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D.C. Voting During COVID: Confusion, Frustration, and Unprecedented Challenges
*Auditor's report says improvements needed to improve mail-in voting,
registration, and communication with voters*

November 16, 2021 (WASHINGTON) The D.C. Board of Elections (DCBOE) was able to rectify many of the issues of the primary election during the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully conduct a largely by-mail general election in November 2020, but significant challenges and areas for improvement remain in the District's overall election processes, according to a new report by the D.C. Auditor.

The report, produced under contract by the Fors Marsh Group (FMG) election research unit is a comprehensive review of how elections were conducted throughout 2020 and includes findings and recommendations to improve by-mail ballots, address turnout and voting challenges, and ensure that all D.C. voters have the same access to and ease in voting.

"Last year's election cycle was clearly unprecedented," said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson. "While our team of election experts documented the serious frustrations voters experienced during the primary, we note the significant improvements made for the fall election and additional areas for future improvement."

The report found that D.C.'s June 2020 primary was marred by long lines at the polls and uncertainty about how to request, cast, and return an absentee ballot as COVID-19 spread. In the general election, the report found that the high rates of undeliverable by-mail ballots, as well as confusion about the process for requesting, returning, and tracking mail ballots, left many voters frustrated—and sharing their complaints via social media.

The report's key findings include:

By-mail ballots. Mail ballots were returned as undeliverable at a rate that far exceeded other by-mail states and jurisdictions, including those also implementing all vote by mail for the first time in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Undeliverable rates during the general election were particularly high in Wards 2 and 8 compared other wards. Undeliverable rates were notably higher for older registrations than those that had been added or updated more recently, suggesting information in registration records was not up to date for many long-time District voters.

Turnout. The District saw less growth in turnout compared to other states and the national average. Although turnout hit record highs in the 2020 general election nationwide and in most states, overall turnout was similar to that of the 2016 general election. Although by-mail accounted for more than half of the ballots cast District-wide, Wards 7 and 8 relied more on in-person voting options (early voting and Election Day voting) than did voters in other wards across D.C.

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Voting challenges. The vast majority of returned by-mail ballots were counted, and the percentage rejected was low compared to other all-vote-by-mail states; however, Wards 7 and 8 had the highest by-mail rejection rates of all wards in D.C. By-mail ballots from Ward 7 and 8 voters were primarily rejected because they were either returned late or lacked a signature and were far less likely to be categorized as “under review” due to a signature mismatch that could not be resolved through the ballot cure process than were rejected ballots from voters in other wards.

Registration. Online registration surpassed registration through the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) in 2020, likely due to DMV offices being closed or operating at limited capacity due to COVID and a concerted effort by DCBOE and other stakeholders to encourage residents to check and update their registration information using the online system. Wards 7 and 8 relied more on in-person registration methods (e.g., DMV) and less on online registration compared to the rest of the wards.

BOE communications. Voters mentioned on social media and elsewhere an ongoing lack of communication by DCBOE and that rather than proactively addressing issues and informing voters of changes DCBOE reacted to events “too little too late.” These challenges disproportionately impacted voters in certain wards, with Ward 8 residents experiencing more difficulties with the by-mail voting process.

The report’s recommendations include:

- Consider a rigorous evaluation of the content and usability of its website to ensure it meets voters’ needs.
- Ensure that voters can register to vote or update their voting address, and create reliable systems for voters to request, return and track a ballot.
- Make rigorous efforts to correct misinformation, including proactively providing updates when policy changes create confusion among voters; communicate early and often.
- DCBOE should seek to understand perceptions of by-mail voting, the specific challenges residents experienced that precluded them from returning a mail ballot, and how the system might be improved to become more trusted by and better meet the needs of residents.

FMG, based in Arlington, Va., has conducted large-scale initiatives focused on increasing the accuracy of election data, improving the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), shaping educational programs serving American students, and increasing awareness of the voter registration process for overseas voters.

This report is the second in a series of three. The first report in the series and also by FMG, [Fair Elections Program Amplified “Voices of Everyday Voters,”](#) looked at the impact that public campaign financing had in its first year of operation. A third report nearing completion by the ODCA staff is a statutorily required financial audit of the Fair Elections Program.

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