Coronavirus freezes Democratic presidential campaign as states postpone primaries

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The contest for the Democratic presidential nomination has been effectively shut down as the two remaining candidates, former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Bernie Sanders, have been compelled to stop all in-person campaign activities and 14 states have postponed scheduled primaries or turned them into mail ballot-only events.

The states that have delayed primaries include New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Georgia, four of the largest in terms of convention delegates, as well as Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Rhode Island and Wyoming, as well as the US territory of Puerto Rico.

As a result, Biden and Sanders remain with the roughly same number of convention delegates that they had as a result of voting through March 17, 1,217 for Biden and 914 for Sanders, with 1,991 required for the Democratic presidential nomination. Based on the revised schedule of primaries—assuming that holds, which is in grave doubt—Biden would not be able to clinch the nomination before June 2, unless Sanders drops out and endorses him.

The only state scheduled to vote in April which is still pushing ahead with a primary is Wisconsin, where voting is to take place on Tuesday, April 7, under conditions where 1,550 people have already contracted coronavirus and 25 have died. Tens of thousands of voters have asked for mail ballots, overwhelming state election offices, while thousands of poll workers have indicated they will not staff polling stations on election day.

While the state's Democratic governor, Tony Evers, belatedly asked for the conversion of the primary to a mail-only vote, as the extent of the coronavirus epidemic has become apparent, the Republican-controlled state legislature refused. It also rejected requests to lift photo ID requirements for mail-in voters, extend early in-person voting, and extend the deadline for returning absentee ballots.

The apparent political motivation was the Republican Party's desire to insure the reelection of a Republican justice of the state supreme court, Daniel Kelly, in what is certain to be a low-turnout election, with voting particularly low in Milwaukee and Madison, where the coronavirus outbreak is concentrated in the state.

"They have cynically calculated that lower turnout will help the conservative candidate," Jay Heck, executive director of Common Cause in Wisconsin told the *Washington Post*. This is a criminally stupid reason for endangering the lives of potentially hundreds of thousands of people.

It is not certain that the primary will actually be held, as there are multiple lawsuits seeking to force a postponement on public health grounds. Wisconsin is the only one of 11 states with primaries or caucuses set for April which has not either postponed the vote or turned it into a mail-only contest.

Hawaii's scheduled April 4 primary has been converted to mail-only. Alaska and Wyoming will vote the same way on April 10 and April 17 respectively. All the states scheduled to vote on April 28, in what was described as a "northeast primary"—Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island—have postponed their primaries until June.

June 2 is now being described as a slightly smaller edition of "Super Tuesday," with Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Connecticut all scheduled to hold elections, and nearly 700 convention delegates to be chosen. But there is little certainty that these contests will take place, given the expected impact of the COVID-19 epidemic.

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Primaries March 17 in Arizona, Florida and Illinois gave a glimpse into the potential impact of the coronavirus on the election. Florida and Arizona are among states where a significant share of voters participate in early voting. According to the most recent data, that percentage has increased from last year along with overall turnout in the two states. Illinois, which has lower rates of mail voting and early voting, experienced a 25 percent decrease in turnout, the worst of any state this year compared to 2016.

Election officials stated the trio of primaries demonstrated the need to expand alternative balloting. They said conducting the majority of balloting through the mail would be the most effective measure states could take. Currently, only Washington, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Hawaii hold elections entirely by mail.

An additional 28 states and the District of Columbia offer “no-excuse” voting by mail, which allows any voter to request an absentee ballot. States with stricter laws require voters to provide an “excuse” for being unable to vote in person, in order to get an absentee ballot.

There have been suggestions that the general election in November would have to be conducted entirely by mail ballot, but the $2.2 trillion congressional bailout for corporate America, enacted by a near-unanimous bipartisan vote, provided only a down payment for such an effort, about $400 million to assist states which decide to switch to mail-in voting. The cost of such an effort nationwide is estimated at $2 billion.

The primary postponements now threaten a conflict between some of the hardest-hit states and the Democratic National Committee, whose chairman Tom Perez has insisted that the June 9 deadline for selecting convention delegates cannot be altered, even though New York state and the District of Columbia have already postponed their primary dates to June 23.

Perez has pushed back against states moving their primary dates past June 9. In a statement he said that states should focus on expanding no-excuse absentee voting and vote by mail “instead of moving primaries to later in the cycle, when timing around the virus remains unpredictable.”

Based on current DNC rules, New York’s decision to hold its primary after the election could result in the state’s number of delegates being reduced by 50 percent.

On Tuesday, however, Biden seemed to pull the rug out from under Perez, by suggesting, in an interview on MSNBC, that the Democratic National Convention itself was unlikely to be held on the dates set, July 13-16, and in the traditional form, as a gathering of thousands of delegates and tens of thousands of media, party operatives, lobbyists and onlookers.

When asked whether the convention could go ahead on the schedule set by the DNC last year, Biden said, “It’s hard to envision that.” He pointed out that the original date was decided on in relation to the Summer Olympic Games, set for July 24, which have now been canceled, indicating that the convention could be put back as long as a month.

The Democratic frontrunner flatly rejected any suggestion that the pandemic could interfere substantially with the 2020 election calendar. “We ought to be able to do what we were able to do in the middle of the Civil War all the way through to World War II—have Democratic and Republican conventions and primaries and elections, and still have public safety,” he said. “We’re able to do both.”

As in previous interviews and statements, Biden declined to hold Trump responsible for the mass deaths which the coronavirus threatens in America, saying only that if he were president he would be cooperating more with the state governors and mobilizing the military and private industry, rather than using press conferences to bait his political opponents and praise himself.

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