



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
BOARD OF ELECTIONS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20003-4733



DCBOE June 2020 Primary Election Recap

Against a backdrop of the dangerous Covid-19 national pandemic, the DC Board of Elections (DCBOE) was tasked with creating and implementing new, unprecedented processes, connections, and procedures to conduct the June 2020 Elections. This document outlines initial lessons learned, including an assessment of areas in which improvement is still needed and areas where we experienced successes.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a series of considerations and challenges for the DCBOE. As always, our core concern was the safety of the voters and workers and making sure all votes were counted. Our greatest challenge to effective planning was time. New voting processes often take years to plan and even more years to effectively implement. In contrast, the time available to the BOE to create and execute this new plan was approximately 8 weeks, whereas it often takes 18 months to plan an election under “normal” circumstances. This election required revisions to established systems and processes all focused on voter and worker safety. In general, changes to processes of this nature require a development period and a review process; unfortunately, we were unable to iron out some of the kinks in many of those modified procedures.

As time progressed, we discovered that several established, previously effective processes were severely strained or broken when four-times the previous absentee voter turnout occurred for this election. We were very fortunate to have the support of the Mayor and Council as we moved to implement this plan. Below is a discussion of the planning for the June 2020 elections and the underlying assumptions that were made with respect to the June Primary.

Changes to the Election Plans in Response to the Pandemic

In early March 2020, the nation determined that the very dangerous Covid-19 pandemic had spread to the United States. As a result, the DCBOE and nearly every other election administration office in the nation were tasked with changing their upcoming primary election plans to aid in the prevention of the spread of the disease. Many states decided that it was impossible to move forward as scheduled with their elections under the conditions and decided to postpone their elections. The DCBOE decided not to postpone, and maintained the schedule legislated by the Council. As the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic threat became clearer, and previously unknown factors presented themselves daily, we were forced to adjust our assumptions and plans in real time.

Over a year’s worth of planning was abandoned for a new plan that was untested, unprecedented, and developed in an eight-week timeframe. Execution of the plan was challenging. Because of the stay at home order, the full complement of DCBOE personnel and resources were not available. Concerns regarding coronavirus transmission made it impossible to staff and open the previously established 14 early Vote Centers and 144 precincts for Election Day. Instead, we opted to operate 20 Vote Centers for 11 days, including on Election Day. Unfortunately, as DCBOE continued to adjust and shift operations, several members of our permanent and temporary staff were forced to

contend with the coronavirus; some tested positive, some had to self-quarantine due to exposure, and some lost family members. It was a tough eight weeks for sure.

Training and Deploying Election Workers

Social distancing and stay at home requirements restricted the number of election workers the BOE could train in person in preparation for the election. We had to conduct training virtually, which proved less effective than we had hoped.

We lost over 1700 poll workers, but we were able to deploy 365 veteran workers throughout the early voting period and had 215 workers staffed on Election Day. Faced with a shortage of workers, we deployed all available DCBOE staff members to Vote Centers as well. Each Vote Center was configured to comply with guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the CDC) and the Department of Health (DOH). Following the guidance to keep workers and voters safe required that the DCBOE limit the number of workers to no more than ten per Vote Center, which caused an additional challenge to in-person voting and limited the speed with which voters could cast ballots. However, voters continued to be processed at the point of check-in at a rate of one voter in less than a minute.

Use of Absentee (Mail-in) Ballot Requests

Initially, the DCBOE considered an all vote by mail process as a way to ensure no voters had to go into a voting location to vote. We consulted with other states that have conducted all-mail voting for many years and were strongly urged not to attempt voting by mail with less than 8 weeks to plan. The two most successful states (Washington and Oregon) both indicated that it took them over two years of planning to start, and as much as 10 years to successfully transition. We heeded their strong warning.

DCBOE had implemented a “no-excuse” absentee ballot program 10 years ago and we decided to expand this well-established system for the June 2020 elections. We immediately began asking District of Columbia voters to request their mail-in ballot with a series of press conferences, virtual meetings with community groups, a digital ad campaign, and print, TV and radio ads. The communications effort worked; the requests started pouring in at rates we had never seen before. Unfortunately, the IT infrastructure supporting the absentee ballot request processes periodically failed.

The DCBOE’s underlying assumption was that the absentee ballot process could scale to manage a significantly greater volume. However, the IT systems supporting the processes were overwhelmed.

The technology systems we used to process the over 92,000 absentee requests had previously processed less than one quarter of the volume of requests received for the June election. Our Election Management Voter Registration System, “Integrity,” was stretched beyond its previous capacity as well.

It later became apparent that updates to the system were needed to accommodate the mail-in process as we were attempting to use it. Once in heavy use, we also discovered that the Vote4DC mobile app was not compatible with all mobile devices as the vendor had previously claimed. The vendor was also not responsive to our numerous requests to address our concerns and make appropriate updates. Many technology unknowns presented themselves daily.

As a result, several mail-in ballot requests were not processed in a timely manner. Additionally, voters who used the Vote4DC app to make their ballot requests did not receive confirmation that their requests had been received. This situation was compounded by the fact voters were not able to track the status of their ballots. This led to understandable confusion and frustration for voters, who were not sure if their ballots would be mailed to them and when, an issue which the DCBOE deeply regrets. Despite the challenges, 92,000 mail-in ballot requests were received and processed, and 92,000 ballots were mailed to District voters. Because there was no time to establish a contract with a credible company and test their processes, BOE did not use a private company (mail house) to provide the mail distribution process and handle the increased demand. We are in the process of identifying a reliable private mail house for an all-mail ballot operation for the November 2020 election.

Long Lines and Wait Times at Vote Centers on Election Day

The DCBOE opened 20 Vote Centers across the District of Columbia at which any voter could vote irrespective of which Ward they resided in. The Vote Centers were open for 10 days prior to the election, including weekends but excluding Memorial Day, from May 22 from 8:30 am to 7:00 pm.

The Mayor, Councilmember Allen, the DCBOE, and many others constantly messaged District voters, informing them that Vote Centers were open and asking voters to please vote early. In spite of this, more than 65% of the 35,000 voters that voted in person cast their ballots on the last day of voting, Election Day, June 2. The extremely heavy Election Day voter turnout, confusion about the status of mailed and returned absentee ballots, and Covid-19 procedures drove the excessively long lines voters unfortunately experienced on June 2, 2020.

Going forward, we are committed to ensuring that there is neither a repeat of the confusion regarding ballots, and we are working to limit the long lines at Vote Centers.

What Worked/What Failed

Despite the obvious challenges, there were some positive lessons learned. We offered multiple voting methods including expanded use of no excuse absentee (mail-in) ballots. These methods of voting worked for the vast majority of DC voters.

As in previous elections, we issued a Voter Guide to each party-affiliated registered voter that included two absentee (mail-in) ballot applications and a postage paid return envelope that many voters utilized. We also employed many new messaging tactics to reach DC voters. We mailed postcards to voters, conducted virtual meetings for DC leaders, community and political organizations, and members of the public at large. We developed informational posters and used digital, print, radio, and television media advertisements to raise awareness about the changes to the District's June voting procedures.

On June 1, 2020, the Board learned that many voters who had timely requested their ballots had not received them. To remedy this problem, DCBOE offered the use of OmniBallot Online. OmniBallot is an electronic, fully accessible absentee, Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) and sample ballot solution by Democracy Live that allows voters to access, mark, print, and return a ballot image either manually or electronically. The ballot return methods, while straightforward, involve

several steps including printing, signing, and scanning the ballots and ballot affirmations, and creating return envelopes should the voter choose to return the ballot by mail. Regardless of the method used to return the voted ballot image, the DCBOE must duplicate the voted ballot image on ballot paper that can be tabulated on DCBOE's tabulation equipment in the same manner as all other official ballots.

DCBOE intended OmniBallot Online to be used solely by voters with certain disabilities. However, we expanded its use to assist voters who did not receive ballots despite timely submitting valid requests. The Board is currently considering how to use OmniBallot in the future, but it will only be used in limited circumstances.

The Board worked hard until the last minute to allow voters to cast their ballots: In response to voters who did not receive their absentee ballot in time, DCBOE used overnight delivery for out-of-state ballots. We reissued ballots to those who had not previously received them and even made last minute local hand deliveries.

Unfortunately, we also had many ballots returned by the Postal Service to DCBOE as undeliverable, indicating that future messaging also needs to stress that voters need to assure that their residence information is up to date.

Next Steps

We are currently training poll workers and mailing ballots for the June 16 Special Election. Additionally, we are putting mechanisms in place to address the challenges identified during the June 2 Primary Election. We believe that the November voter turnout will shatter all previous records. We expect a doubling of the June election turnout, which was the highest in over 10 years. We propose the following for the November Election:

1. Mail a ballot to every registered voter in DC using a private mail house for distribution
2. Open 40 Vote Centers 7 days before Election Day for early voting and voting on Election Day
3. Identify areas where more Vote Centers may be needed
4. Identify a workable solution for the Board's mobile app capable of interacting with all mobile platforms
5. Hire additional IT and other staff at DCBOE in anticipation of the higher workload
6. Identify experienced poll workers willing to staff the Vote Centers during the Early Voting period
7. Heavily message to voters about voting locations and early voting
8. Upgrade the in-house technology to adequately accommodate and process the magnitude of absentee ballots anticipated for the November Election

A major lesson learned with the June 2 Primary election was that the DCBOE is severely under-resourced. Without the additional resources to cover the expected record-shattering voter turnout, the long lines and voter frustrations cannot be adequately addressed.

The DCBOE will provide additional details around this plan in the coming days. We need the continued support of the Mayor and the Council to develop and implement this plan.

We look forward to the thoughtful input of all parties, including the voters and voter organizations, as we continue to strive to make voting in the District safe and ensure that every District voter has the opportunity to vote and that every valid vote is counted.