

Delaying primaries helps protect incumbents as well as voters

May 14 2020, by Robert Boatright

[Nineteen states](#)

[, including Wyoming, Hawaii and Maryland, have postponed or canceled their primary elections. To many Americans, the idea that states might cancel or postpone their primaries as a response to the COVID-19 epidemic may sound undemocratic.](#)

Whenever election laws are changed, there is reason to worry that one party or faction will benefit. While much of the [current news coverage has focused on presidential primaries](#), as a [political scientist who studies campaigns and elections](#), I believe the real consequences of delayed primaries will be felt in the House and Senate.

Most American [states adopted the direct primary](#) for nonpresidential candidates in the early 20th century. In a direct primary, a single election is held to choose the party's nominee, unlike the [presidential primary](#) where an election is held to choose delegates who will then choose the nominee. Today, direct primaries are referred to as "state primaries." Some state primaries are held on the same day as the presidential primary, but many are not.

Holding primaries during the early weeks of the pandemic [would have been a problem for many reasons](#) – and in the case of Wisconsin, which did hold its presidential primary, may have exposed many to the virus.

But moving state primaries later in the year may insulate congressional incumbents of both parties from challengers—and tamp down a progressive insurgency within Democratic Party.

Does a primary date matter?

There are a variety of folk theories about the effects of election timing, which may explain people's concerns about the potentially undemocratic effects of postponing primaries.

Yet states are constantly tinkering with their primary dates. Over the past two decades, [legislation](#) has been introduced in 31 different states to change the dates of their state primaries.

It has [long been believed](#) that later primaries—and, accordingly, shorter general election campaigns—reduce the cost of campaigning. [Some say](#) that later primaries harm nominees in the general election, because parties have less time to resolve conflicts before the general election.

[Others](#) argue that later primaries limit the "buyer's remorse" that may set in if a candidate wins the nomination but is ultimately shown to be a problematic general election candidate. And some [hypothesize](#) that voter turnout is affected by the season—voters may not be paying attention to elections in the spring, or they may travel during the summer.

There is little evidence to back these claims.

Political scientist [Vin Moscardelli](#) and I recently [analyzed](#) the effect of state primary dates on competitiveness, candidate spending and voter turnout. We found no measurable evidence that changing the primary date affects competitiveness or candidate spending. We did find a slight effect on turnout: Voter turnout goes down in the summer but up again in the fall.

Yet anecdotes are often more powerful than facts. In Massachusetts, where I work, it is easy to find Democrats who insist that the party's frequent losses in gubernatorial races are [caused by the state's September primary](#), which they believe creates divisions among Democrats that have helped moderate Republicans win in November.

Incumbents, challengers and postponed primaries

Most of the theories, then, suggest that there are benefits for parties, and perhaps for voters, to holding primaries later in the year.

The candidates who stand to benefit most from changing primary dates, however, may be incumbents—regardless of party.

The biggest consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic for congressional candidates is that there has been very little fundraising or campaigning since March. When campaigning becomes difficult or funds become scarce, name recognition becomes more important. It will be hard for unknown candidates to generate the grassroots support or online buzz that has propelled past insurgent candidates of both parties. [Incumbents rarely lose their primaries](#), and this year they will be more secure than usual.

This is a particular issue for the left wing of the Democratic Party. Some [national progressive organizations have sought to capitalize on the success of candidates](#) such as [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) and [Ayanna Pressley](#), who successfully challenged older, more conventional Democratic lawmakers. These groups will be boosting primary challengers to some mainstream Democrats in U.S. House races this year, and in [some state legislative races](#) as well.

These efforts will be complicated by the new obstacles to grassroots organizing and fundraising. It's hard to raise money or knock on doors

during a pandemic, and it's harder still if the campaign season unexpectedly grows a month or two longer than you had anticipated.

The [Democratic primary recently held in Ohio's Third District](#) – a majority-minority district centered in Columbus—may be the clearest example. There, incumbent [Joyce Beatty was facing a strong challenge](#) from community activist Morgan Harper.

But Harper's fundraising and spending were based on the expectation that the primary would happen on March 17. When it was moved from March 17 to April 28, Harper [reportedly found it difficult to maintain momentum](#). She ended up losing by a 68% to 32% margin.

It is impossible to know whether the [election](#) would have gone differently had it been held in March, but the size of the margin [surprised many observers](#).

Many other candidates are in a similar position. Among states that moved their primaries, [Pennsylvania has potentially competitive incumbent primaries](#) in both the Republican and Democratic parties, [New Jersey has a pair of potentially competitive Democratic primaries](#) and [Indiana has a competitive Democratic open seat primary](#).

The insurgent candidates in these races will have more time to retool their campaigns than Harper did, but it is hard to see how nonincumbents will be able to run campaigns remotely like what they had planned.

We will never know what the 2020 primaries would have been like without the pandemic, and there are many good reasons for states to move their elections. Whatever the merits of making elections later, and safer, these changes will have lasting political consequences.

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