

Maine Election Analysis

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Introduction

Maine saw two major primary elections in 2020, both of which may be used to provide valuable information for our understanding of election administration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maine’s 2020 presidential preference primary was held on March 3, 2020 during “Super Tuesday,” while the Democratic and Republican primaries were held on July 14, 2020. This timing—one election pre-COVID-19 and one after—gives us leverage to examine how well Maine has conducted its elections during the pandemic, and may allow us to understand what needs to be done in advance of the 2020 general election in November.

The presidential preference primary on March 3 was the first ever held in the state of Maine. Previously, all presidential nomination contests were done via caucuses, generally at the town level.

In addition, both primaries used instant-runoff voting (IRV), also a first. Popularly referred to as “ranked-choice voting,” IRV allows voters to rank as many candidates as they choose based upon their preference. While this election may not be a perfect comparison to the 2018 primary election, which used STV alongside competitive races for congressional, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial party nominations, it does provide us with a snapshot of absentee ballot behavior for the presidential race in pre-COVID conditions in 2020. When used alongside the 2020 July Primary elections, we begin to see a picture of absentee voting in Maine elections that allows us to draw conclusions leading up to the 2020 general election.

This report addresses several key questions:

- How did Maine voters fare in voting by mail in the presidential preference primary in March 2020 and accompanying ballot items?
- How did Maine voters fare in the July 2020 primary election, especially compared to previous primary elections?
- How did Maine voters who participated by mail spoil their ballots?
- How well do first-time absentee voters participate in Maine elections?
- Finally, how sensitive were the IRV tabulations to accidents and mishandling?

I. Data Issues

Maine’s voter file is generally available only to political committees, and therefore was unavailable for this analysis. This limited the data available for this report. In particular, the only individual-level administrative data available was the absentee voter file, which the state releases every election. This file includes the town, unique voter identification number, partisanship, accepted/rejected status, date requested, and other similar attributes. Beyond issues of absentee voting, the analysis here will be confined to aggregate data reported at the municipality level. Luckily, nearly every municipality—with the exception of a handful of cities such as Lewiston, Bangor, and Portland—has only a single voting site, and thus these results may generally be seen as precinct-level results in precincts that do not change between elections

In order to examine absentee voting in the March and July 2020 primaries, we needed to clean the data. Similar to the description provided above about the 2018 election, we removed in-person absentee ballots and UOCAVA ballots from the data. This was done because these are not mail-in ballots in the traditional sense; UOCAVA is uniformed and overseas ballots that are unlikely to be heavily influenced by COVID, and in-person absentee is more akin to early voting than it is to mail-in voting.

II. Summary of Findings

- First-time absentee voters had their ballots rejected at slightly higher rates in both 2020 elections than in 2018.
- Absentee voters had a relatively low rejection rate in both the March 2020 and July 2020.
- The most common reason for ballot rejection in the 2020 primaries was leaving a ballot envelope unsigned.
- IRV tabulations were not very sensitive to counting mishandling in the July 2020 primary.

III. The 2020 Presidential Preference Primary

Maine’s presidential preference primary was held on March 3, 2020. These primaries were a first for the state for both parties. Previously, Maine had chosen its delegates to the Democratic and Republican conventions via caucuses. In addition, a statewide referendum was on the ballot, asking voters whether they favored overturning a Maine law that eliminated the religious and philosophical

exemption to the state's vaccination requirements. A total of 388,393 votes were cast in the referendum, 205,937 in the Democratic primary, and 113,728 in the Republican primary. Several thousand voters participated in the referendum, but not the primary.

A total of 36,042 domestic mail¹ ballots were requested for the 2020 presidential preference primary and referendum. Of these, 32,556 were returned, for a return rate of 90.2%. Of those returned, 628 ballots were rejected, for a 1.9% rejection rate. All told, 31,828 absentee ballots were counted, leading to an 88% completion rate from request to tabulation. These counted absentee ballots amounted to 8.2% of all ballots cast in the primary and referendum.

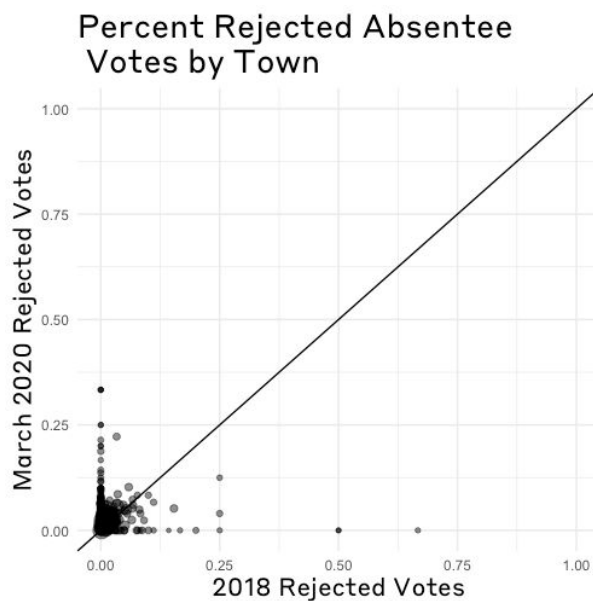
By party, 19,871 Democrats successfully cast an absentee ballot, or 9.6% of ballots cast in that primary. The 7,358 successful Republican absentee ballots amounted to 6.4% of ballots cast.

A. Comparison to the 2018 Primary

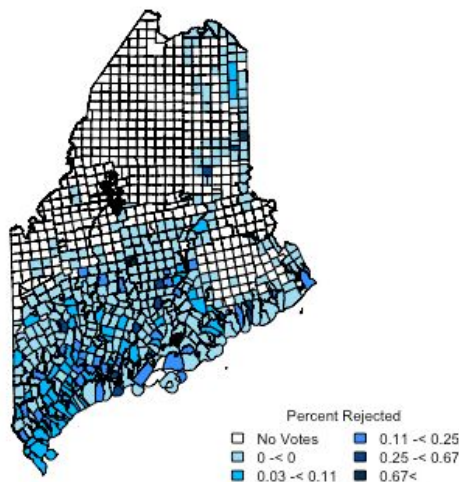
Because there were no presidential primaries in 2016 in Maine, we compared the 2020 primary to the 2018 primary. In that previous primary, 23,250 absentee ballots were requested, 19,343 were returned for counting (83.2% return rate), and 19,111 were accepted (98.8% acceptance rate of ballots returned). This was very close to what was witnessed in 2018, as can be seen in the figure below. While 1.9% of absentee ballots were rejected in the 2020 March primary, 1.2% of absentee ballots were rejected in the 2018 primary election.

¹ The analysis in this report is confined to domestic mail ballots. We have excluded federal write-in absentee ballots (FWABs), overseas ballots (UOCAVA), and ballots cast in the presence of a clerk.

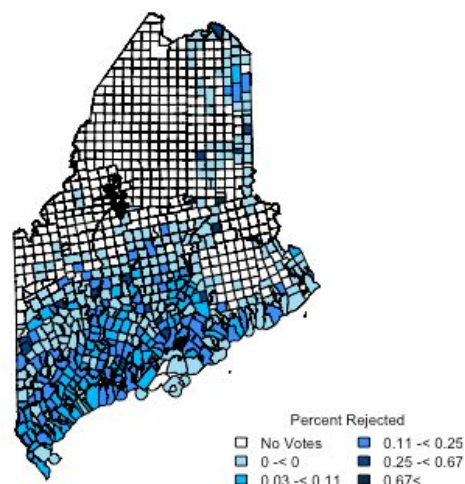
Percent Mail Ballots Rejected in 2018 and 2020



Ballot Rejections June 2018



Ballot Rejections March 2020



Absentee ballot rejection rates for June 2018 and March 2020 primaries in Maine.

B. Reasons for Rejected Ballots

We can find the reasons for each ballot rejection from the absentee voter file, which are reported in the table below. The most common reason for rejection was the lack of a signature on the envelope (216 cases, or 34.4%), followed by 167 (26.6%) rejected due to not being received until after the deadline. Maine requires that ballots be [received before the close of polls on Election Day](#). Some of the other reasons, such as the voter spoiling the ballot, probably cannot properly be considered rejections.

Reasons for Ballot Rejection in Maine

Reason for Rejection	Number of Rejected	Percent
Aid Certification not Completed	2	0.3%
Ballot Undeliverable	53	8.4%
Duplicate Ballot Received	22	3.5%
Envelope not Signed	216	34.4%

Not Enrolled when Necessary	3	0.5%
Other	125	6.7%
Received after Deadline Date	167	26.6%
Spoiled by Voter	73	11.6%
Signature does not Match	7	1.1%
Voted in Person	32	5.1%
Witness Certificate not Properly Completed	9	1.4%
Total	628	100.0%

C. New postal voters: How did they behave?

We looked more closely at individuals who voted by mail for the first time in Maine. Due to data limitations, we cannot ascertain that these were first-time voters, only that they have never voted by mail in the state of Maine prior to the 2020 presidential preference primary. The rejection rate of first-time voters was 3.1% (175) as opposed to 1.9% (535) of the general population of voters who had used absentee ballots previously.

IV. July 2020 Primary

Following the March 2020 Presidential preference primary and accompanying ballot questions, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted elections in the State. The state opted to postpone the June 9 primary election to July 14. The offices contested in this primary election included U.S. House, U.S. Senate, as well as for the Maine state legislature and local offices

There were 192,620 domestic mail absentee ballot requests in the July 2020 primary, which resulted in 192,513 ballots being issued. Of these, 173,171 were returned (89.9%). Of the returned ballots, 171,153 (98.8%) were counted.² New mail voters accounted for 58,840 (34.3%) of these

² The Maine absentee voter file has apparently marked 19,419 ballots as rejected, despite not being returned for counting. We classify these ballots as unreturned, not rejected.

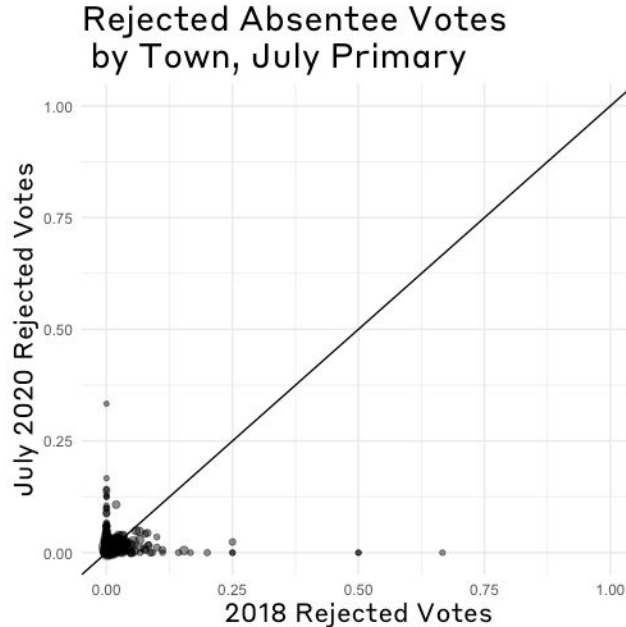
ballots. Of the counted ballots, Democratic voters accounted for 115,747 ballots, Republicans 32,111, Greens 2,831, and Unenrolled 20,474.

A. Comparison to 2018 Primary

The July 2020 primary serves as a better comparison to the June 2018 primary for the purposes of understanding potential outcomes in the fall election. This is because the two had nearly identical scope with the U.S. Senate and U.S. House primaries. While we can not know the effect of COVID-19 on absentee ballots through causal inference, this provides a more solid comparison to what we might expect in the fall election than we are able to get from comparing the June 2018 primary to the 2020 March primary.

Absentee ballot rejections in the July 2020 primary were comparable to the June 2018 primary. On the whole, the correlation of rejection rates between July 2020 and June 2018 is weak, but positive, with more municipalities having higher rejection rates in 2020 than in 2018. A total of 201 municipalities had higher percent of rejected ballots than in 2018, while only 77 had a lower percent of rejected ballots. Overall, there was a 1.3% rejection rate

Absentee ballot rejection rates for June 2018 and July 2020 primaries in Maine.



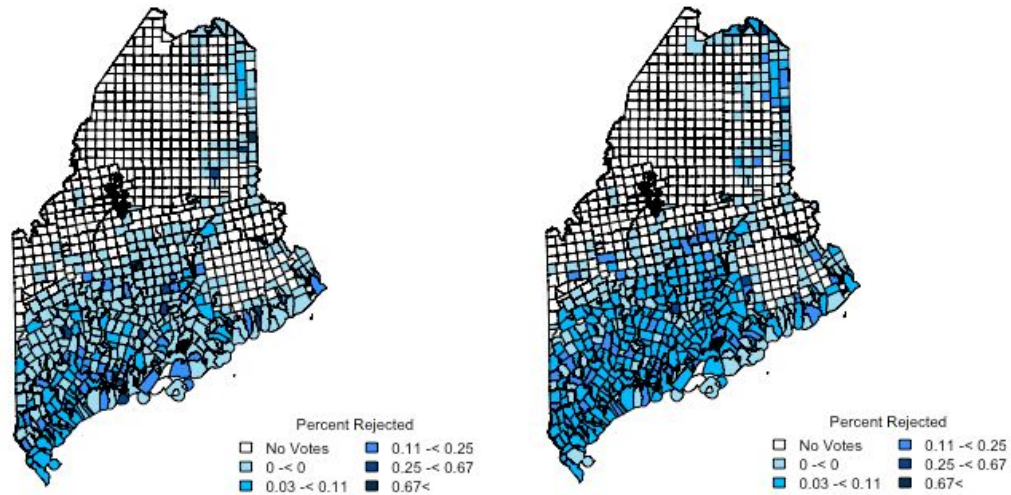
July 2020 rejections compared to June 2018 elections. Note they are relatively similar.

B. Reasons for Rejection

Similar to the March Presidential Preference Primary, the rejection rate was largely driven by ballots not being returned by the deadline. Interestingly, other reasons for rejection — such as lack of aid certification and a lack of signing the envelope — also were more frequent in the July 2020 primary than they were in the June 2018 primary election.

Ballot Rejections June 2018

Ballot Rejections July 2020



Map of rejection rates by municipality.

Reasons for Ballot Rejection in Maine, July 2020 Primary.

Reason for Rejection	Number of Rejected	Percent
Aid Certification not Completed	36	1.5%
Ballot Undeliverable	177	7.4%
Duplicate Ballot Received	86	3.6%
Envelope not Signed	892	37.7%
Not Enrolled when Necessary	5	0.2%
Other	545	23%
Received after Deadline Date	288	12.2%
Spoiled by Voter	136	5.7%
Signature does not Match	9	0.3%
Voted in Person	111	4.7%
Witness Certificate not Properly Completed	66	2.7%
Total	2,363	100.0%

C. First-Time Absentee Voters

As was true with the March primary, the rate of rejection for first-time absentee voters was higher in the July primary, than among those who had cast absentee ballots before. Of the 58,840 ballots cast by new absentee voters, 897 were rejected (1.5%), compared to 1,485 (1.2%) of ballots returned by more experienced absentee voters.

V. Ranked-Choice Voting Missteps

Following the initial count in the July 2020 Republican ME-2 primary election, no candidate reached the 50%+1 vote threshold to be declared the winner. Therefore, the ballots had to go through reallocation based on ranked-preferences in order for a candidate to break that threshold. Following protocol established by the Maine Secretary of State's office, the ballots were carried to a central

counting facility in Augusta by secure couriers. Ballot images were scanned centrally in preparation for aggregation and retabulation. After the votes were initially tabulated, Adrienne Bennet had 13,468 votes (31.80%), Eric Brakey had 9,542 (22.53%), and Dale Crafts had 19,337 (45.66%). This led to a reallocation of votes, where third-place candidate Brakey's votes were reallocated to the indicated second-place selection or otherwise exhausted. After the second tabulation, Bennet had 16,207 votes (41.45%) to Crafts's 22,888 votes (58.54%), ultimately resulting in a victory for Crafts.

[Several days later, an anomaly was noticed](#); it appeared that 13,000 votes were not included in the final tabulated results. Upon closer inspection, it was found that one of the computer drives was corrupted, and did not properly upload the results to the aggregated ballots that are used for the final tabulation. This was corrected and the results were re-tabulated, leading Bennet to have 20,295 votes (42.01%) to Crafts's 28,019 (57.99%), ultimately resulting in the same winner.

How sensitive were the results to this type of technical failing? In order to investigate this, we took the tabulated results and simulated this mistake repeatedly. Similar to what statisticians refer to as the "jackknife," we sequentially removed one municipality from the tabulated results and then re-ran the reallocation algorithm, testing if removing a single municipality could change the final result of the election. We did this for all 232 voting municipalities in ME-2, and found that the results could not have been changed in this election by simply losing a single precinct or municipality from the result. Of each reallocation, not a single precinct was found to change the results.

Conclusion

In the first part of this report, I examined voter behavior in the 2020 presidential preference primary. Unlike most of the other states that have been examined by the Stanford-MIT Project on a Healthy Election, Maine does not release a detailed voter registration file and voter history. This greatly limits the ability of researchers and non-partisan election observers from evaluating the fine points of the dynamics of Maine elections, and has inherently limited the scope of this report to the data that are available. This data include the absentee voter file, which is an anonymized file by town of voter participation in each election for voters to opt to vote using an absentee ballot. In doing so, I find that the rejection rate of absentee ballots in Maine was relatively low, both in the March 2020 presidential preference primary (1.9%) and the July 2020 primary election (1.3%). The most common causes of these rejections came from voters omitting the signature on the back of the ballot. Interestingly, there was not a large difference in either

election between first-time voters and those who had utilized absentee voting previously (3.1% in March and 1.5% in July).

Furthermore, the results of the July 2020 Republican Congressional primary were fairly resistant to accidental omission of ballots, as there was no municipality that could have been omitted and changed the final results of the election. While this does not extrapolate out to the fall election, it should provide relative confidence that the results were not overly influenced by the mistake in tabulation.

These results are important for several reasons. On a normative front, it is a democratic goal to have as many votes counted as legally possible in order to ensure a fair election. While this is a key consideration, there are more practical impacts that such a high rejection rate may have on the presidential election. Maine is one of two states (along with Nebraska) which can split its electoral votes based on congressional district-level returns for president. If the presidential election nationally and in Maine is close and one side has a much higher rejection rate than the other, it is possible that at least one electoral vote could be decided as a result. However, it appears from the first two major elections in 2020-- the presidential preference primary and the July 18 primary-- that ballot rejection rates in Maine are relatively low and may be unlikely to impact the outcome of the general election in Maine.