
How the “Purell Primary” Will Affect Future Elections in Illinois

By John G. Fogarty Jr., Latasha R. Thomas / Mar 25, 2020

The timing of the coronavirus pandemic was a major factor in historically low turnout for an Illinois primary in a Presidential year. Initial estimates put turnout in the City of Chicago, for example, at about 35%, much lower than the 2016 primary which saw turnout at 53%. But for record-breaking early voting and vote-by-mail voting, the turnout would have been even lower. Election authorities were plagued by polling place closings and election judge shortages, all of which further frustrated Election Day turnout.

As vote-by-mail ballots continue to trickle in, one thing is clear: policymakers will be looking at this election – the so-called “Purell Primary” – with an eye toward election law changes to encourage turnout among Illinois voters and streamline election administration. At least two ideas will merit, and receive, increased scrutiny.

There will be calls for expanded vote-by-mail balloting, removing the need to physically go to the polls. Around the country, we see an increase in vote-by-mail balloting every election cycle. Tom Perez, the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, made the call for all registered voters in the United States to automatically be mailed a vote-by-mail ballot. Others undoubtedly will follow.

There are many practical issues with an automatic vote-by-mail policy, however. Such a move would come with astronomical costs. The mailing alone would be a budget-buster for most election authorities. Compounding the expense is the fact that our voter rolls – both locally and nationally – are not accurate. Sending live ballots to addresses where people no longer reside is a needless expense and an invitation for electoral fraud.

Vote-by-mail balloting typically employs scant and inconsistent authentication procedures. Signature verification is conducted relatively haphazardly, and as a result, fraud is tougher to detect. When vote-by-mail ballots are rejected for non-matching signatures, the burden on the voter to have his or her ballot counted is a heavy one. Typically, the election authority is required to notify a voter whose vote-by-mail ballot is rejected by mail, and the voter is provided an opportunity to cure whatever deficiency caused the ballot to be rejected. There are many ways this can go wrong – the local clerk may not be diligent about timely notifying the voter, the voter may be out of town or otherwise may not receive the notice, and/or the voter may be unable to come to the election authority's office to authenticate the ballot. In other words, there are plenty of opportunities for administrative error to frustrate what is otherwise a citizen's fundamental right in voting, which is not what policymakers on either side of the aisle desire.

Another idea gaining momentum is the expanded use of “vote centers” instead of singular precinct polling places. The coronavirus forced the Chicago Board of Elections to close at least 150 polling locations that were to be located in nursing homes or other similar locations. Fully 20% of election judges – upon whom we rely to carry out an election – did not show up, largely out of coronavirus fears. Closed polling places and absent election judges lead to long lines and frustrated and confused voters.

Fortunately, the City of Chicago was able to make the best of a bad situation by keeping open all early voting centers on Election Day. Early voting centers are located in every ward in Chicago and are several times larger than an average precinct polling place. Typically, early voting centers accommodate voters up to the day before Election Day, but not on Election Day itself. This year, because early voting sites remained open on Election Day, voters who were stymied at their traditional polling place could be directed to a large-scale facility in their neighborhood where they could still cast their vote.

These early voting sites demonstrated the efficacy of using larger “vote centers,” and moving away from the use of so many precinct polling places in the City of Chicago. Vote center advocates note that Chicago uses many more polling places than comparable big cities, at great cost and logistical burden. Chicago maintains 1,700 polling places for a population of 2.7 million people, whereas Los Angeles uses 1,360 polling places for a population of 4.0 million and New York City utilizes 1,205 polling places for 8.5 million people. Roughly 13,000 people (both election judges and full-time staff) are required to administer Chicago's elections on an Election Day. Vote center advocates argue that these numbers can be cut drastically in favor of larger, better-equipped sites and that placing six vote centers in every ward, each equipped with over 100 voting machines, would ensure accessibility at reduced staffing, requiring only 2,400 people to run, city-wide. This results in cost savings and the elimination of the problems of polling place closings and election judge shortages, according to advocates.

One week after Election Day, ballots are still being counted in Illinois, and all the world is rightly focused on beating back COVID-19. Time will tell what lessons policymakers will take from the Purell Primary.