

Texas Primary Election Analysis

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Introduction

The Texas presidential primary took place on March 3, 2020, as one of the states in the Super Tuesday contest. Of the seventeen candidates on the Texas ballot, 34.6% of the vote went to Joe Biden with 725,562 votes, while 29.9% of the vote went to Bernie Sanders with 626,339 votes. Michael Bloomberg won 14.4% of the vote, and Elizabeth Warren 11.4% of the vote. Donald Trump won the Republican overwhelmingly, with 94.1% of the vote and 1,898,664 votes. A number of primaries were held in Senate and House elections, as well as for state office.

In Texas, for offices other than the presidency, if no candidate receives more than 50% of the votes, there is a run-off election. This happened in over 30 races on Super Tuesday. On July 14th, Texas held a run-off election for the Democratic and Republican primaries. We discuss this election in the latter portion of the memo.

Texas holds open primaries, where voters may participate in any party's primary election, regardless of their partisan affiliation. They simply have to indicate which party's ballot they would like prior to voting. Table 1 shows participation in each party's presidential primary. All told, 4,111,595 people voted in the 2020 primary held on March 3; 2,094,428 voted in the Democratic primary, and 2,017,167 voted in the Republican primary.¹ Relative to 2016, Democrat turnout increased by 658,533 votes (+45.9%) while Republican turnout decreased by 819,321 (-28.9%). Given the change in competitiveness on the Republican side, it is unsurprising that Republican primary participation shrank.²

Table 1: Size of Party Primaries		
	Total Votes (President)	
	Democrat	Republican
2016	1,435,895	2,836,488
2020	2,094,428	2,017,167
Change	+658,533 +45.9%	-819,321 -28.9%

¹ Votes for a presidential candidate in the primary.

² Readers should keep this change in competitiveness in mind throughout the memo, as it limits our ability to draw conclusions about certain dynamics in the November elections on the Republican side.

Texas offered three modes of voting: mail-in voting, early (in-person) voting, and election day voting. The last day to register to vote was February 3. Early voting started on February 18, two weeks before election day, and went on until February 28. Any registered voter is eligible to vote early in-person, and face the same requirements that election day voters face. For this election, that meant that both early and election day voters had to show ID when going to vote.

The requirements for mail-in voting are more stringent. To be eligible to vote-by-mail in Texas, voters have to meet [one of the following four criteria](#): (1) be aged 65 or older; (2) be sick or disabled; (3) be out of the country on election day and during the early voting period; or (4) be confined in jail, but are otherwise eligible to vote. Eligible voters could begin applying for a mail-in ballot on January 1st. Mail-in ballot requests were honored if they were received by February 11st, and mail-in ballots were counted if they were received by primary day, March 3rd.

Unlike other primaries — and importantly, unlike Texas’s run-off primaries — the Super Tuesday elections were largely free of COVID-19 concerns. According to coronavirus data from the *New York Times*, there were only 11 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Texas on the date of the primary elections, March 3, and all eleven were in Bexar county. There were no confirmed deaths at the time of the primary.

The public health situation was vastly different for the run-off election. Texas is one of ten states that requires candidates who do not receive a majority of votes to compete in a run-off election. For any contest, the top two candidates in the primary election are on the ballot for a run-off election. While the run-off election was originally scheduled for May, Governor Abbott decided to postpone the run-off due to COVID-19.

Unfortunately, postponing the election did little to mitigate the challenge and risk of voting amidst a pandemic. On May 26, the original run-off primary date, there were 1,083 new cases. Figure 1 shows the precipitous climb in cases on dates surrounding the run-off election. Throughout the early voting period, cases climbed, though there were dips along the period. The circumstances facing election officials and voters were therefore starkly different than those of March 3rd’s primary.

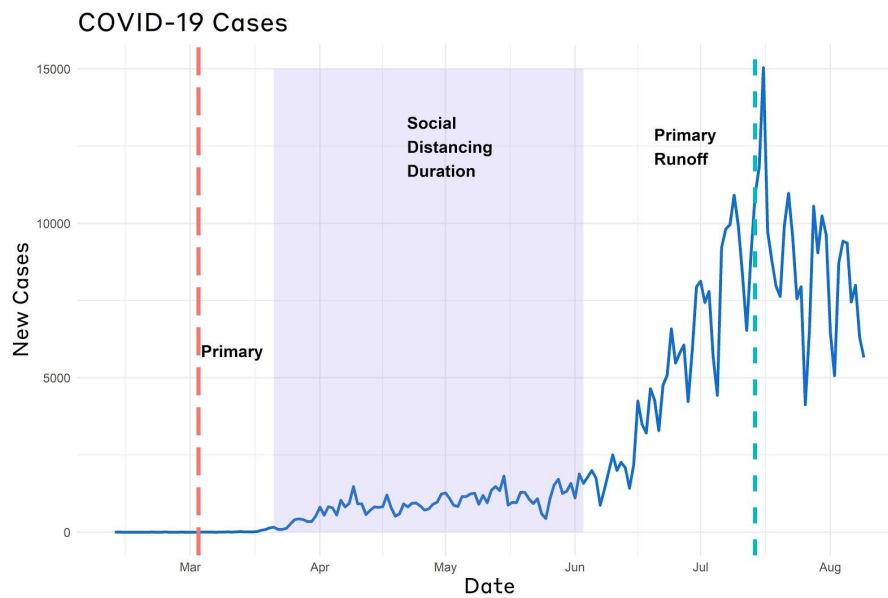


Figure 1: Election Timing, COVID-19 Policies, and New Case Count.

Summary of Findings

Although COVID-19 concerns were largely absent from the initial partisan primary, the disease was spreading throughout Texas by the time the primary run-off election was held. Examining general participation patterns, comparing turnout and vote mode between the initial primary and the run-off election, and evaluating the legal and regulatory framework surrounding voting can provide us with insight regarding potential challenges facing election administrators and voters in November.

- Adaptations to election administration resulting from COVID-19 are legally contested. Policies surrounding social distancing and mask-wearing vary by county, but the state of Texas has expressed hesitation to force voters to wear masks. Moreover, vote-by-mail is restricted in Texas, and voters who are not out-of-state or 65 and over must have a qualifying disability to vote-by-mail. Courts have not yet found a lack of immunity to COVID-19 to be a qualifying disability, though it is questionable whether this is enforceable.
- While turnout declined in the 2020 primary, relative to 2016, participation in the Democratic primary grew in many counties throughout Texas. Given that the General Election is likely to be highly competitive, even in a Republican-dominated state like Texas, participation in the General Election will likely be high, given the increased participation in the Democratic primary in 2020.
- Importantly, voter registration has already increased in recent years. There were over 16

million registered voters by March of 2020, a [state record for voter registration](#). More voters means more traffic at the polls, more potential vote-by-mail ballots to count, and a general increase in logistical challenges facing election administrators.

- Texas votes are increasingly shifting away from voting on Election Day. When compared with 2016 (in select counties with available data), voters were more likely to use Early Voting rather than vote on Election Day. Voters in the Democratic primary were more likely to vote early or by-mail than those in the Republican primary. Importantly, many early voters in the primaries voted towards the end of the voting period — both those voting early in-person and by mail. Election administrators should keep this in mind, as Early Voting sites may become crowded as people rush to vote early as Election Day approaches, and issues with USPS may make it difficult to accommodate and count a rush of absentee ballots that come in on the days immediately prior to and following Election Day. Voters may want to take this trend into consideration and vote earlier than they might otherwise have, given COVID-19 and an increased reliance on vote-by-mail.
- Maintaining polling stations during COVID-19 is a primary concern facing election administrators throughout the country. This issue is salient in Texas as well. Many polling stations closed between the March primary and the run-off election. As the proportion of black residents in a county increases, the number of polling stations per thousand voters tends to decline. These trends present tremendously important equity concerns for the upcoming election, especially in the context of severe racial health disparities in COVID-19 severity and complications.

I. Legal Context

There have been a number of court cases regarding the expansion of mail-in/absentee ballot eligibility, and how the coronavirus changes this and/or applies under the current election laws. The legal battles started after the March 3 primary election, but will have implications for the July 14 primary run-offs and eventually the 2020 November general election. For an overview of these developments, see the related LawFare blog post [here](#).

Legally, the requirements for vote-by-mail are relatively more stringent than in other states, and courts have upheld the requirement that voters must be an enumerated reason for mailing in their ballot. This has incited a series of legal battles over whether a lack of COVID-19 immunity should qualify as one of those enumerated reasons. Thus far, courts have not accepted a lack of COVID-19 immunity as a qualified disability that would grant them vote-by-mail access. However — and importantly for November — [it is up to individual voters](#) to determine whether they meet the state's

definition of a qualified disability, which provides some leeway for voters to switch to vote-by-mail.

II. Turnout

A. March 3 Primary

Table 1 showed that Texas turnout overall declined for the Republican primary and increased for the Democratic primary. When we examine turnout patterns at the county level, looking at both the size of the primary contests for the Democratic and Republican primaries, and changes in the overall turnout rates. There is substantial heterogeneity at the county level, yet the general trend holds: 78% percent of counties (199) saw an increase in the size of the Democratic primary turnout, while only 22% of counties (55) saw an increase in the size of the Republican primary turnout. Because Texas has open primaries, we cannot distinguish between increased turnout among registered Democrats or Democratic-leaning voters, versus independent voters or Republican-leaning voters switching the primary in which they cast a vote. Figure 2 visualizes these changes geographically, showing the relatively decline in participation (red shades) in most counties in the Republican primary, and an increase in many counties (blue shades) in the Democratic primaries. Because turnout in 2020 is expressed as a percent of turnout in 2016, a value of 1 indicates turnout parity between the two times periods, a value over 1 indicates an increase and a value under 1 indicates a decrease. The values are bounded at 0 as a lower-bound.

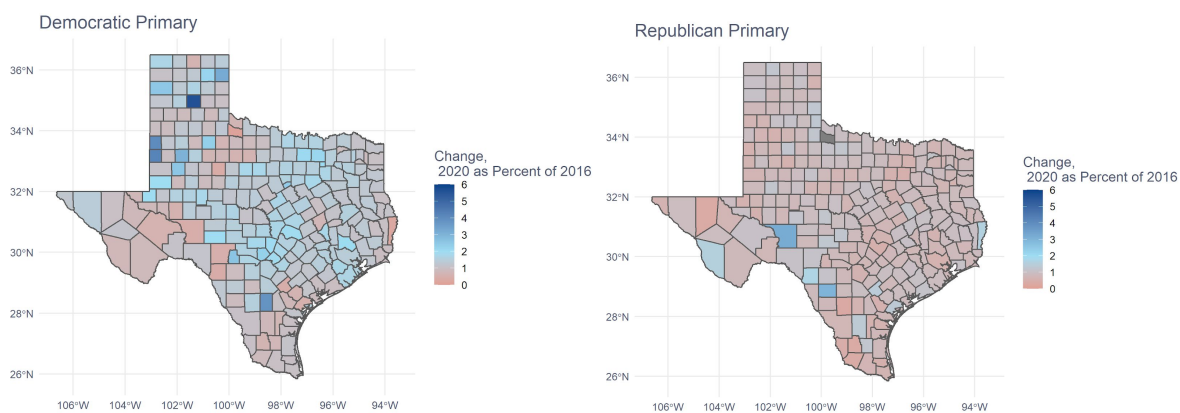


Figure 2: Change in Turnout of the Partisan Primaries, County Level.³

³ The graphic for Republican turnout changes excluded Foard County, which saw 11x the Republican turnout in 2020 than in 2016, and therefore renders the map interpretable by dragging up the highest value for the scale. It is unclear if this is simply a data era.

Figure 3 shows the overall turnout rates at the county-level, measured as the percentage of votes cast out of registered voters.⁴ Because Texas is a conservative state, the decline in participation in the Republican primaries was largely enough to lead to an overall decrease in primary participation across the two primaries. Although 204 counties saw a decline in turnout between 2016 and 2020 (80%), some counties actually saw an increase in primary voter participation.

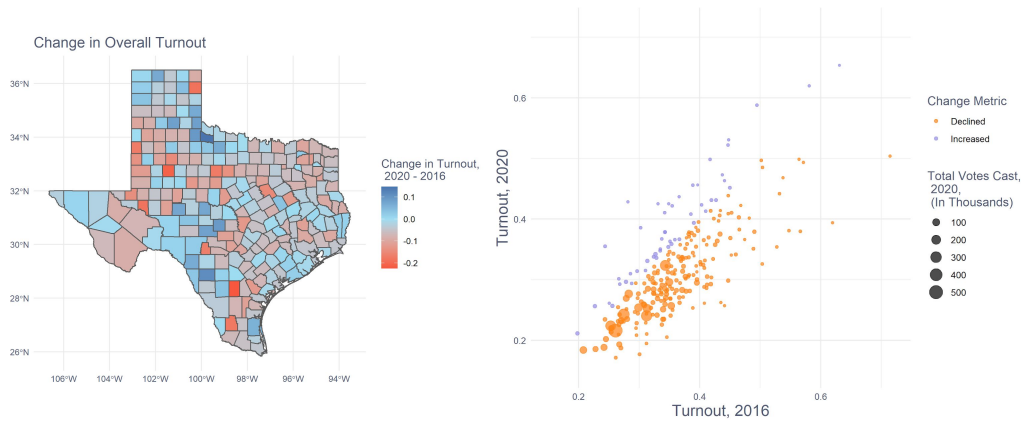


Figure 3: Overall County-Level Turnout Trends.

Of the 254 counties in Texas, 50 counties (shaded in purple in Figure 3) saw an increase in turnout. Compared to the counties that saw a turnout decline, these counties tended to be much smaller, and have a lower proportion of black residents. Some counties that saw increases are in Texas’s southwest, though they are largely scattered throughout the state. We show the geographic distribution of increases in Figure 4.

⁴ These data come from the [Texas Election Division](#) report of election results, where the turnout is calculated as the percentages of votes cast out of “voters” — presumably, registered voters.

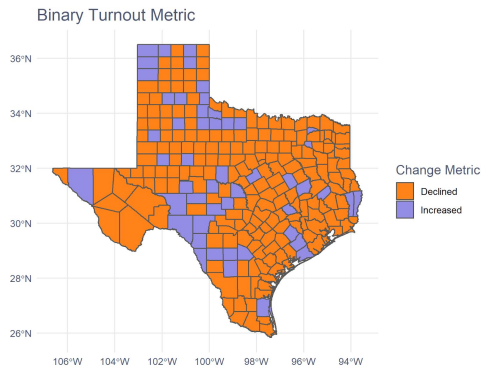


Figure 4: Spatial Distribution of Turnout Increases

B. July 14th Primary Run-Off

Comparing the March 3 primary - where COVID-19 was not a large concern - to the July 14th primary run-off can help us understand how election administrators and voters responded to an increased COVID-19 threat and what challenges they may face in November. However, run-off primaries are not directly comparable to the March primaries because fewer races were held in each county, and not all counties had races at all. For example, while the Democratic primaries saw one state-wide national seat (Senate) and one state-wide office (Railway Commissioner) hold run-off elections, the Republican side did not have any contests competing in all counties in the state. We examine turnout patterns in one Democratic race and nine Republican races. On the Democratic side, we look at turnout in the Senate primary run-off.⁵ On the Republican side, we look at turnout in nine Republican House races, in the following Congressional districts: 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, and 35.

Turnout in the Senate primary run-off was very low, with only 5.8% of registered voters casting votes in the Democratic race, amounting to 955,735 votes cast in the Democratic Senate primary throughout the state. At the county-level, turnout ranged from essentially 0% — no voters in Sterling county, and only two voters in Reagan county — to Zapata, where almost 40% of registered voters cast a vote in Democratic primary.⁶ In contrast, in the nine Congressional district House races, which took place in 96 districts, the average turnout was 12%, with turnout ranging from near 0% (59 voters) in Bastrop county to 60% in Roberts county.⁷

⁵ Each partisan primary had other races too, both at the federal and state level. However, we selected these races because we are able to compare across the state.

⁶ It is important to keep in mind that although we are looking at turnout in the Senate primary for comparability across the state, each county had different contests in which they might vote. Therefore, it is possible that Sterling county had no other contests, while Zapata had some highly contested run-off elections.

⁷ These numbers provide only rough estimates of turnout. Congressional districts are often split across multiple counties,

III. Voter Registration

Texas does not release voter registration data in real-time. The state does, however, release voter registration numbers annually. We display these counts, going back to 2008, in Figure 5. Texas has seen a dramatic increase in the number of registered voters in recent years, climbing to over 16 million registered voters by the time of the run-off primary in July, representing a new state record in voter registration.

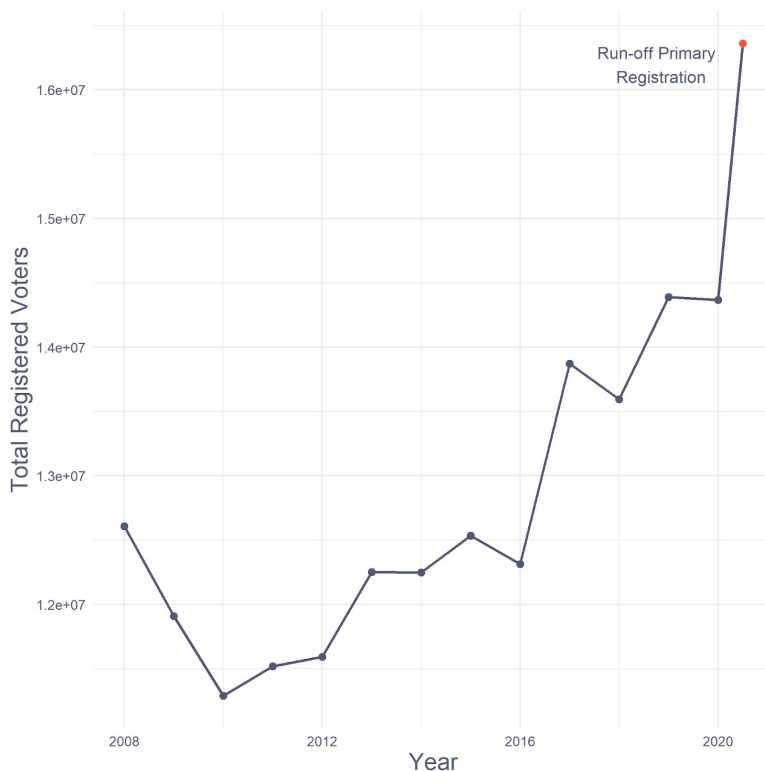


Figure 5: Voter Registration Numbers over Time.

IV. Vote Mode

Despite concerns of — and noted experiences with — crowded and inefficiently run polling stations on Election Day, almost half of Texas *do not* vote on Election Day, but rather through Early Voting. In the Democratic Primary, 52.2% of voters voted on Election Day, while 42.3% voted early.

meaning that only a portion of a county may have had a chance to participate in a particular Congressional contest.

The remaining voted by mail. For Republicans, participation in Early Voting was slightly higher — 48.9%, while 46.6% voted on Election Day. Voters in the Democratic primary were more likely than those in the Republican primary to vote by mail. Those figures were 5.5% and 4.5%, respectively. Because confirmed coronavirus cases were almost entirely absent in Texas at the time, it seems unlikely that the 1,872,899 voters who voted early were doing so to avoid spreading the coronavirus, nor is it likely that any increase in vote-by-mail was due to COVID-19.

Data limitations inhibit our ability to compare vote mode between the 2016 and 2020 electorate. However, vote mode data is available for a select number of large counties, and we can compare how those counties voted in 2016 and 2020. Together, these counties account for 19 million of Texas’s 29 million citizens, or 67% of Texans. How they administer their elections will be meaningful as we look towards November. When compared with these select counties in 2016, it appears as if the proportion of voters using Early Voting increased in 2020, and the proportion of Election Day voters declined. In these counties, and throughout Texas, only approximately 5% of voters vote-by-mail. If Texas will not allow for widespread absentee voting, or voters feel as if they do not qualify for vote-by-mail, voters may switch to Early Voting as a strategy to avoid crowded polling stations and potentially long lines.

Table 2: Vote Mode, Select Counties								
	2016 % of Votes Cast, Select Counties ⁸				2020 % of Votes Cast, Select Counties			
	Mail	Early	Election Day	Total Votes	Mail	Early	Election Day	Total Votes
Dem	4.4%	37.9%	57.8%	1,062,607	5.0%	42.0%	53.0%	1,619,690
Rep	3.6%	39.5%	56.9%	1,527,334	5.5%	50.4%	44.0%	940,894
Total	3.9%	38.8%	57.3%	2,589,941	5.2%	45.1%	49.8%	2,560,584

A. Early Voting

For the March 3 primary elections, early voting began on Tuesday, February 18, and lasted until February 28. Voting patterns in the 2020 primary suggest that early voting may not be a panacea for crowded polling stations and potential virus transmission. Many voters who used Early Voting held off until the final days for the election. Figure 6 shows the daily early vote count, as well as cumulative early votes during the early voting period for both the Democratic and Republican votes in

⁸ Not all counties have historic early in-person or mail-in voting statistics. The counties for this table are: Bexar, Brazoria, Collin, Dallas, Denton, El Paso, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Hidalgo, Montgomery, Nueces, Tarrant, Travis, and Williamson Counties.

the March 3, 2020 primary. Of course, there are many reasons why this may be different in November. Primary voters may simply be different from those who vote in general elections. Perhaps more importantly, voters were choosing from a crowded field on Super Tuesday, and might have been waiting to cast their vote until they made a final decision. However, the trend does suggest that early voting may become quite crowded, posing an important logistical consideration as election administrators attempt to make early voting safe.

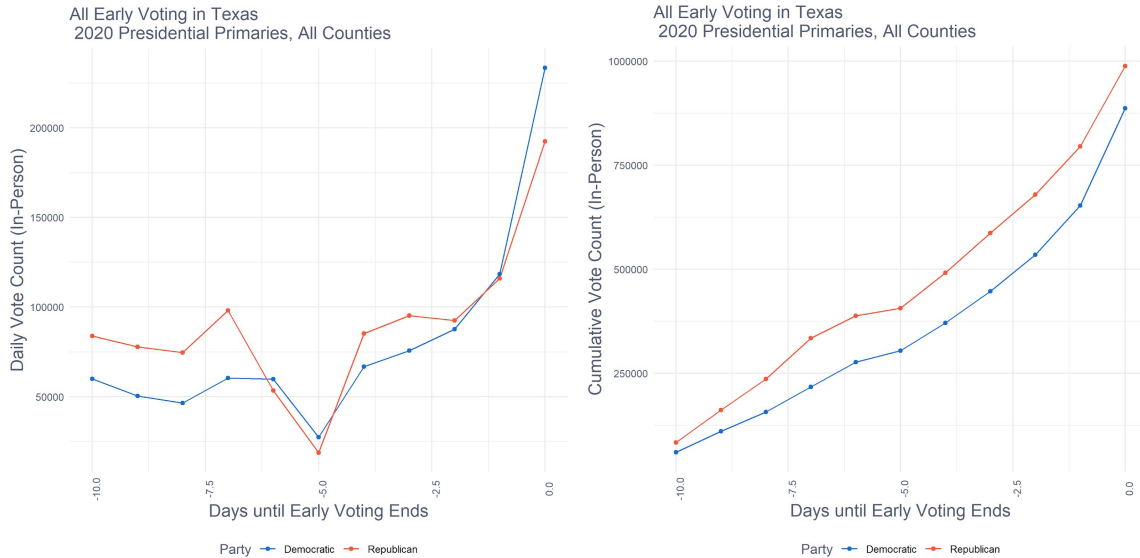


Figure 6: Timing of Early Voting.

B. Vote-by-Mail

It is unclear exactly who will be eligible to vote by mail in November, and voter eligibility may de facto vary by county. In the past, very few Texans have voted by mail, with that figure hovering around 5%. Though more may vote by mail this coming November, past trends may still provide insight into potential challenges facing election administrators. Vote-by-mail also poses temporal considerations for election administrators, particularly as precincts cope with an unprecedented increase in vote-by-mail.

In the March primary, more mail-in ballots were received as the election approached. Again, this trend may not be repeated in November, as fewer people may be undecided, and will not be waiting for additional information for voting. However, if this trend continues, there may be a rush of ballots mailed in towards the end of the voting period, potentially overwhelming the postal service and

election administrators. Moreover, there may be a partisan difference in who votes when. Figure 7 below shows that voters in the Democratic primary were more likely to vote towards the end of the period (March 3 primary). Again, we caution against generalizing to the general election in this case, as the level of competition in the primaries were very different. Yet, the following figure illustrates the “Blue Wave”: a trend in which Democrats are more likely to vote late, leading to swings in vote tallies, margins of victory, and even changes in the victor, as late mail-in ballots are counted.

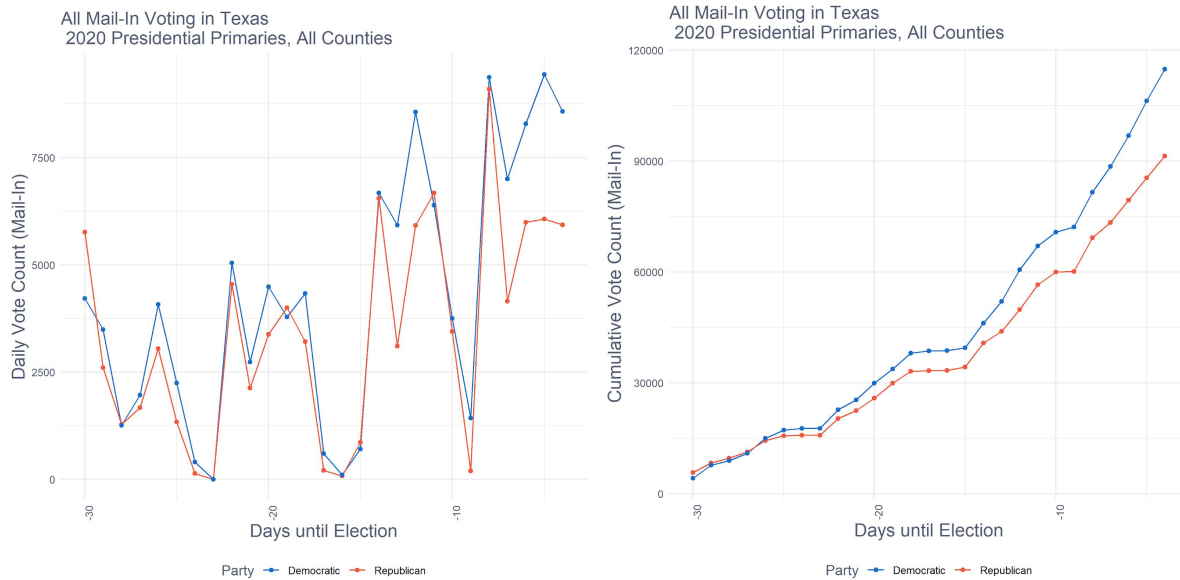


Figure 7: Ballot Cast by Mail by Day before the Primary

When we compare this in the same counties discussed above, we can see in Figure 8 that Democratic absentee voting increased in the March 3, 2020 primary, compared to 2016, while Republicans voted early at roughly the same rates. Democrats also vote more heavily towards the end of the time period in 2020, amplifying the trend of Democrats voting later in the Early Voting period, when compared with 2016.

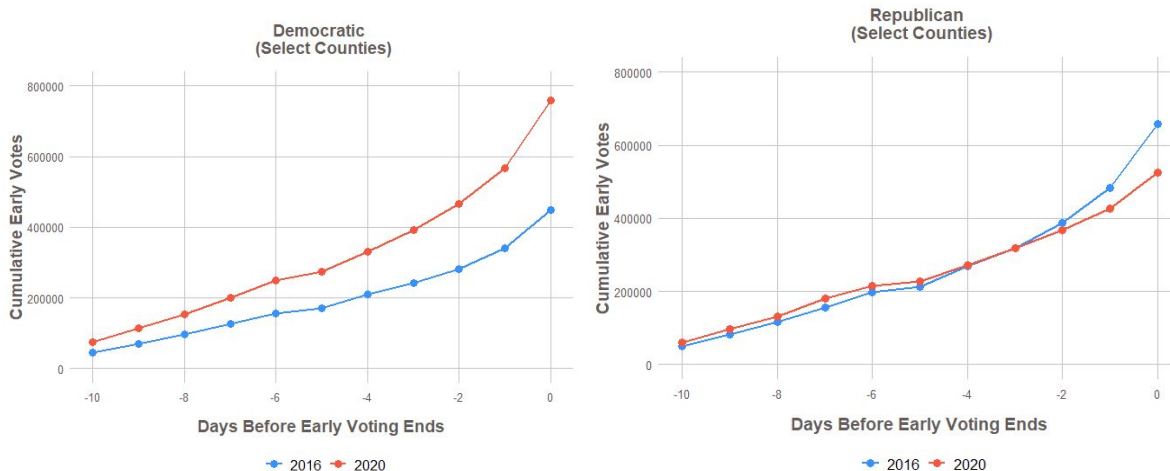


Figure 8: Early Voting in Selected Counties in the Days before the Primary

C. Comparison to July 14th Run-off

The period of early voting was extended in the July run-off elections, beginning on June 29, rather than July 6. Election officials also intend to expand the early voting period for the general election, though the official dates have not yet been released. Because so few people voted in the run-off election, we do not display the daily vote counts. In this case, more informative is the proportion of absentee and early votes cast per day. In the following figure, we show the proportion of all votes that were cast on each day, by each vote mode. For example, on the last day of early voting, nearly 10% of all votes cast *in the whole election* were cast on that date through early voting. These proportions are disaggregated by party in Figure 9.

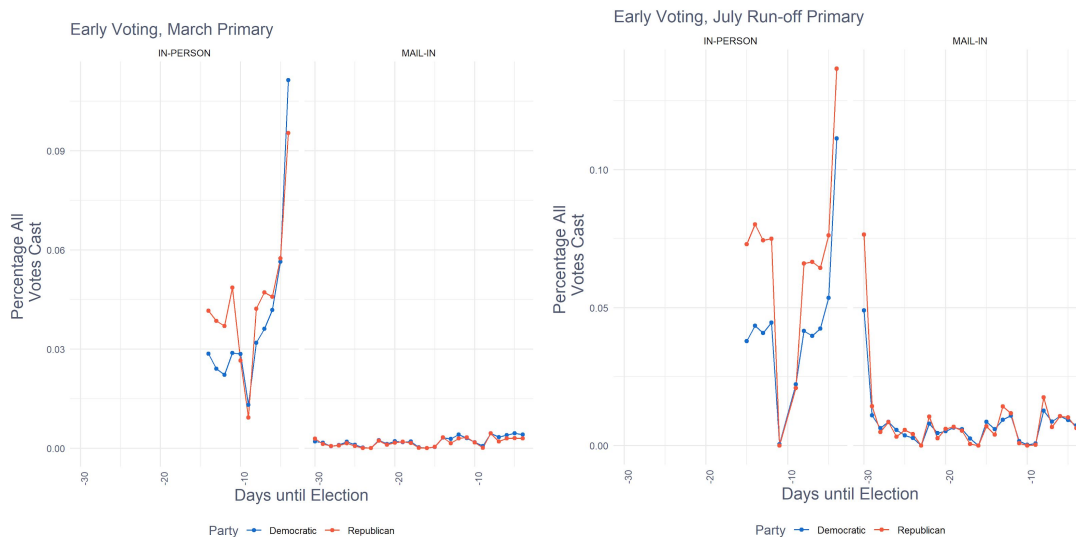


Figure 9: Dates Votes Were Cast in March Primary and July Run-off

This measure provides us with a comparable metric by which to evaluate reliance on early voting, taking into consideration the total number of votes cast in the election. The left-hand panel of Figure 9 shows the daily proportion of votes cast for the March primary, while the right-hand side shows the daily proportion of votes cast in the July run-off. In both elections, Early voting spiked towards the end of the voting period. Mail-in voting was used more heavily in the July run-off elections.

V. Polling Station Locations

A pressing concern facing election administrators in November is the number of polling stations. More polling stations increases the space available for voting. Social distancing becomes easier as voters are spread out across polling stations. Yet this also requires more administrative capacity and, importantly, more poll workers. Figure 10 shows the distribution of polling stations across Texas.

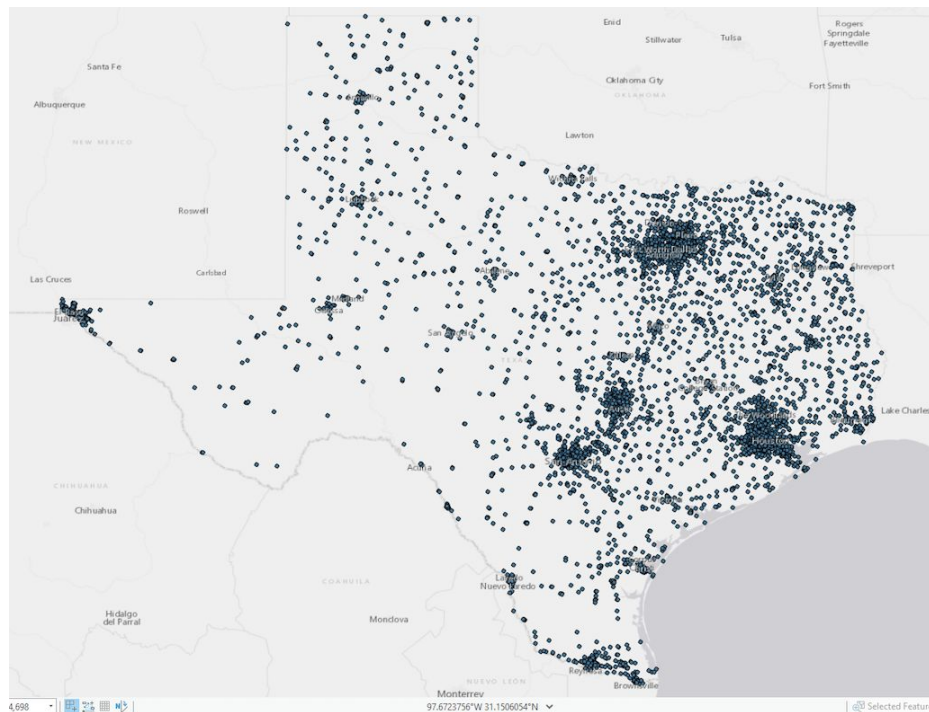


Figure 10: Polling Station Locations in Texas

Examining how polling stations correspond to local demographics can tell us more about equity in access to vote. However, it is first important to underscore what we can and cannot learn from this data. Demographic differences are not evenly distributed across communities. Municipalities with a relatively higher proportion of one racial group may be different in other important ways — for example, population density and urban status. Despite these caveats, it is still insightful to examine how polling station density varies according to local demographics, as this highlights how easy or difficult it is for some individuals to vote.

We show spatial variation in polling station density in Figure 11. The maps show the relationship between polling station density and the percent of the county that is white (left-hand panel) or black (right-hand panel). The polling station density is logged to account for several extreme outliers, which are predominantly very small counties that have one or two polling stations, yet very few residents. As Figure 12 shows, there is a positive correlation between the percent of white residents in a county and the number of polling stations, and a negative correlation between the proportion of black residents and polling stations. These trends hold for both early and day-of polling stations.

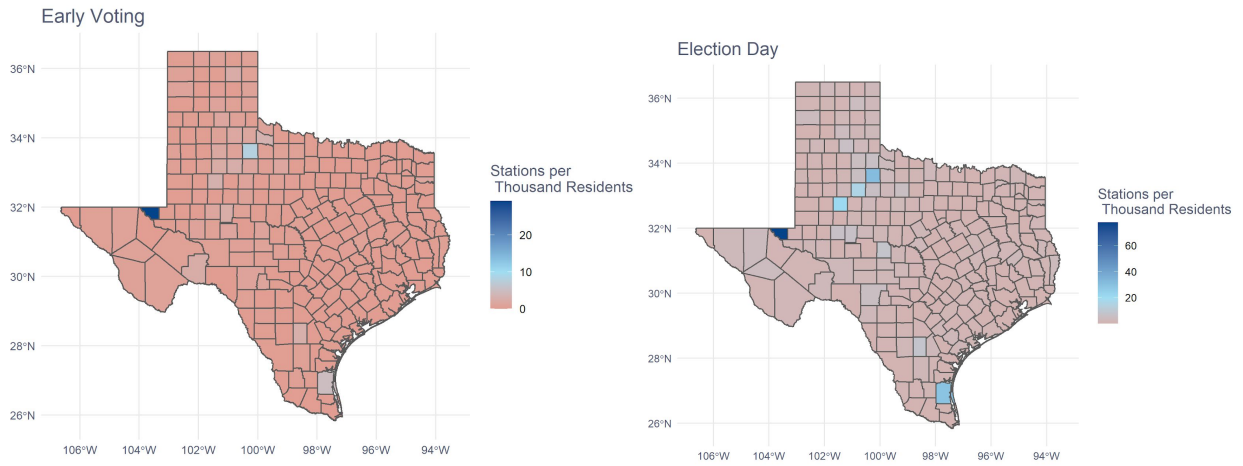


Figure 11: Spatial Variation in Polling Station Density

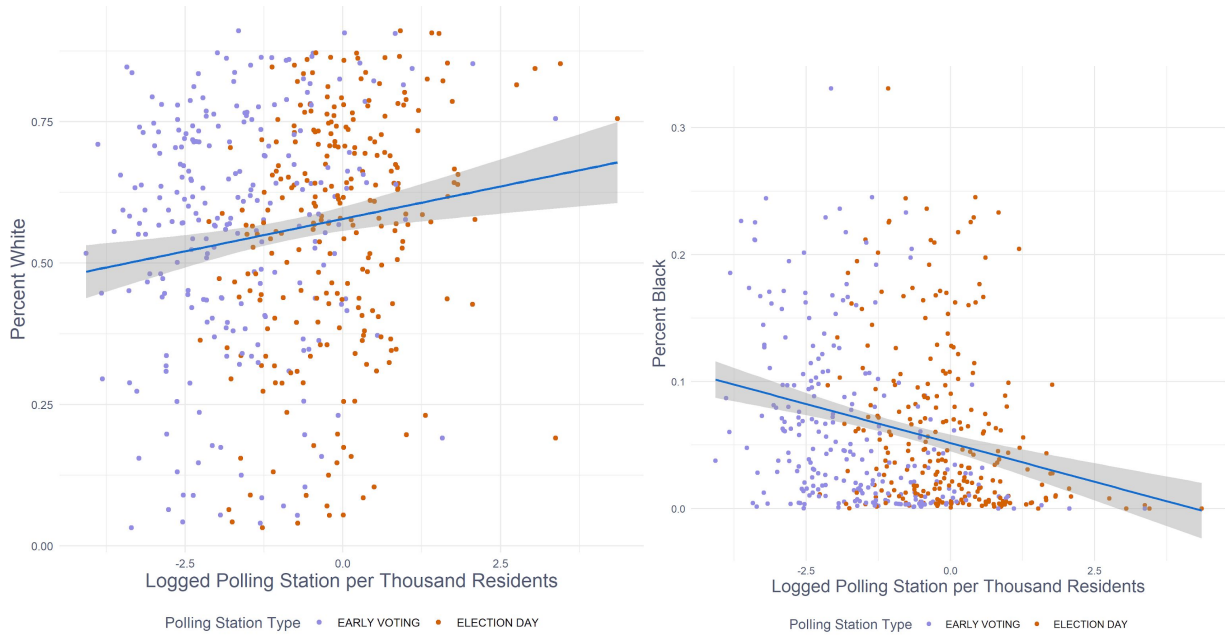


Figure 12: Racial Demographics and Polling Station Density

The number of polling stations also declined between the primary and the run-off elections. In five counties (Harris, Dallas, Bexar, Travis, and Montgomery), the number of polling stations in the Democratic run-off on the day-of-the election declined by over one hundred polling stations. In Harris County, the number lost was 583, while in Dallas, the number was 368. We show the decline in

polling stations in Figure 13, though we omit the five counties which lost over 100 polling stations due to ease of visualization. More polling stations appear to have been lost for Election Day voting, rather than early voting, and there does not appear to be a strong relationship between the county size (represented by the size of the points), and the loss of polling stations. Figure 13 shows the relationship between change in election day and early voting polling stations per county, shading the observations by party primary (by color) and by county population (by unit size). The change in polling station counts is reverse-coded, so the number represents the absolute number of polling stations *lost* between the March and July primaries.

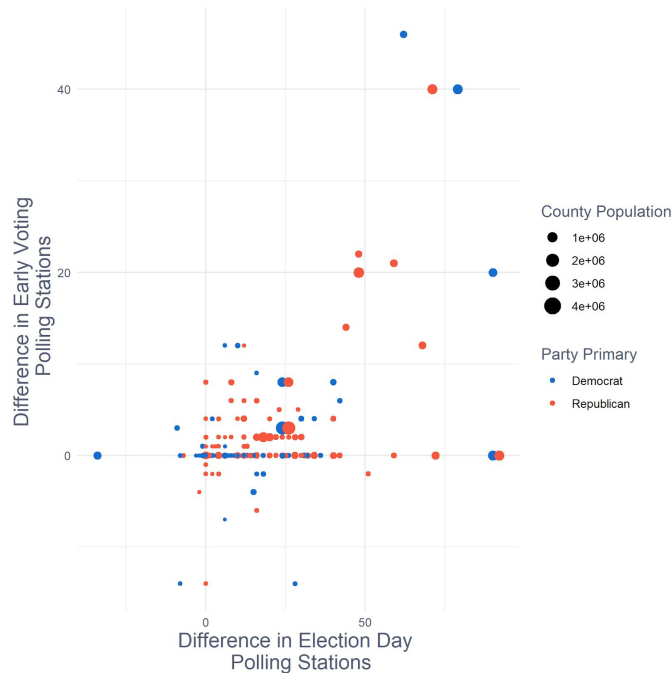


Figure 13: Change in Polling Stations per County

We also show the distribution of polling stations lost in each primary in Figure 14. The distribution of polling station changes is not markedly different between the Democratic and Republican primaries. The two primaries differed in terms of competitiveness between the two partisan contests, suggesting that polling stations were not necessarily removed according to expected participation in the respective races.

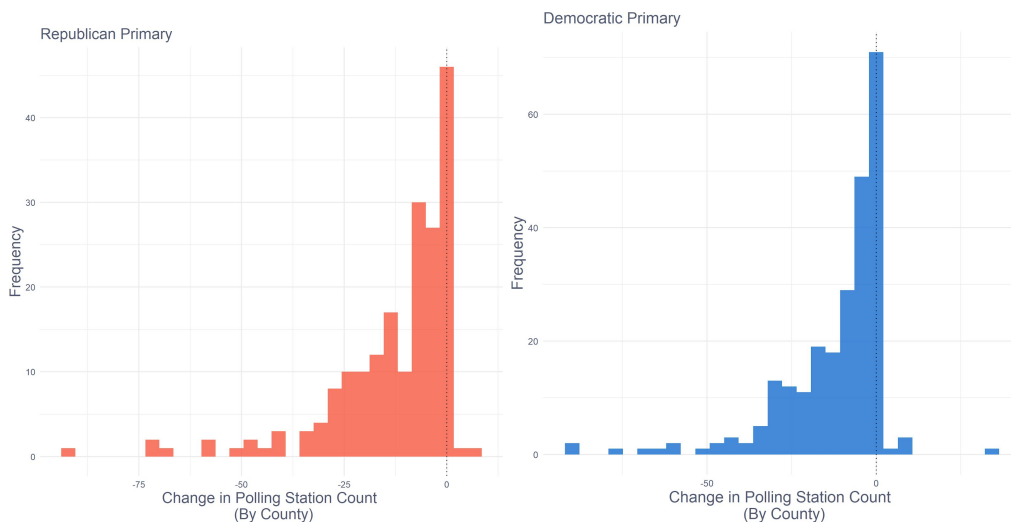


Figure 14: Distribution of Polling Station Changes, Democratic and Republican Primary.

Conclusion

Without individual-level data, it is difficult to fully present Texas’s electoral landscape. However, county-level trends illustrate a great deal about participatory patterns in Texan elections. The analyses here can complement individual-level data as it becomes available. We highlight the importance of the legal context surrounding how voters choose to cast their ballot — and potential confusion that it may create, the growing size of the Texas electorate, and the necessity for equitable geographic coverage of polling stations as three important trends to observe as the General Election approaches.

Data

The data for these analyses were collected predominantly from the Texas Secretary of State. Historic election information, including turnout, past election results, and voter registration come from the [Election Results](#) page. Recent election results can be found [here](#). COVID-19 prevalence data comes from the [New York Times](#). Finally, population and demographic data was accessed [here](#), collected by the Texas Population Estimates Program at the Texas Demographic Center.

Appendix

2020, 2016 Presidential Primary Election Turnout, Comparable Counties, by County

County	Party	2016 Total Turnout	2020 Total Turnout	Change from 2016-2020
Bexar	Democrat	114,524	172,108	50.3%
	Republican	132,583	80,898	-39.0%
Brazoria	Democrat	12,942	21,782	68.3%
	Republican	39,247	35,829	-8.7%
Collin	Democrat	40,034	84,724	111.6%
	Republican	116,676	68,985	-40.9%
Dallas	Democrat	159,086	241,487	51.8%
	Republican	175,122	85,712	-51.1%
Denton	Democrat	32,506	67,368	107.2%
	Republican	96,060	66,840	-30.4%
El Paso	Democrat	54,742	68,534	25.2%
	Republican	28,805	18,404	-36.1%
Fort Bend	Democrat	39,206	69,604	77.5%
	Republican	68,587	57,244	-16.5%
Galveston	Democrat	13,879	22,376	61.2%
	Republican	39,474	28,609	-27.5%
Harris	Democrat	222,686	323,314	45.2%
	Republican	327,046	193,627	-40.8%
Hidalgo	Democrat	58,366	59,329	1.6%
	Republican	18,666	12,385	-33.6%
Montgomery	Democrat	12,677	25,612	102.0%
	Republican	90,740	64,289	-29.2%

Nueces	Democrat	22,234	22,650	1.9%
	Republican	28,099	16,743	-40.4%
Tarrant	Democrat	104,440	155,113	48.5%
	Republican	213,993	125,203	-41.5%
Travis	Democrat	144,144	224,756	55.9%
	Republican	84,844	42,129	-50.3%
Williamson	Democrat	31,141	60,933	95.7%
	Republican	67,392	43,997	-34.7%