



How Much and Where Are Voters Voting During the Pandemic? Findings from Large Texas Counties

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Summary

The global pandemic shifted how campaigns function and when elections occur. In Texas, which held primary runoff elections during the height of the pandemic, voters were not shy about voting - setting records for turnout in a primary runoff motivated by a competitive US Senate race - but preferred voting in government facilities and community centers to schools or religious sites.

Recommendations

Based upon the information and analysis in this report, we offer the following recommendations to make voters comfortable.

- Voting locations should be large and spread out inside. Alternatives like outdoor areas or non-traditional locations like malls may alleviate voter concerns.
- Avoid smaller locations where crowding might occur. Voters shied away from voting at religious and school facilities perhaps because the total number of such sites decreased from 2018 and because of concerns about these facilities spreading the virus.
- Stick to familiar locations so voters have a history with the location. Large, common locations were preferred by most voters in large urban and suburban counties.
- A longer early voting, as Governor Abbott has mandated, will physically spread out the likely record breaking number of voters in 2020.

Background

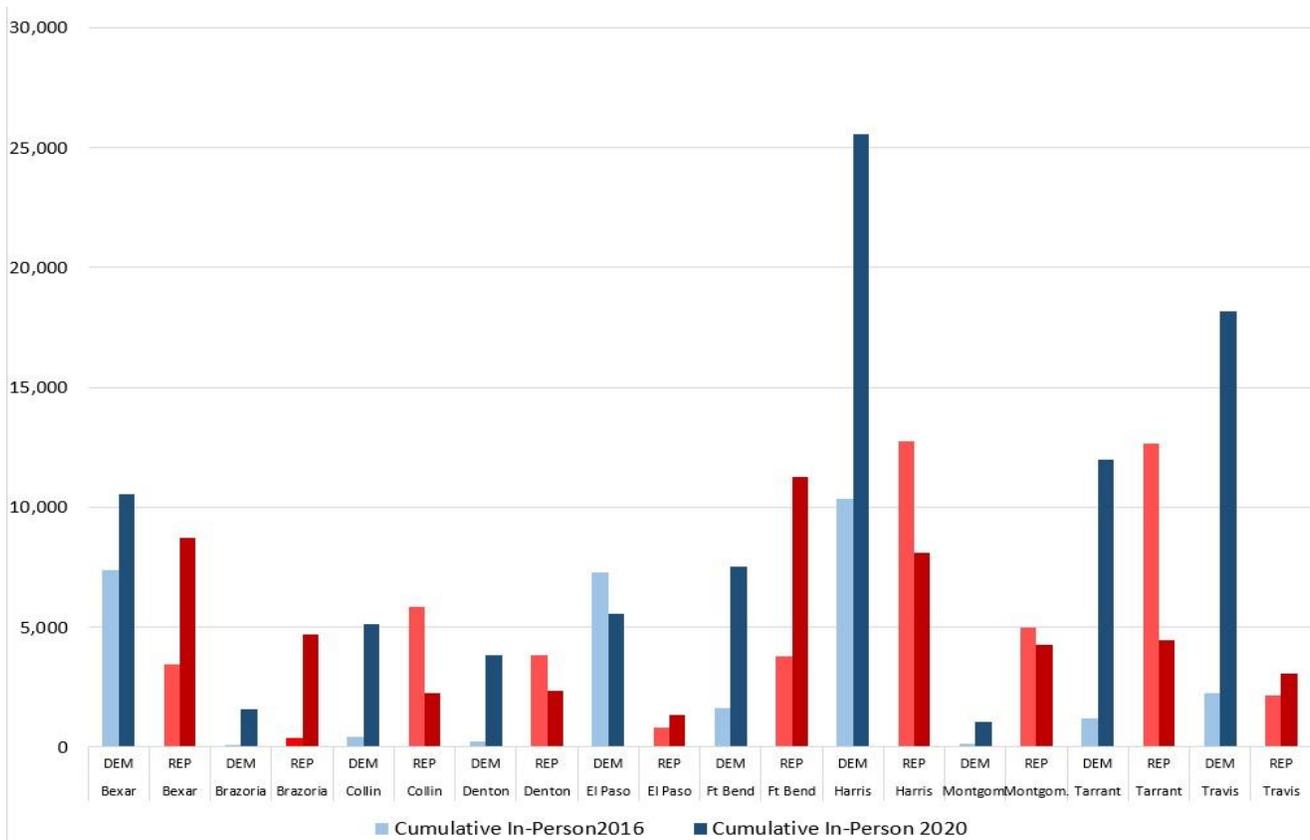
As the rapid spread of COVID-19 made voting in Texas, amid efforts by state and local officials to keep Texans from spreading the virus, Governor Abbott postponed the scheduled primary runoff election from May 26 to July 14. “Holding the runoff in May would cause the congregation of large gatherings of people in confined spaces and cause numerous election workers to come into close proximity with others. This would threaten the health and safety of

many Texans.”¹ He also extended early voting days for the July 14 election from one week to two weeks. Governor Abbott has also extended early voting for the November election as well, from October 13 to October 30.

Primary Runoff 2020 - Week 1 Turnout

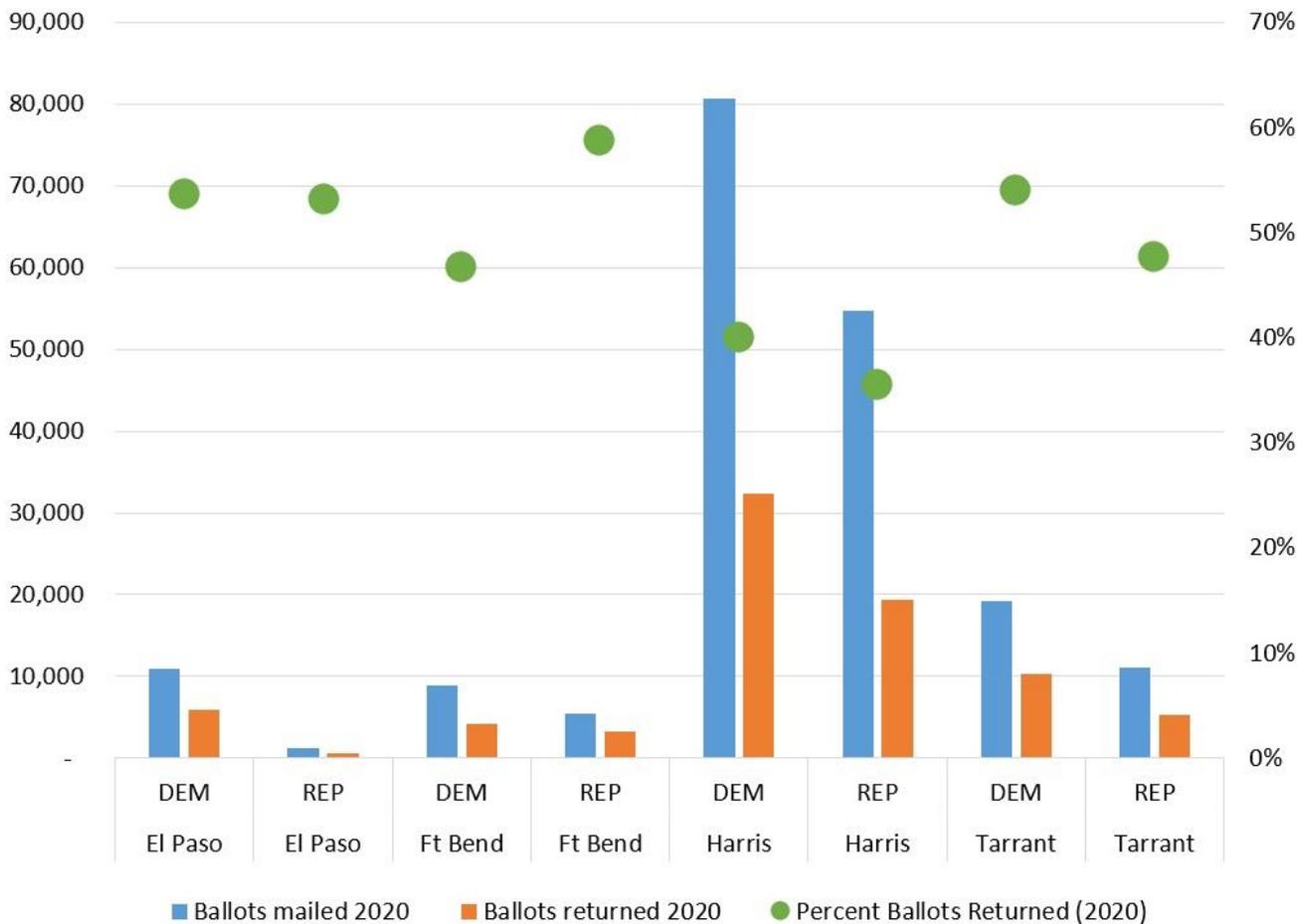
Below is a graph of changes from 2016 to 2020 for in-person voting only in most of the largest counties. Democratic in-person voting up big in in 2020 in most of these counties compared to 2016 except El Paso and Bexar. This is true even in traditionally red counties like Collin, Tarrant, and Denton. Republicans ran strong in Brazoria and Fort Bend but were slumping in Tarrant and Denton, compared to 2016.

(Caveat: early voting in runoff in 2016 was ONLY one week while 2020 will have two weeks. This report compares the first week for 2016 and 2020.)



¹ “Governor Abbott Postpones Runoff Primary Election In Response To COVID-19.” March 20, 2020.

Given the epidemic, many Texans 65+ (or with other valid reasons to vote absentee) have chosen to vote by mail. How do the counties compare on return rates? Mail ballot percent return for week 1 of primary runoff is higher in El Paso and Fort Bend than Harris. Republican primary percent mail ballot return is higher (than Democrats) in Fort Bend. Democratic primary percent return is higher (than Republicans) in Tarrant (and slightly in Harris).



The early voting numbers were robust for Democrats in the first week - considering the usual election cycle - driven by an unresolved US Senate race at the top of the ticket. There were not too many races of consequence happening on the Republican side of things statewide, so rather lackluster turnout is perhaps not surprising.

Where Did Texans Vote?

To explore where Texans voted in the pandemic primary runoff, we examined turnout in several large urban and suburban counties (Bexar, El Paso, Harris,

Travis, Williamson). Specially we tracked the total early votes in each county and the early votes in both the Republican and Democratic primaries.

Voting locations were categorized into the following groups: schools (primary and secondary schools), community centers, religious institutions, and government facilities.² The following table charts the total of each type of voting location by county.

County	Community Center	Religious Facility	Government Facilities	Schools
Bexar	3	0	24	1
El Paso	6	0	14	3
Harris	19	7	14	6
Travis	2	3	5	7
Williamson	0	0	4	0

To further probe where Texans vote, we utilize an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to determine the key variables predicting early voting turnout. OLS allows us to estimate what effect our exploratory variables have on the dependent variable (total voters at each location).³ We use control variables like the total population, residential units, Black residents, and Latino residents. Positive numbers indicate the estimated number of voters per location in the 2020 cycle above the normal trend. A designation of “no effect” means that there was no statistically significant increase or decrease.

The findings from the statistical models displayed in the table below shows voters in these large counties preferred to vote at community centers and government facilities but not at schools or religious facilities. Clearly there were fewer schools or religious facilities utilized as polling locations in the primary runoff for 2020, but even controlling for all types of locations and

² Excluded from the analysis were other “local” voting sites that didn’t fit one of these classification criteria.

³ More specifically, the sum of the squared differences from the data point and the point of the linear estimate. The smaller the differences, the better the model fits. About a quarter of the variance is explained by the three models, a healthy amount considering the low number of total cases.

density of the surrounding areas, voters tended avoid these specific locations to vote in favor of other locations.

	Total	Democrats	Republicans
Schools	<i>No effect</i>	<i>No effect</i>	<i>No effect</i>
Community Centers	+457	+432	<i>No effect</i>
Religious Facilities	<i>No effect</i>	<i>No effect</i>	<i>No effect</i>
Government Facilities	+347	<i>No effect</i>	+330

In terms of party, early voting Democrats - who had larger turnout overall due to more competitive primaries - were more likely to vote at community centers primarily while early voting Republicans were more likely overall to vote at government facilities.

Voters seemed to gravitate towards larger facilities and those in centrally located areas. Smaller facilities like religious facilities or other locations were less popular perhaps because of fears concerning crowding which might contribute to community spread of COVID-19. Large and expansive locations like the Metropolitan Multiservice Center in Harris County, the Toney Burger Activity Center in Travis County, or the Brookhollow Library in Bexar County, the Humble Civic Center in Harris County, and the El Paso County Eastside Annex were top voting locations.

