



Election insecurity: Experts warn voter turnout could be toss-up amid pandemic

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With 86 days until Election Day on Nov. 3 and 58 days before early in-person voting is supposed to start in Ohio, broad information on the choices voters will have and the procedures that will be in place amid the pandemic are unclear.

The primary elections in Ohio saw wide-ranging effects caused by the coronavirus. Scheduled for March 17, the primaries were extended to April 28 while voters were asked to vote absentee as in-person voting was limited to people with disabilities and those without an address.

Although having fewer voters casting ballots in the primaries is expected, participation in Ohio this year was down to 1.8 million voters compared to 3.3 million in the 2016 primaries - a drop of 54%.

But it was pretty close to 2018, which is the most recent year available. That had 1.67 million voters.

Meanwhile, experts say the pandemic will have a dramatic effect again on how many will vote in November.

"What states need to do between now and the election is quickly make a choice about how they're going to conduct the election. And then, conduct widespread voter education to inform voters how exactly the process is going to work to make voters feel more comfortable, that it will be conducted fairly, safely and uniformly," Cato Institute Legal Associate James Knight said.

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose held two virtual events last week aimed at clarifying questions about the upcoming elections, though those were focused mainly on mail-in voting. He did, however, say all three ways Ohioans have been able to vote will be available (casting ballots through mail, early in-person voting, and voting in-person on Election Day).

Activist Ruth Leonard with the Community Solidarity Response Network of Toledo said right now, her main concern is making sure eligible Ohioans are registered to vote and are educated about their options.

"Normally, about a month prior is when you find out about early voting, about the early voting polling locations. I'm still not 100% sure of what is happening in regard to that. I think just making sure that the communities know what's going on, how to vote, where to go to vote, when

the polling locations will be open, if the polling locations will be open, how to apply for a ballot," she said. "These are all things that I think should be pushed out into the community."

LaRose's office said there won't be any changes from last year when it comes to polling locations. There will be a single early voting center determined by the county board of elections.

Knight said there are measures states can adopt in order to make voting safer, such as offering curbside voting in which people would be able to vote from their cars; extending the time polls are open; expanding early voting; and allowing mail-in voting.

LaRose's office released a November plan in June, saying all 88 county board of elections in the state will be required to offer curbside voting for voters physically unable to enter polling locations.

His office also said the times polls open and close have not changed this year.

In Ohio, the law states voters must have four weeks of early in-person and absentee voting. The state is also one of the few that opens the polls on the weekends during the early voting period.

The secretary of state's office will send out 7.8 million absentee ballot request forms around Labor Day weekend to every voter in the state following years of precedent, LaRose said last week.

The Brookings Institute, a nonpartisan public policy organization, analyzed how mail-in voting went in every state and the District of Columbia during the pandemic and assigned a letter grade based on their performance.

In June, Ohio was one of 21 states to score a C while only seven states received an A and 12 others received a B. Eight scored a D and two an F.

The institute considered factors such as how easy it was to get an absentee ballot (states that mail ballots to voters got extra points), how easy it was to fill out the ballot, how long voters had to return ballots and whether states allowed for alternate ways of submitting ballots.

An updated version of this study released on Aug. 7, after several states expanded mail-in voting, shows Ohio scored a B along with 14 other states.

University of Maryland Associate Professor Ethan Kaplan, who has studied how early in-person voting has affected turnout in Ohio, said uncertainty in voter participation this year is expected.

Kaplan said although polls that try to predict turnout are relatively accurate, it's still a guess based on people's answers and how they have voted in the past. But the pandemic is unprecedented, Kaplan said, and other factors are still up in the air when it comes to in-person voting.

"There were a number of examples (around the country) where there weren't enough people who could staff the polling stations. And so they consolidated, and then, they might also do some strategic consolidation based upon governance and a certain party not wanting people living in a certain area to vote as much because they're afraid that they'll vote for members of the opposite party," he said.

Kaplan said voters do tend to cast in-mail ballots when they are able to, although that has not had an effect in overall participation thus far because those would be from people who would have voted anyway. But the pandemic has changed that dynamic this year.

Leonard said she believes voters learned how the electoral college works after Hillary Clinton won the popular vote and President Donald Trump won the delegates.

She added people have become more politicized this year and have recognized why their votes matter not only when it comes to presidential candidates, but senators, representatives and elected officials at every level of government.

"Now, we have a much wider community of people, who in the wake of George Floyd, are recognizing that (importance). Now we've taken it as a moment to not only say Black Lives Matter but to say, this is how Black Lives Matter plays a role in our everyday life. And this is how you can help," Leonard said. "And it's by something as simple as using your voice to vote."