The COVID-19 Pandemic, the Election Calendar, and Voter Turnout in the 2020 Presidential Nomination[1][†]

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As the official start of the 2020 nomination season drew closer, it appeared it would be an exciting, hard-fought, likely drawn-out endeavor to nominate the Democratic candidate that would compete against President Trump in the November election. Many aspects of the race seemed well-posed to stimulate turnout, including the switch by many states away from caucuses in favor of primaries, a more backloaded calendar, the number of candidates in the race, the Democrats' out-party status, and animosity towards the incumbent president. Yet, just as former Vice-President Joe Biden was beginning to establish his position as the front-runner in early March, the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the nomination. As the race was settling into a two-person contest between Biden and Senator Bernie Sanders and then Biden looked more and more certain to become the Democratic nominee, the cost-benefit calculation for voters should have changed dramatically. As the benefits to voting, notably the likelihood of one's vote affecting the outcome, dwindled, the costs of voting during a pandemic dramatically increased. Several states rescheduled their contests, opting to hold them in June or later, well beyond when the race was competitive, voting instead after Biden had already emerged as the de facto nominee. For states that opted to keep their contest date, holding them in late spring, voters were faced with navigating stay-at-home orders and uncertainty pve,4 (h)16 ( )18 (s)-11.1 ()bh6 (es)5 ( )TJ-13.88 -2.3 Tdd4 ( )182(

we show in the analysis that follows, that is not what we find. We demonstrate that turnout was high in 2020, but remained high, even after the pandemic disrupted the nomination and Biden emerged as the de facto nominee.

How the 2020 Nomination Race Unfolded

The 2020 Democratic presidential nomination race to defeat President Donald Trump attracted one of the deepest pools of potential nominees, featuring nearly thirty candidates. Before winning the nomination, former Vice-President (and former U.S. Senator) Joe Biden defeated a considerable number of current or former elected officials including eight U.S. Senators, seven U.S. Representatives, four governors, four mayors, and a former Cabinet Secretary.[2] By any definition, this field included several quality candidates with realistic chances of securing the nomination. The race also reflected the most diverse field of viable candidates with several prominent candidates of color, women, and the first serious candidate from the LGBT community.

With all of these candidates in the race, no clear front runner emerged in the lead up to the 2020 nomination season, which signaled the deep divisions within the party. Though Biden enjoyed a modest lead throughout most of the polls before the first contests (while briefly trailing Senator Elizabeth Warren in national polls), he failed to garner significant traction in gaining early endorsements (Real Clear Politics 2020; Bycoffe and Dottle 2020). Meanwhile, Senator Bernie Sanders dwarfed Biden's fundraising numbers and far outraised the rest of the field

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(Nilsen 2020). The narrative of the race was framed frequently about "electability." Activists sought to find a candidate that could energize voters, unite the party, *and* defeat President Donald Trump, but there was little agreement about who that was.

In the early stages of the race, there was considerable uncertainty about who would emerge as the nominee. Biden had a shaky start earning a dismal fourth and fifth place finish in Iowa and New Hampshire, respectively. Both Senator Bernie Sanders and South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg claimed the momentum after coming in first and second place in the first two tightly-fought contests. After Sanders earned a decisive victory in Nevada, the race remained unsettled. Increasingly, the idea of a contested convention seemed "possible" and fear of what a Sanders' nomination might do to the party's prospects grew more visible (Lerer and Epstein 2020; Phillips 2020).

South Carolina Representative James Clyburn's pivotal endo36 (2 (vo)-4)-11 (C[f)29 (o)23.)9 (ond)-2 (a)]

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effectively leaving a two-person struggle. Though Sanders remained in the race, Biden's momentum and string of successes in early March suggested that Biden had a clear path to earning a majority of the pledged delegates.

Right as the race reached this pivotal moment, the COVID-19 pandemic fully disrupted the nomination calendar. On March 13th, just ten days after Super Tuesday, President Trump declared COVID a national emergency (Trump 2020). As a result, media coverage of the primary race was subsumed by coverage of the pandemic and voters shifted their attention away from the race (Bond 2020; Jurkowitz 2020). As the number of positive cases began to surge, states began implementing stay-at home orders and other public health measures. Many states rescheduled their contests for later in the nomination calendar while others made noticeable changes to how they conducted elections. While this was ongoing, Biden won every remaining contest until Sanders dropped out of the race on April 8th.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we first examine known factors associated with voter turnout in presidential nomination contests. Next, we explore an emerging literature to explore how the pandemic might affect voting behavior. Finally, we present our exploratory analysis of the relationship between COVID-19, the nomination calendar, and voter turnout.

Electoral Rules and Voter Turnout

Broadly, we know that "rules matter" in that the patchwork diversity of how nominations vary across states and parties can shape voter behavior, including the number of voters that choose to participate in the process (Jewitt 2019, Norrander 2020). For example, states that employ open primaries compared to closed primaries experience higher levels of voter participation (Jewitt 2019). Additionally, states that utilize primaries compared to caucuses enjoy

higher rates of voter turnout (Jewitt 2014; 2019). Given that the 2020 Democratic nomination season featured the lowest number of caucuses in the post-reform era (Cohn 2019), we would expect increased levels of voter turnout.

But part of what makes rules matter is whether voters are aware of them and directly observe their impact. While voters can observe whether they are participating in a primary or caucus or whether they had to previously register with their party to participate, they are less likely to be aware of the often byzantine rules of delegate allocation. Recent research suggests that whether states utilize winner-take-all or proportional delegate rules has no impact on voter turnout (2019). This finding echoes how a voters' experience at the polls is associated with confidence and behavior but not other components of election administration (Atkeson and Saunders 2007; Bullock et al. 2005; Hall et al. 2007, 2009; Claasen et al. 2008; Flavin and Shufeldt 2019).

In addition to the rules and electoral administration shaping behavior, the context of the race matters as well. Oftentimes, the invisible primary shapes the options well before voters get a chance to cast a ballot (Cohen et al. 2008; Norrander 2020). As we previously discussed, the invisible primary did not winnow the 2020 field, leaving voters with many viable candidates to choose from. The reason why so many candidates chose to run and remained in the race is at least two-fold. First, party elites failed to coordinate on a single candidate as many candidates had pockets of support reflecting the ideological and demographic diversity within the field and divisions within the party. Second, enthusiasm (and voter turnout) is generally greater for the out-party (Atkeson and Maestas 2016). President Trump was historically unpopular and once impeached (at this point) making it very attractive for potential candidates to throw their hat in the ring, as Democratic voters were intent on removing Trump from office. Since research

indicates that races with a higher number of candidates are associated with high levels of voter turnout (Aldrich et al. 2019; Jewitt 2019; Norrander 2020), we would anticipate a race like 2020 with a large field of candidates to produce higher levels of turnout.

The rules and the context of the race truly meet when we consider the schedule of the nomination calendar. Increasing attention has been paid to the concept of frontloading, or "the tendency for states to move their primary or caucus toward the beginning of the nomination season, resulting in a clustering of contests early in the season" (Jewitt 2019, 56). The genero35.9 ((nT58 Tw T*)-26 (h)16 (e s Tw T)-4 (1 9g4 (1)16 ( )16 (eTd[3-255416 (sTJ -2.9149ih(o)-24 at)- (1

preferred candidate winning, the ideological differences between Democratic candidates is dwarfed by the ideological difference between Democrats and Republicans in the general election. The costs of participating in an election during a pandemic, given great uncertainty, could be lethal.

The potential risk or fear of getting COVID or spreading the disease to others should be associated with lower levels of turnout for good reason. First, the pandemic disrupted elections beyond the United States (see Landman and Splendore 2020). Fear of catching the virus or higher rates of positive COVID-19 cases were associated with lower levels of voter turnout in a diverse collection of countries including Brazil, Spain. France, Nigeria, and Malawi (Vazquez-Carrero,

Scheller 2021; Morris and Miller 2021). For instance, during Texas' July 14th primary, only

voters over the age of 65 could cast an absentee ballot (and thus vote-by-mail) without an

excuse. Yoder et al. (2020) find that while the number of people choosing to vote absentee in

Texas tripled compared to previous elections, turnout itself did not drastically change.

Examining Florida, which kept its March 17th primary as scheduled, Scheller (2021) uncovers

that individual voters were less likely to turn out as their age and the positive COVID-19 rate in

their county increased. Finally, Morris and Miller (2021) reveal that consolidating polling places

in Milwaukee in response to COVID-19 was associated with lower rates of voter turnout,

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a loved one to it (Deane, Parker, Gramlich. 2021; Galvin and Bracken 2021). The level of

concern toward COVID-

turnout to precipitously drop. In the following section, we unpack some of these changes to the election calendar and explore trends in voter turnout.

Defining Key Concepts

Before examining the 2020 Democratic nomination calendar and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the intended calendar and voter turnout, it is essential we define several key concepts, including what it means for the nomination to be competitive. As the nomination season progresses, it often becomes increasingly clear which candidate will be crowned the nominee. However, we consider the race to be competitive until there is a high level of certainty that a candidate will become the nominee. In the analysis that follows, we use a dichotomous categorization of competitive or not.[3] We measure when the nomination turns from competitive to uncompetitive by looking at when a de facto, or presumptive, nominee emerges. All contests that occur after a de facto nominee emerges are considered to be in the uncompetitive phase of the nomination season. A de facto nominee can emerge through one of the following two paths. First, since a candidate needs 50% + 1 delegate to become the party's nominee at the National Convention, he or she becomes the de facto nominee once he or she surpasses that threshold. Second, a candidate can become the de facto nominee by all of his or her viable competitors withdrawing from the race (Jewitt 2019). For instance, Hillary Clinton became the de facto Democratic nominee after securing a majority of delegates in the 2008 nomination. Alternatively, Al Gore utilized the second path and became the de facto Democratic nominee on

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[3] Of course, there are other ways to measure competitiveness, such as the number of candidates in the race or the delegate lead between the leading candidate and his or her competitors. Future work will address these factors.

March 9, 2000 because Bill Bradley withdrew from the race, leaving Gore as the only viable option.

In 2020, Biden became the presumptive nominee via the second path; the nomination race became uncompetitive because Bernie Sanders withdrew from the race on April 8, 2020. All of the other major competitors, including Klobuchar, Warren, Bloomberg, and Buttigieg, had previously withdrawn from the race. At this point in time, Biden was ahead of Sanders by almost 400 delegates, having secured 1,313 delegates. Yet, he was still several hundred delegates shy of the needed 1,991 delegates to win the Democratic nomination.

Considering whether or not the nomination is competitive becomes important for assessing turnout and meaningful participation. Voters in any state holding contests after a de facto nominee emerges and the race becomes uncompetitive lack the opportunity for timely and meaningful participation. Though they can still turn out and participate, voters in states holding contests in the uncompetitive phase have no real say in who becomes the nominee. That choice

cast and divides by the number of people eligible to vote in the election. However, calculating turnout in presidential primaries and caucuses is much more complicated as it is less clear who is eligible to vote.

Presidential nomination contests are intraparty events and occur at the state level and the rules vary across states and parties. The electoral rule that has the most bearing for calculating turnout is the openness rule, which governs who can participate. In open contests, any eligible voter is allowed to participate, regardless of party identification or loyalty. In semi-open contests, members of the political party and independents are allowed to participate, but members of the other major political party are excluded. In closed contests, only party members may participate. Of course, some states register voters by party, but others do not.[4] Therefore, finding a consistent denominator is even more challenging.

The choice of a denominator is further complicated by the fact that both the Republican and Democratic parties hold presidential nominating events, but voters are only allowed to participate in one party's contest. Thus, in a state that holds an open Republican primary and an open Democratic primary, a voter may only opt to vote in one contest, even if these primaries are held months apart. In other words, the electorates are discrete from one another and this needs to be heeded when calculating the denominator.

To overcome these theoretical and methodological challenge, we follow the work of

the normal partisan support score (NPSS) as the denominator of our voter turnout calculation. The normal partisan support score can be thought of as an estimate of the proportion of voters in a state who routinely support the political party. The normal partisan support score has been calculated in a variety of ways, but, importantly, it should consider support for the party for a variety of offices and years (to account for a charismatic candidate, an uncontested election, or a partisan tide). Here, we follow the procedures laid out by Jewitt (2014, 2019) and calculate the normal partisan support score by averaging the proportion of the vote won by the Democratic candidate in the most recent two presidential elections, senatorial elections, and gubernatorial elections in the state.[5] We then multiply this average by the voting eligible population for the state, resulting in the normal partisan support score. When using the normal partisan support score as the denominator of the voter turnout calculation, it presents a consistent figure that can be calculated for every state, regardless of openness rules and whether the state has party registration. Turnout calculated using this denominator can be thought as the percentage of partisan supporters that participated in the contest.

A Calendar Disrupted

Now that we have described some central terms for our analysis, we can examine how COVID

Tuesday in March and was supposed to close on the second Tuesday in June, per the rules established by the national Democratic Party.[6] This meant that a month after the nomination season began with the Iowa caucuses, other states were allowed to begin holding contests. Thus, the first Tuesday in March, commonly known as Super Tuesday, was cluttered with contests. 17 states held contests on March 3, 2020 and several more were scheduled to vote throughout the rest of March. As we have come to expect with recent calendars, the nomination was relatively front-loaded, with contests clustered in the beginning of the nomination season. This is evidenced by the high number of contests found on the left side of the graph.
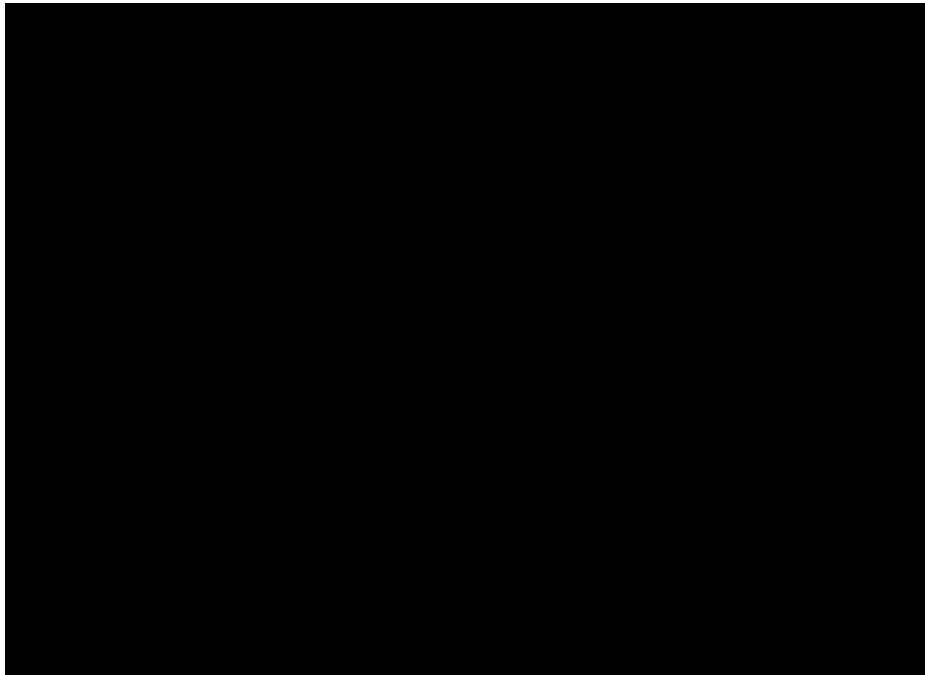

Figure 1: Intended and Actual 2020 Democratic Calendars

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[6] https://democrats.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2020-Delegate-Selection-Rules-12.17.18-FINAL.pdf

Of course, due to the pandemic and the schedule changes, the 2020 Democratic nomination calendar ended up looking quite different than was intended. In early March, the 2020 nomination was reaching a pivotal time, with numerous states voting, and Biden beginning to establish a substantial lead. The pandemic was also simultaneously reaching a critical juncture, and it began to disrupt the nomination. The right panel of Figure 1 shows the calendar as it actually happened, documenting the contests that were rescheduled due to COVID-19 following disruptions from COVID and rescheduled contests. It also depicts a calendar that is not necessarily back-loaded, where contests would be clustered at the end of the calendar, nor a calendar that has contests equally spaced around the nomination season. Instead, it depicts a calendar that is almost bimodal—there are a number of contests in early March, then an unusually quiet interlude throughout most of April and May created by pandemic movement, and then the number of contests starts to pick back up in June.
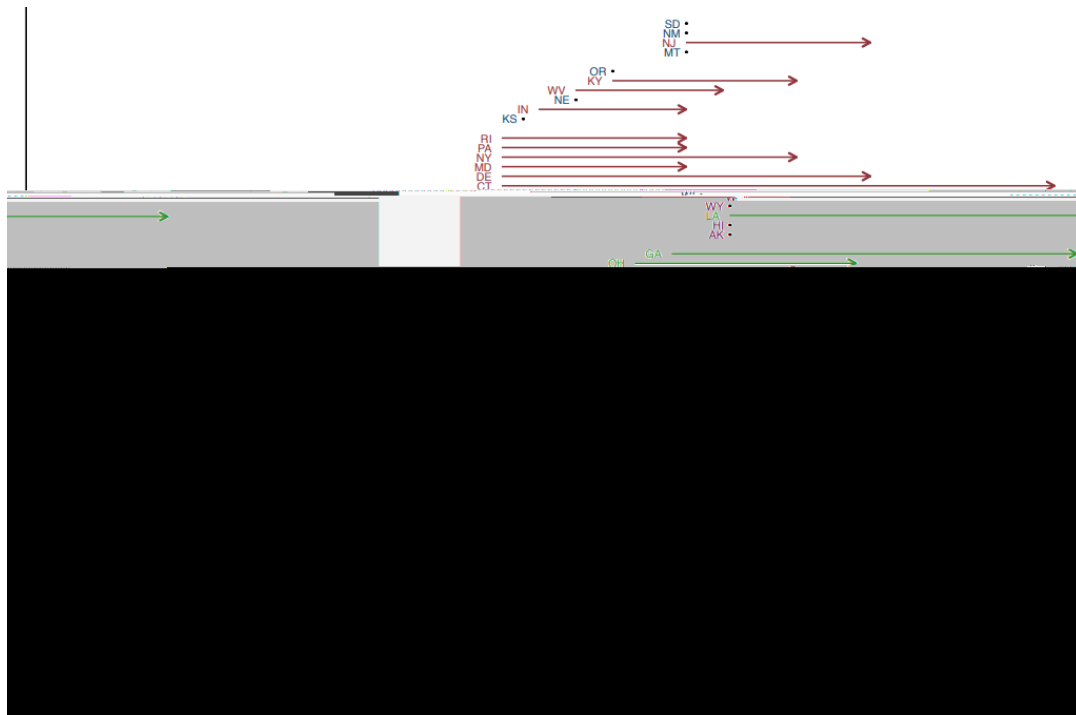

Figure 2: Contest Movement in the 2020 Democratic Calendar

To take a closer look at the changes to the calendar. What states rescheduled their contents, and when they moved them to, Figure 2 depicts the movement of state contests. States, indicated by their abbreviations, are located at their original contest date. States with a red arrow shifted in the calendar to the point in time where the arrow stops.

Days before its scheduled March 17th primary, Ohio, was the first state to postpone its contest. It opted to reschedule its primary for April 28, 2020. Other states, including Georgia and Louisiana, soon followed this decision, moving their contests even later in the season, opting for dates in June and July. Thirteen states ended up rescheduling their contests, moving them anywhere from 28 to 105 days later than they were originally intended. On average, states that moved their contests held them 52 days later than originally scheduled. Every state except Ohio chose to hold the rescheduled contests in June or beyond. As a result of this movement, June 2 became a major date in the calendar, second only to Super Tuesday. Though early June is generally the end of the nomination calendar, on June 2, 2020, 7 states (and the District of Columbia) held primaries, with 636 delegates available. Six states held contests in late June, July, or August, a period of time in which the nomination is usually in the interregnum phase, or the lull between the de facto nominee emerging and the candidate officially being nominated at the Convention (Mayer and Busch 2004).

The Calendar, Competitiveness, and Turnout in 2020

Given the theorized connection between the calendar, competitiveness, and turnout, we next turn our attention to the turnout rates of the 2020 Democratic nomination contests and how the pandemic affected the number of voters that participated.
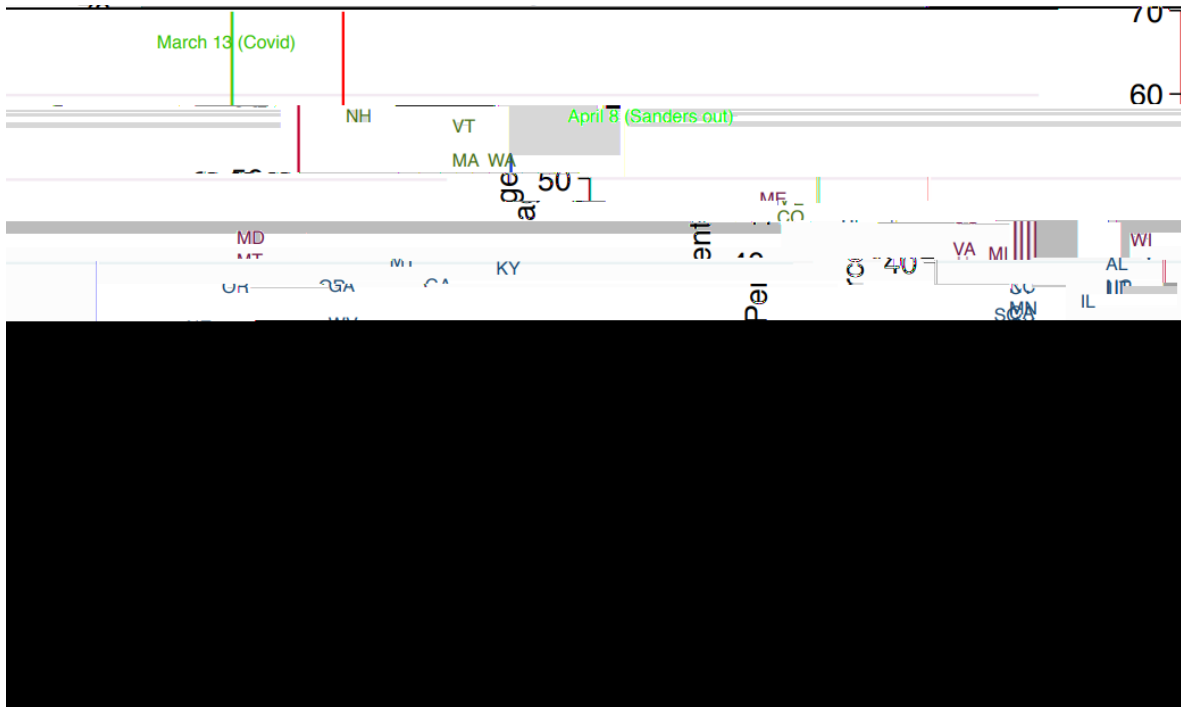
Figure 3: Turnout in the 2020 Nomination Contests, By Date

Figure 3 shows the turnout rate in each state organized by the date the contest took place (actual, not intended, date). The first vertical line on the graph represents when COVID first disrupted the calendar, depicting March 13, 2020, the day that the Ohio primary was originally scheduled to occur. The second vertical line demarcates April 8, 2020, when Joe Biden became the de facto nominee and the nomination shifted from the competitive phase to the uncompetitive phase.

When examining Figure 3, it is clear that turnout varies considerably across states from a low of 5.3% in the Hawaii primary to a high of 57.6% in the New Hampshire primary. Many factors, such as the state's political culture, demographic factors, the type of contest (primary or caucus), the number of candidates in the race, affect turnout in the presidential nomination contests (Jewitt 2019). The date of the contest and whether the contest is held in the competitive phase or occurs after a de facto nominee has emerged is also critical for understanding the

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