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THE CURRENT: What should states learn from Tuesday's primaries for the November elections?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current part of the Brookings podcast network. I'm your host Adriana Pita.

Tuesday, June 23 was another big primary day, with races in New York, Virginia, and Kentucky, as well as some runoff elections in the Carolinas and Mississippi. While results are still being tabulated many of these races, New York and Kentucky in particular, like many other states who have held elections during the pandemic, have struggled with managing their mail-in ballot system and have seen dishearteningly long lines at polling places.

So with us to talk about Tuesday's primaries, but also more broadly about how states have been managing their primaries during this social distancing era of COVID-19, and the lessons they need to learn for the general election in the fall, is Elaine Kamarck, senior fellow and director of the Center for Effective Public Management, and also author of "Primary Politics. Everything You Need to Know About How America Nominates its Presidential Candidates." Elaine, thanks for talking with us today.

KAMARCK: Well, thanks for having me.

PITA: Before we get to some of the process questions, I want to ask you to touch briefly on some of the more significant races in these primaries. Can I ask you to look to New York first? And again for our listeners, this is the caveat that we're recording this Friday morning and many of these races have not been officially called. So, this is sort of more of a check in on where we are now, and the potential outcomes.

KAMARCK: Well, I think your caveat is actually the biggest news, which is, we don't really know what we're seeing in New York. Here we are three days after the election and we really can't tell. I mean, it looks like there are three races where the more progressive candidate has won the primary. The marquee race in New York was Jamaal Bowman taking on Elliot Engel. Elliot Engel has been the congressman from the 16th district in New York for more than 30 years. He's chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the House, a very prestigious post, and right now, it looks like an African American school principal is beating him in the primary in his district. Now, I say right now because -- and this applies to all the races we'll discuss today Bowman has a large lead in the people who voted in person. But we know that almost 2 million absentee ballots were sent out in New York state. And the absentee ballots aren't even started to be counted; they don't get counted in New York 'til eight days after election day. So, while it looks like Elliott Engel may be losing his primary, we really are not going to know until next week sometime. So, we may have to do this all over again.

I can say the same thing for two other primary races in New York – well, actually three other primary races in New York -- where it looks like the progressive challenger is doing fairly well. Two of those are open seats. It looks like Mondaire Jones in the 17th district and Richie Torres in the 15th district are doing very well and are likely to win the Democratic nomination. And in New York's 12th District where the Carolyn Maloney -- also a powerhouse in the Congress like Elliot Engel -- it looks like she is almost neck and neck with Suraj Patel, again a challenger from the progressive wing of the party. So, right now it looks like a pretty good night for progressives in New York State primaries, but I really have to say that with heavy skepticism here, just because, if we look at what's happening, more votes are going to be cast absentee than were cast in person and that very well can change the outcome of the race or any of the races.

PITA: I'm going to ask you to come back to that later on about in terms of numbers of where how people are voting. But just to continue with some of the other races. I'm looking at Kentucky, the big races about who's going to be the Democratic challenger for Senator Mitch McConnell, what do we know about where that stands currently?

KAMARCK: Well, again, we have a real problem knowing that, okay. By mid-afternoon on election day, we know that 570,000 absentee ballots had been received at election offices and another hundred thousand at early voting locations. And it looks like only 156,000 people voted on election day. So it to put this in context, it looks like only 30% of the vote in Kentucky was in person. That's why it is extremely hard to figure out who is winning the Democratic nomination to contest Mitch McConnell

Certainly, Amy McGrath had a very, very strong lead. She raised enormous amount of money. She's a female former Marine fighter pilot, quite a strong candidate, particularly for a state like Kentucky. And at the last minute, there's been a surge by an African American state rep named Charles Booker and so that surge showed up in the in-person voting. And if you just look at the in-person voting, people are saying, "Wow, this is a close race." On the other hand, the in-person votes are swamped by the number of absentee ballots. So again, this is a peculiar situation we find ourselves in, but it may happen in November, which is, it will take many days after election day to actually figure out who won.

PITA: And anything that we should be paying attention to from Virginia?

KAMARCK: No, Virginia didn't have any particularly, doesn't look like there's any particularly big upsets in Virginia. I think the New York and the Kentucky were the big stories.

PITA: So to get to that question about how many people are voting via absentee voting with mail-in, what do we know so far -- not just about Tuesday, but over the course of the last couple of months of primaries--about how those numbers are shaking out?

KAMARCK: Well, let me step back. It is to a certain extent, it's really, we're really lucky that we had the pandemic happen early in the election year, as opposed to later, because we've had a series of primaries in which state election officials could kind of figure out how to operate in this new environment. And so, what we've seen across the board are enormous increases in absentee ballot requests and decreases in polling locations and both of those are causing their own problems. So, for instance, in Kentucky, there were fewer than 200 polling locations in this primary compared to 3700 four years ago. In New York state, 1.7 million people requested absentee ballots for the primary and

that was that's compared to one 160,000 in 2016. So, we've got this unprecedented increase a request for absentee ballots.

With that of course are coming a decrease in polling places because the election officials are saying, well, my god, we've got to spend all this money to send out absentee ballots, obviously, we can decrease the number of polling places. Well, the problem that's arising is that a to a certain extent that has worked out. On the other hand, there are people who are not getting their absentee ballots on time, either because they sent in the application too late, or the absentee ballot application and ballot were sent to a wrong address or things got lost in the mail. In other words, given this volume, there's a lot of snafus.

Now the second part of that is that when the snafus have happened with the absentee ballots, people then go to the polling places, and because there are fewer polling places, there's long lines, and the long lines mean that people are frustrated. They have to wait, you know, stand six feet apart, wear their masks, etc. And we've had stories from all over the country: Baltimore, for instance, during the Maryland primary, of polling places closing when there are still voters waiting and then people going to court, to have the polling places reopen to let the remaining voters vote. All sorts of problems are happening. So, this is really a system that is stressed. That's the bad news. The good news is it's being stressed in a series of primaries. States are learning from each other and states are looking towards November to see if they can make this all work better.

PITA: Great, I should mention to our listeners that you are working on a project of a scorecard looking ahead to the November elections, you're examining sort of the state-by-state readiness about whether they're going to be ready to go for this. It's going to be coming out either next week or the week after. So, let folks know to look out for that.

What are some of the lessons that states should be taken away from this? What changes have we seen so far that they need to make and what systems do they need to get place in time for the general election?

KAMARCK: Well, there's a couple. First of all, many states have already moved to a system called "no excuse" absentee balloting, where you don't have to bother giving them a doctor's orders or, you know, some excuse from your mother. You just, if you want an absentee ballot, you simply get it.

States have to have the money ready to print an unprecedented number of absentee ballots. Congress in the first pandemic bill did include some money for states. Nobody thinks it's nearly enough, so perhaps they'll get some more money in a second pandemic bill if there is one. So they they've got to have money to print the ballots, send them out.

And then voters need to -- this is a two-way street right? Voters need to learn about voting absentee. There's lots of places where people really never liked to vote absentee. They didn't trust it, etc. And I think that it's incumbent on good government groups, not to mention the campaigns to get people to learn about how to do this, [to be] sure that their address was correct in the voter rolls, make sure that they are registered, etc., so that they can get their ballot in a timely manner and mail in their ballot, or return their ballot to a legal collection point.

One of the things we are scoring states on is the ease of getting an absentee ballot and also the lenience for counting those ballots when ballots arrive. So, some states say the ballot has to have

arrived by election day. Well, that means that if you forget about it and you mail in your ballot on the morning of election day, your vote may not be counted. More and more states are increasing the length of time after which your ballot is received that it can be counted. And that's pretty important and states are increasingly doing that.

We're scoring states on the ease of voting from home. Now, what we can't score states on, and it's also a big problem, is the ease of getting to an in-person voting [location]. Part of the reason for that is states don't announce their locations and until closer to November. But what we've learned from the past year is that two things are important, right? One is making it very easy vote. But the second thing that's important is having sufficient polling places for backups, because let's face it, things happen. People don't get their ballots or they've moved and the ballot goes to the wrong place, etc. So, you still need to have in-person polling places, and you have to have enough in-person polling places that people don't get discouraged and leave the polling place before voting.

PITA: Yeah, that's absolutely important. We're running a little long on time, but I guess I wanted to follow up and just ask you about also what states need to do to make sure that the electorate knows that the steps have been taken and that they can trust the system. There's rightly a lot of concern about voting suppression when you're voting process is so ragged. What can they do to help make sure that their constituents know that this is going to work one way or another?

KAMARCK: Well, one thing states are doing is that some states are using the barcode technology to allow for vote tracking, just like we track our packages from Amazon or UPS, to allow people to see if their ballot was received, if their ballot was counted. And I think voter tracking will be a very useful tool for people who are nervous about mail-in ballots. I think the other thing states are doing is they're opening up an increasing number of early voting locations. And early voting locations are really good for people who don't want to send in a ballot, but it also means that the more people who vote early at a variety of places, it means the less congestion on election day. Let's face it, the real issue here during voting during a pandemic is, we now know, it's been drilled into us a million times, we should not be in crowds with strangers in indoor spaces. Therefore, to the extent that vote from home and early voting can reduce the congestion at polling places, it means that fewer voters risk getting the virus, not to mention the poll workers.

Remember when it comes to a big presidential election, there's a lot of players. So each campaign is going to be very interested in making sure its voters vote and very interested in telling people how to vote correctly. Some campaigns may also engage in voter intimidation and try to confuse the voters. So, things could get a little wild as people are trying to educate voters and some people are trying to confuse the voters. It has happened before that rival campaigns have sent out messages to voters, giving them the wrong date of the primary. And some people believed it and didn't vote for or went to vote a day after the primary had been held. There's a lot of dirty tricks that go on in campaigns. There's a lot of voter suppression that takes place, particularly in African American communities because there is an incentive to suppress that vote, since it tends to be overwhelmingly a Democratic vote. There's just a lot of funny business that can go on with the vote and people have to be aware and alert.

PITA: All right, well, Elaine, thanks for talking to us today, we will keep an eye out for your scorecard in the coming weeks.

KAMARCK: Great. Thanks. Thanks a lot. Take care.