lower rates of voter turnout, especially among Black voters, in Wisconsin's April 7th primary.

Beyond COVID-19, previous research also has linked public health emergencies with voter turnout. For example, the Ebola virus dampened voter turnout in the 2014 congressional elections, especially among Democratic voters (Campante, Depetris-Chauvin, and Durante 2020). Sometimes the effect of a pandemic may have a delayed and prolonged impact on voting behavior. For example, a different study found that congressional districts with higher rates of HIV/AIDS cases eventually experienced higher rates of Democratic turnout and vote share (Mansour, Rees, and Reeves 2020). Similar to COVID-19, the response to HIV/AIDS revealed partisan differences in how serious citizens viewed the risk and the appropriate government response. Democrats, in particular, wanted elections to be conducted with expanded vote-by-mail (VBM) options and were more likely to take advantage of it compared to Republicans in 2020 if it was available in their state (Nielber 2020; Kousser et al 2021).

Most relevant for our purposes given that we are examining voter turnout during the Democratic nomination contest, fear of the Coronavirus frequently fractured along party lines. Democrats reported higher levels of concern that they might catch the virus themselves or expose

a loved one to it (Deane, Parker, Gramlich. 2021; Galvin and Bracken 2021). The level of concern toward COVID-19 and risk of exposure was (and is) associated with many characteristics associated with the Democratic Party including gender, race, education, and population density. Democrats reported greater fear of going out, being part of large crowds, dining out in restaurants, and were more likely to stay home. Moreover, affective polarization (animus or antipathy toward the opposing party) exacerbated partisan differences in public opinion and behavior in response to the pandemic. Democrats with a strong aversion to Republicans are more likely to double-down and take the risk of the Coronavirus even more seriously as part of their political identity (Druckman et al 2020; 2021). The very population most likely to participate in a Democratic primary were frequently the ones most concerned with the virus.

In summary, many features of the 2020 Democratic nomination would lead us to believe we would see higher rates of voter turnout. The invisible primary failed to winnow the field giving voters a choice among a strong diverse field of candidates representing different ideological and social groups within the party's coalition. As the out-party, Democrats were mobilized to defeat President Trump and energized to find a candidate that could unite the party, mobilize voters, and win in November. Yet, right as the race is shaping up into a two-person contest, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically alters the race. The costs associated with voting are increasingly high amidst the uncertainty given the new and emerging health risks and particularly felt among a Democratic primary electorate more worried about the pandemic. The pandemic also leads many states to reschedule their contests, shuffling the calendar, and placing many of these state contests later in the process outside of the competitive window after Biden becomes the presumptive nominee. As a result, the natural expectation would be for voter

turnout to precipitously drop. In the following section, we unpack some of these changes to the election calendar and explore trends in voter turnout.

Defining Key Concepts

Before examining the 2020 Democratic nomination calendar and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the intended calendar and voter turnout, it is essential we define several key concepts, including what it means for the nomination to be competitive. As the nomination season progresses, it often becomes increasingly clear which candidate will be crowned the nominee. However, we consider the race to be competitive until there is a high level of certainty that a candidate will become the nominee. In the analysis that follows, we use a dichotomous categorization of competitive or not.³ We measure when the nomination turns from competitive to uncompetitive by looking at when a de facto, or presumptive, nominee emerges. All contests that occur after a de facto nominee emerges are considered to be in the uncompetitive phase of the nomination season. A de facto nominee can emerge through one of the following two paths. First, since a candidate needs 50% + 1 delegate to become the party's nominee at the National Convention, he or she becomes the de facto nominee once he or she surpasses that threshold. Second, a candidate can become the de facto nominee by all of his or her viable competitors withdrawing from the race (Jewitt 2019). For instance, Hillary Clinton became the de facto Democratic nominee after securing a majority of delegates in the 2008 nomination. Alternatively, Al Gore utilized the second path and became the de facto Democratic nominee on

³ Of course, there are other ways to measure competitiveness, such as the number of candidates in the race or the delegate lead between the leading candidate and his or her competitors. Future work will address these factors.

March 9, 2000 because Bill Bradley withdrew from the race, leaving Gore as the only viable option.

In 2020, Biden became the presumptive nominee via the second path; the nomination race became uncompetitive because Bernie Sanders withdrew from the race on April 8, 2020. All of the other major competitors, including Klobuchar, Warren, Bloomberg, and Buttigieg, had previously withdrawn from the race. At this point in time, Biden was ahead of Sanders by almost 400 delegates, having secured 1,313 delegates. Yet, he was still several hundred delegates shy of the needed 1,991 delegates to win the Democratic nomination.

Considering whether or not the nomination is competitive becomes important for assessing turnout and meaningful participation. Voters in any state holding contests after a de facto nominee emerges and the race becomes uncompetitive lack the opportunity for timely and meaningful participation. Though they can still turn out and participate, voters in states holding contests in the uncompetitive phase have no real say in who becomes the nominee. That choice has already been solidified—the nominee has been decided. In 2020, 31 states voted during the competitive portion of the nomination season (prior to April 8, 2020) and 19 states voted during the uncompetitive portion. Voters in these 19 states had no meaningful choice in who would become the nominee—Joe Biden was the only option. Following the paradox of voting and the cost-benefit calculation that goes into participating, we expect turnout to drop precipitously once a de facto nominee has emerged and voters lack the opportunity for meaningful participation in the process.

In order to determine how many voters are opting to participate in the nomination process, we need to ascertain the most appropriate way to measure voter turnout. Calculating turnout in general elections is relatively straightforward, as one simply takes the number of votes

cast and divides by the number of people eligible to vote in the election. However, calculating turnout in presidential primaries and caucuses is much more complicated as it is less clear who is eligible to vote.

Presidential nomination contests are intraparty events and occur at the state level and the rules vary across states and parties. The electoral rule that has the most bearing for calculating turnout is the openness rule, which governs who can participate. In open contests, any eligible voter is allowed to participate, regardless of party identification or loyalty. In semi-open contests, members of the political party and independents are allowed to participate, but members of the other major political party are excluded. In closed contests, only party members may participate. Of course, some states register voters by party, but others do not.⁴ Therefore, finding a consistent denominator is even more challenging.

The choice of a denominator is further complicated by the fact that both the Republican and Democratic parties hold presidential nominating events, but voters are only allowed to participate in one party's contest. Thus, in a state that holds an open Republican primary and an open Democratic primary, a voter may only opt to vote in one contest, even if these primaries are held months apart. In other words, the electorates are discrete from one another and this needs to be heeded when calculating the denominator.

To overcome these theoretical and methodological challenge, we follow the work of Norrander (1986, 1992) and others (e.g. Schier 1982; Jewell 1984; Jewitt 2014, 2019) and utilize

⁴ Those states that hold closed contests typically do have party registration, as it allows them to track which voters are members of the political parties. However, some states utilize "loyalty" pledges and require voters to attest that they are loyal to and consider themselves members of the political party.

the normal partisan support score (NPSS) as the denominator of our voter turnout calculation. The normal partisan support score can be thought of as an estimate of the proportion of voters in a state who routinely support the political party. The normal partisan support score has been calculated in a variety of ways, but, importantly, it should consider support for the party for a variety of offices and years (to account for a charismatic candidate, an uncontested election, or a partisan tide). Here, we follow the procedures laid out by Jewitt (2014, 2019) and calculate the normal partisan support score by averaging the proportion of the vote won by the Democratic candidate in the most recent two presidential elections, senatorial elections, and gubernatorial elections in the state.⁵ We then multiply this average by the voting eligible population for the state, resulting in the normal partisan support score. When using the normal partisan support score as the denominator of the voter turnout calculation, it presents a consistent figure that can be calculated for every state, regardless of openness rules and whether the state has party registration. Turnout calculated using this denominator can be thought as the percentage of partisan supporters that participated in the contest.

A Calendar Disrupted

Now that we have described some central terms for our analysis, we can examine how COVID-19 disrupted the nomination schedule. The 2020 calendar was designed to look similar to recent calendars. The calendar as it was intended to operate can be seen in the left panel of Figure 1. The four carve-out states—Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina—were allowed to schedule contests in February, and the window opened for all other states on the first

⁵ States, of course, elect senators and governors in different years. We utilize the two most recent senatorial elections and gubernatorial elections regardless of how recently they occurred.

Tuesday in March and was supposed to close on the second Tuesday in June, per the rules established by the national Democratic Party.⁶ This meant that a month after the nomination season began with the Iowa caucuses, other states were allowed to begin holding contests. Thus, the first Tuesday in March, commonly known as Super Tuesday, was cluttered with contests. 17 states held contests on March 3, 2020 and several more were scheduled to vote throughout the rest of March. As we have come to expect with recent calendars, the nomination was relatively front-loaded, with contests clustered in the beginning of the nomination season. This is evidenced by the high number of contests found on the left side of the graph.

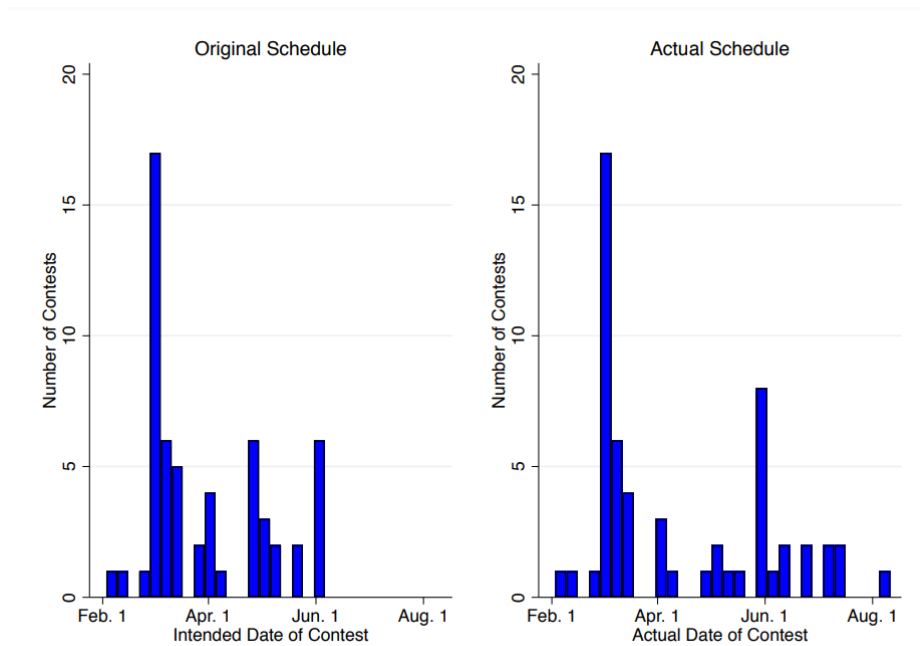


Figure 1: Intended and Actual 2020 Democratic Calendars

⁶ <https://democrats.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2020-Delegate-Selection-Rules-12.17.18-FINAL.pdf>

Of course, due to the pandemic and the schedule changes, the 2020 Democratic nomination calendar ended up looking quite different than was intended. In early March, the 2020 nomination was reaching a pivotal time, with numerous states voting, and Biden beginning to establish a substantial lead. The pandemic was also simultaneously reaching a critical juncture, and it began to disrupt the nomination. The right panel of Figure 1 shows the calendar as it actually happened, documenting the contests that were rescheduled due to COVID-19 following disruptions from COVID and rescheduled contests. It also depicts a calendar that is not necessarily back-loaded, where contests would be clustered at the end of the calendar, nor a calendar that has contests equally spaced around the nomination season. Instead, it depicts a calendar that is almost bimodal—there are a number of contests in early March, then an unusually quiet interlude throughout most of April and May created by pandemic movement, and then the number of contests starts to pick back up in June.

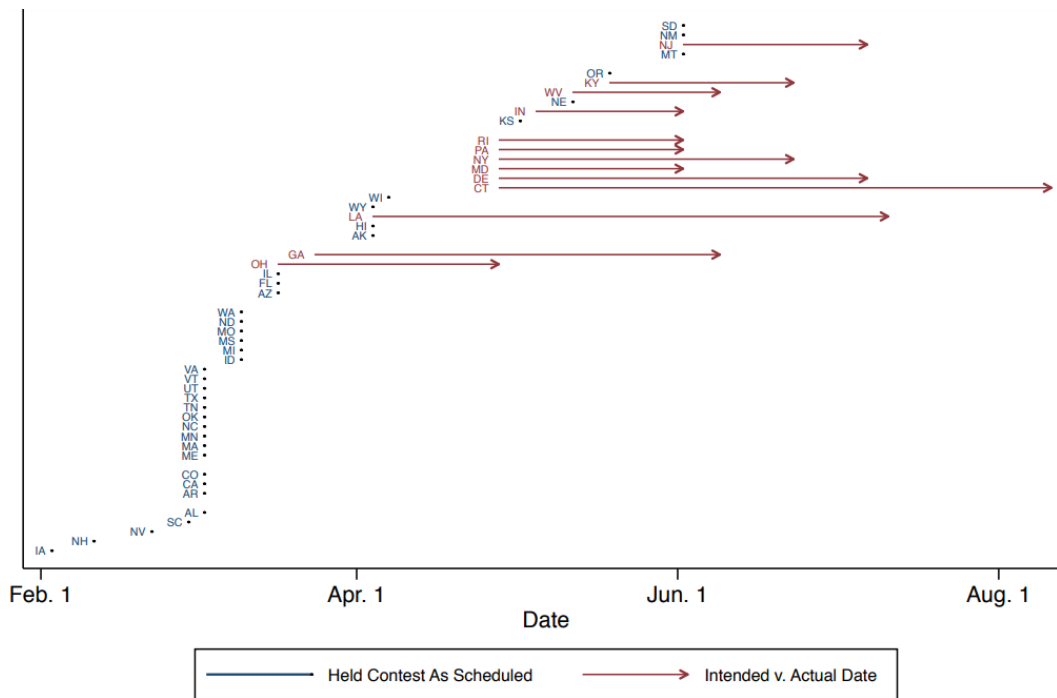


Figure 2: Contest Movement in the 2020 Democratic Calendar

To take a closer look at the changes to the calendar. What states rescheduled their contents, and when they moved them to, Figure 2 depicts the movement of state contests. States, indicated by their abbreviations, are located at their original contest date. States with a red arrow shifted in the calendar to the point in time where the arrow stops.

Days before its scheduled March 17th primary, Ohio, was the first state to postpone its contest. It opted to reschedule its primary for April 28, 2020. Other states, including Georgia and Louisiana, soon followed this decision, moving their contests even later in the season, opting for dates in June and July. Thirteen states ended up rescheduling their contests, moving them anywhere from 28 to 105 days later than they were originally intended. On average, states that moved their contests held them 52 days later than originally scheduled. Every state except Ohio chose to hold the rescheduled contests in June or beyond. As a result of this movement, June 2 became a major date in the calendar, second only to Super Tuesday. Though early June is generally the end of the nomination calendar, on June 2, 2020, 7 states (and the District of Columbia) held primaries, with 636 delegates available. Six states held contests in late June, July, or August, a period of time in which the nomination is usually in the interregnum phase, or the lull between the de facto nominee emerging and the candidate officially being nominated at the Convention (Mayer and Busch 2004).

The Calendar, Competitiveness, and Turnout in 2020

Given the theorized connection between the calendar, competitiveness, and turnout, we next turn our attention to the turnout rates of the 2020 Democratic nomination contests and how the pandemic affected the number of voters that participated.

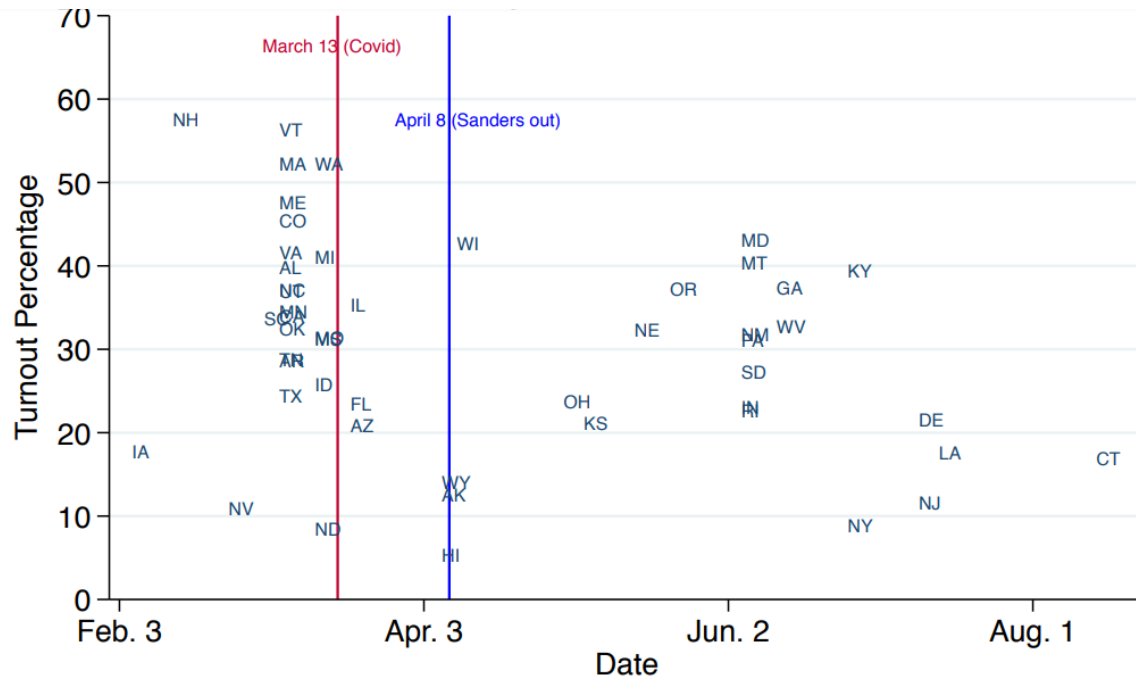


Figure 3: Turnout in the 2020 Nomination Contests, By Date

Figure 3 shows the turnout rate in each state organized by the date the contest took place (actual, not intended, date). The first vertical line on the graph represents when COVID first disrupted the calendar, depicting March 13, 2020, the day that the Ohio primary was originally scheduled to occur. The second vertical line demarcates April 8, 2020, when Joe Biden became the de facto nominee and the nomination shifted from the competitive phase to the uncompetitive phase.

When examining Figure 3, it is clear that turnout varies considerably across states from a low of 5.3% in the Hawaii primary to a high of 57.6% in the New Hampshire primary. Many factors, such as the state's political culture, demographic factors, the type of contest (primary or caucus), the number of candidates in the race, affect turnout in the presidential nomination contests (Jewitt 2019). The date of the contest and whether the contest is held in the competitive phase or occurs after a de facto nominee has emerged is also critical for understanding the

turnout rate. Of course, even on a single date, there can be and is significant variation in the turnout rate; 24.4% of Democratic Party supporters turned out to participate in the Texas primary compared to 56.3% in Vermont’s primary, both held on Super Tuesday 2020. Looking across the nomination season, the general downward right slope indicates that turnout falls on average as the nomination season progresses. However, this figure also illuminates that in 2020 turnout does not plummet once Sanders withdraws from the race and Biden becomes the de facto nominee.

Table 1: Historical Comparison of Competitiveness and Turnout in Democratic Presidential Nominations, 1980 – 2020

Year	Days Competitive	Number of States in Competitive Portion	NPSS Turnout
1980	134	50	22.1%
1984	147	50	18.1%
1988	120	50	24.9%
1992	113	27	20.9%
1996		Uncontested	
2000	50	19	16.3%
2004	57	30	16.0%
2008	152	50	31.3%
2012		Uncontested	
2016	127	50	23.8%
2020	65	31	30.5%

In order to contextualize the turnout rates of the 2020 Democratic nomination contests, Table 1 presents a historical comparison of competitiveness and turnout in the Democratic nominations between 1980 and 2020. The 2020 Democratic nomination was competitive for only 65 days. 31 states holding primaries and caucuses in that time period. It was particularly short compared to the two open nominations (2008 and 2016) that preceded it, both of which were

competitive until the bitter end, allowing every state the opportunity for timely and meaningful participation in the selection of a nominee.

Despite the fact that voters in only 31 states had the opportunity to cast a vote when there was a meaningful choice to be made between at least two candidates, turnout was relatively high in 2020, with 30.5% turnout. In fact, it was the second highest turnout rate between 1980 and 2020, surpassed only by the highly competitive nomination between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in 2008, which had a record turnout rate of 31.3%.

Compared to the 2004 nomination, which was fairly similar in terms of length of competitiveness, as it was competitive for 57 days with 30 states voting in that period, turnout in 2020 was almost double the turnout rate of 16% in 2004. Turnout in 2020 was also significantly higher than several nominations that were competitive for the entire nomination season, such as 2016, which had a turnout rate of 23.8%, and 1988, which had a turnout rate of 24.9%. While the competitive portion of the 2020 nomination race was relatively short by historical standards, turnout was very high, even when compared to very competitive nominations.

Table 2: Mean Turnout in the 2020 Democratic Nomination Contests, By Competitiveness

	Mean	Number of Contests
Competitive	32.4	31
Not Competitive	27.4	19
Total	30.5	50

This high level of turnout is surprising because based on a cost-benefit analysis, we would expect fewer voters to head to the polls once the nomination is no longer competitive. There is no meaningful choice to be made—the nominee has already been decided, which lowers

the perceived benefits dramatically. Even more so in 2020, we would expect the costs of voting to increase dramatically. In a pandemic, voters need to navigate stay-at-home orders, changing electoral rules and procedures, and the risk of COVID exposure. Yet, turnout did not fall very much between the competitive portion of the 2020 nomination and the uncompetitive portion. As Table 2 shows, 31 contests were held in the competitive phase of the 2020 nomination, with an average turnout rate of 32.4%. 19 states held contests when the nomination was no longer competitive, when Joe Biden was the only viable candidate left, and the average turnout rate among those states is 27.4%. Turnout does drop once the nomination is no longer competitive, but it still remains relatively high, particularly given the circumstances of 2020.

Table 3: Mean Turnout in the 2020 Democratic Nomination Contests, By Shared Date with State Primaries

	Mean	Number of Contests
Shared Date	30.7	21
Separate Dates	30.4	29
Total	30.5	50

Thus, we also investigate whether turnout remained high throughout the 2020 nomination season because voters were participating in other primary elections. In 2020, 21 states held presidential nomination contests in conjunction with congressional or state primary elections (Table 3). In the other 29 states, presidential nomination contests were held on a different date from any state or congressional primary elections. Average turnout for states that held primaries on the same date and states that held primaries on different dates was almost identical (30.7% for the former, 30.4% for the latter).

Of course, this is complicated by the fact that states holding earlier contests, which are more likely to be in the competitive phase, are less likely to hold their presidential nominating contest in conjunction with state or congressional primaries. Thus, Table 4 presents a controlled mean comparison between competitiveness, shared date, and turnout.

Table 4: Mean Turnout in the 2020 Nomination Contests, by Competitiveness and Shared Date with State Primaries

	Competitive	Not Competitive	Total
Shared Date	32.9	29.6	30.7
	(7)	(14)	(21)
Separate Dates	32.2	21.2	30.4
	(24)	(5)	(29)
Total	32.4	27.4	30.5
	(31)	(19)	(50)

This analysis indicates that during the competitive window, turnout is very similar, regardless of whether or not the state holds its presidential primary in conjunction with the state or congressional primaries. States holding primaries on the same date in the competitive window have an average turnout rate of 32.9%; in states where the presidential nomination contest was held in the competitive phase of the nomination, but the congressional or state primaries were held at a different time, the average turnout rate was 32.2%.

A different relationship emerges when we look at contests occurring after April 8, 2020. Among states holding contests in the uncompetitive portion of the nomination, there does appear to be a positive impact on turnout from sharing a date with a congressional or state primary. States in the uncompetitive portion that shared a date have an average turnout rate of 29.6%

compared to states in the uncompetitive portion that did not share a date, which had a mean turnout rate of 21.2%, or 8.4 percentage points lower. Thus, joining up the state or congressional primary with the presidential nominating contest resulted in higher turnout once Biden emerged as the *de facto* nominee.

Nine of the thirteen states that moved their contests later in the nomination season rescheduled their contests to be held in conjunction with their state or congressional primaries. Doing so may have encouraged voters to go to the polls in these states—even if there was not a meaningful choice to be made in the presidential nomination, there may have been one in the state or congressional primaries, which increased the turnout rate.

Conclusion

Of course, based on this analysis, we cannot say that turnout did not fall because of the pandemic and the rescheduling of several contests. It is quite possible, plausible even, that many voters decided to stay home, rather than risk their safety at the polls—especially since there was no meaningful choice to be made in the presidential nomination after April 8, 2020. What we do know, however, from this analysis is that turnout was very high in 2020—second only to 2008. Turnout may have been *even* higher if the competitive phase of the nomination had stretched on longer or if several contests had not been rescheduled. On the other hand, rescheduling presidential nomination contests in the uncompetitive phase to be held in conjunction with state and congressional primaries may have increased turnout in these locations. In order to parse this out, additional research needs to be done.

We see several fruitful lines for future inquiry. The first of which is to put the 2020 contest in more of a historical context. Assessing how turnout in the 2020 primaries and caucuses

compares to participation rates from states in previous years would provide us more insight into whether the unique features of this race mobilized or demobilized voters more than what we might expect. A second consideration is to examine how different conceptualizations of competition are associated with voter turnout. For example, measuring competition as a continuous variable based upon the size of the delegate lead might provide different insights compared to measuring competition as a dichotomous variable.

The disruption caused by the pandemic provides several natural experiments to examine how states chose to respond and administer their primary elections (and whether those choices are associated with higher levels of voter turnout). We anticipate that several political and partisan factors are associated with postponing and rescheduling the election, including whether the state had a Democratic Governor or the degree of competition between parties for control of state government. In addition to states opting to utilize primaries more compared to caucuses and choosing to schedule their primaries later in the contest, many states also responded to the pandemic by adding more opportunities to vote by mail and other forms of convenience voting that may be associated with higher rates of voter turnout. Gaining a deeper understanding of how states chose to respond to the pandemic and the extent their election administration decisions are associated with higher turnout could be an important lesson to promote more meaningful opportunities for participation in future presidential primaries.

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