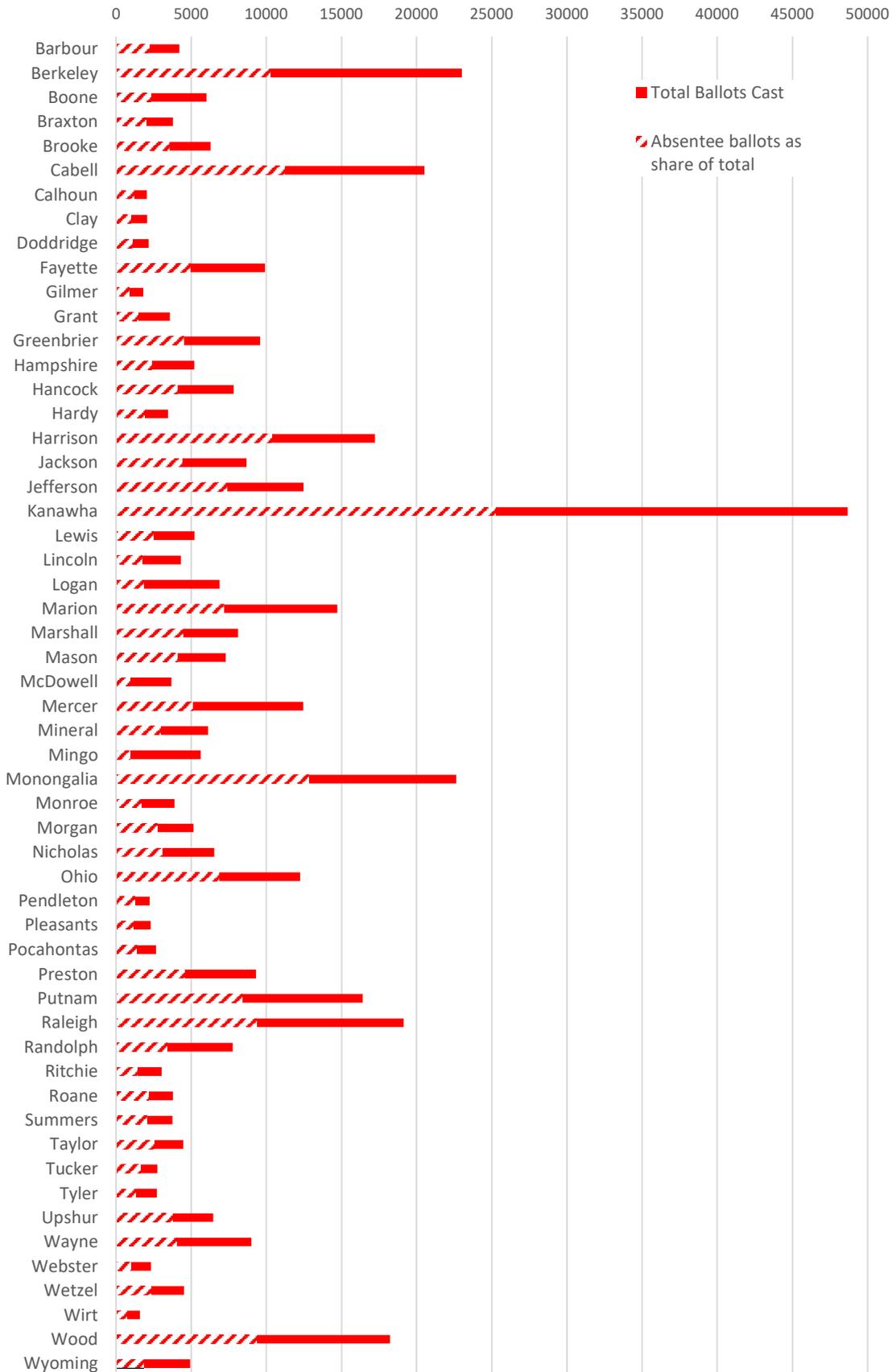


2020 WV Primary: Ballots Cast & Absentee Acceptance



Acceptance of Vote by Mail in West Virginia: A Natural Experiment

Vote by mail will never come about by citizen referendum in West Virginia as it did in Oregon. Instead, vote by mail policy must be devised without evidence of its potential for acceptance. Would vote by mail be accepted by West Virginia voters? How can we know in advance?

We can use what social scientists call a “natural experiment.” Because of the pandemic, Secretary of State (SOS) Warner decided to send every registered voter an absentee ballot application for the 2020 Primary.¹ While absentee voting, with its application, is not true vote by mail, data from the 2020 Primary may help us gauge acceptance potential for some type of mail-in voting.² Natural experiments like this don’t happen every day; it is a gift to learn from.

Turnout in the West Virginia 2020 Primary

Across all counties, the turnout for the 2020 Primary election was only 37%, with a low of 24% in McDowell County and a high of 51% in Lewis County. Lewis was the only county with a majority of registered voters participating in the 2020 Primary.

Compared with the 2016 Primary, turnout for 2020 was 3% lower statewide, but higher in 16 counties (range: +0.1% to +7%).

Absentee Acceptance in the 2020 Primary

Of the 450,742 ballots cast in the 2020 Primary, 224,378 (50%) were absentee ballots.³

Absentee ballot use was highest in Harrison County (60% of ballots cast), but absentee ballots constituted the majority of ballots cast in 27 counties (see figure). In only 3 counties (Logan, McDowell, and Mingo) was the absentee share below 30%. Those 3 counties also had low (under 30%) voter turnout overall.

Was the Natural Experiment from the 2020 Primary a Success?

These data suggest the answer is a qualified yes. We saw widespread acceptance of absentee voting, which involved both returning applications and ballots largely by mail.

This could be an underestimate of acceptance for mail-in voting. Factors that would tend to depress use of mail-in voting for the 2020 Primary include:

- The 2020 absentee initiative came with little voter education and obvious voter confusion.⁴
- The absentee ballot application process is a deterrent to participation in mail-in voting.
- The SOS announced that absentee applications would be sent to all voters¹ a week after instructing voters to obtain their own applications.⁵ This led to confusion for some voters who had already requested or submitted applications.
- The merits of mail-in voting were undermined by public officials’ announcements that emphasized in-person voting, both early and on Election Day. Similarly, local media (at least in Monongalia County) emphasized in-person over mail-in absentee voting.
- Absentee voting was intended to provide a safe alternative to in-person voting. Yet, the Governor downplayed the state of the pandemic; *The Comeback* reopening began April 30.⁶

- SOS Warner’s announcements about “voter fraud” in April and May made absentee voting appear risky.⁷ The SOS also made public pronouncements against vote by mail.
- Few ballot dropboxes were available as alternatives to the Postal Service. For example, in Monongalia County, the one dropbox was located inside the courthouse, making it relatively inaccessible.

What About the County Clerks?

Acceptance of vote by mail by county clerks is nearly as important as acceptance by voters. What does the experiment tell us about acceptance of mail-in voting by county clerks?

Anecdotal evidence tells us that county clerks in most counties managed to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. But they had little time to plan for a wholly different election than they had experienced previously. Their task was not easy, but they appear to have succeeded.

Two different elections at the same time are what several county clerks across West Virginia [reported] “It’s overwhelming,” said Linda Huggins, county clerk in Preston County. “It is something that it’s just unreal. Everybody in the office feels it.”⁸

Case Studies from 3 Counties

Preston County: Case Study #1

Acceptance of mail-in voting in Preston County could be a bellwether for the state. Preston is one of 27 West Virginia counties with fewer than 20,000 registered voters and, although a part of the Morgantown Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), Preston County lacks an urban center.

- From the pool of 19,457 registered voters, the Preston County clerk received requests for 5,179 absentee ballots for the 2020 Primary. That’s about 5,000 more than the number processed for a typical election.⁸
- Also, the same clerk’s office organized and managed early voting and in-person voting for 36 precincts on Election Day.
- Turnout in Preston County (absentee and in-person combined) was 48%, better than the statewide average of 37%.
- Compared with 2016, turnout in Preston County was down 2.6%, slightly better than the statewide average.
- Absentee ballots (with an 88% return rate) made up **49%** of total ballots cast for 2020 in Preston County.

Monongalia County: Case Study #2

Monongalia County is the core of the Morgantown MSA with Morgantown as its principal city. It has the third highest number of registered voters among the 55 counties in West Virginia.

- From a pool of 71,458 registered voters, the Monongalia County clerk received requests for 14,832 absentee ballots for the 2020 Primary.

- The same clerk's office organized and managed 5 early voting sites and in-person voting for 41 precincts on Election Day.
- Turnout in Monongalia County (absentee and in-person combined) was 32%, below the statewide average of 37%.
- Compared with 2016, turnout in Monongalia County was down 6.6%, double the statewide average.
- Absentee ballots (with an 86% return rate) made up **57%** of total ballots cast for 2020 in Monongalia County.

Harrison County: Case Study #3

Harrison County adopted a different strategy for the 2020 Primary, which more closely mimics an important feature of true vote by mail. Rather than managing two full-blown elections – one in-person and the other mail-in absentee -- Harrison County made significant reductions in the number of in-person voting locations in response to COVID-19 and the number of absentee ballots anticipated.⁹ Early voting was conducted at 2 locations, and 67 precincts were consolidated into just 7 locations for in-person voting on Election Day.

- From a pool of 44,880 registered voters, the Harrison County clerk received requests for 12,008 absentee ballots for the 2020 Primary.
- Turnout in Harrison County (absentee and in-person combined) was 38%, just above the statewide average of 37%.
- Compared with 2016, turnout in Harrison County was down 8%, worse than the statewide average and 9th worst among the counties.
- Absentee ballots (with an 86% return rate) made up **60%** of total ballots cast for 2020 in Harrison County. This was the highest rate of absentee ballot use across the 55 counties.

The decrease in Harrison County turnout for the 2020 Primary, as compared with 2016, is troubling. Did their strategy of reducing in-person polling places (by 90%) for Election Day cause de facto voter suppression?

Examining other counties with decreased turnout might offer clues. Unfortunately, statewide data on changes in in-person voting locations are nonexistent,¹⁰ and the limited data available yield a mixed picture. Wood County, with 68 precincts reduced to 7 polling locations, had an 11% decrease in turnout.¹¹ On the other hand, Randolph County, with polling locations unchanged, had an 8% decrease in turnout, which is comparable to Harrison County's.¹²

Despite the lack of clarity on this point, the acceptance rate for absentee ballots in Harrison County suggests that the reduction in in-person locations had offsetting benefits. Improved voter education and more experience with mail-in voting may help counteract adverse effects on turnout in the future, while also alleviating burden on county clerks and their staff.

Endnotes:

¹ Mail-In Absentee Ballot 'Application' to be Sent to Every Registered Voter in WV, 3/26/2020, <https://sos.wv.gov/news/Pages/03-26-2020-A.aspx>

² All data downloaded from the West Virginia Secretary of State, Historical Election Results <https://sos.wv.gov/elections/Pages/HistElecResults.aspx> and Historical Voter Turnout <https://sos.wv.gov/elections/Pages/HistVoteTurnout.aspx>.

³ The number of absentee ballots requested (262,313) was higher than the number returned (224,378) – overall, 86% of absentee ballots requested were returned. The return rate exceeded 90% in 7 counties and 80% in 44 counties. Returns fell below 80% in only 4 counties.

⁴ “Blaney clears up confusion on absentee ballot requests,” *Dominion-Post*, May 16, 2020. <https://www.dominionpost.com/2020/05/16/blaney-clears-up-confusion-on-absentee-ballot-requests/>

⁵ Secretary Warner Encourages West Virginians to Vote Early and Absentee in the May 12 Primary Election, 3/19/2020, <https://sos.wv.gov/news/Pages/03-19-2020-A.aspx>

⁶ COVID-19 UPDATE: Gov. Justice announces that “The Comeback” is now underway, 4/29/2020, <https://governor.wv.gov/News/press-releases/2020/Pages/COVID-19-UPDATE-Gov.-Justice-announces-that-%E2%80%9CThe-Comeback%E2%80%9D-is-now-underway.aspx>

⁷ News releases collected from the SOS website alone:

- Community Participation is Key in Detecting, Reporting, and Correcting Election Fraud, 4/30/2020, <https://sos.wv.gov/news/Pages/04-30-2020-A.aspx>
- The Role of the WVSOS Investigations Division, 5/6/2020, <https://sos.wv.gov/news/Pages/05-07-2020-A.aspx>
- Absentee Ballot Fraud Scheme in WV Referred to U.S. Attorney for Prosecution , 5/21/2020, <https://sos.wv.gov/news/Pages/05-21-2020-A.aspx>

⁸ WV MetroNews, Early voting plus crush of absentee ballots make for busy times at West Virginia county clerk offices, 5/31/2020. <https://wvmetronews.com/2020/05/31/early-voting-ballots-plus-crush-of-absentee-ballots-make-for-busy-times-at-west-virginia-county-clerk-offices/>

⁹ Harrison County Clerk, 2020 Primary Election Day Polling Place Locations, <http://countyclerk.harrisoncountywv.com/index.php/2020-primary-election-day-polling-place-locations/>

¹⁰ A telephone call to the Secretary of State’s office on 7/13/2020 confirmed that no data on precinct location changes are available for all counties.

¹¹ Wood County WV County Commission Minutes, 6/1/2020, <https://woodcountywv.com/county-offices/commission/archived-minutes-and-agenda.html>

¹² Randolph County WV County Commission Minutes, 6/4/2020, https://randolphcountycommissionwv.org/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/Minutes_060420_256.pdf