



Kansas 2020 Democratic Party Primary: A Case Study



"How a team of four at the start, with no previous experience running an election, in less than six months pulled off the first Presidential primary in state history, using centralized ballot processing and the advice of experts, resulting in turnout in the top tier nationally, while staring down a pandemic."

A fateful decision

In April 2019, Vicki Hiatt realized her newest and largest hurdle. She had recently stepped up to her position as Chair of the Kansas Democratic Party (KDP), and from her prior years as Vice Chair she had seen enough to know things needed to change.

She was convinced the caucus process of picking a Presidential candidate was past its prime. Asking people to travel long distances, to stand in line for hours in a dusty gym, was inconvenient at best. Thousands of interested party members missed out on participation. In fact, in the 2016 cycle, just 8.7% of the over 400,000 registered Kansas Democrats showed up. That was not the level of involvement and inclusion she was looking for.

On the other hand, there were parts of the caucus model she did not want to lose. The spirit and excitement of people showing up to support their favorite candidate, and then if that candidate did not make the threshold of viability adjusting to their next most favorite choice, appealed to her. And she was well aware that there were about 20 candidates running for President on the Democratic side at the time. Even if the field had winnowed by the following spring, she expected there might be four or five left standing. And of course, there was a possibility one or more of those remaining might drop out right in the middle of her process. How to deal with that so no one's vote was rendered moot?

It is important to note that in Kansas, party primaries are run by the parties, with no help from the state elections department. So, whatever Hiatt and her team was going to do, they would have to do on their own. There would be no cache of available voting machines, no trained precinct poll workers, no experienced ballot processing folks. Oh, and no money either. Whatever it cost the Kansas Democrats would have to raise on their own.

Over the summer, the core team of KDP officers met to develop the Delegate Selection Plan which would drive the implementation of the Presidential Primary. By December when the Plan was approved by the Democratic National Committee (DNC), Hiatt and the KDP Executive Director Ben Meers (hired in July 2019) began working with consultants to plan the timeline for the project and design the ballot packet.

By late January 2020, Operations Director Josh Wasinger and Finance Director Brenna Duffy began the process of planning the space for the Election Headquarters and ordering supplies. In early February, two additional staff members were added to increase the team to six. Dwight Keeling, Presidential Primary Coordinator, would run the day to day operation of overseeing the Election Center and Reeves Oyster, Digital Media Coordinator, would connect with local and national media outlets to keep them apprised of the progress of the election and keep the voters up to date on



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changing procedures for voting. There were many others who provided support, but these were the core of now six people who would make it happen or be on the hook if it didn't.

One of the advantages the team had was living next to Colorado, where that state had decided in 2013 to conduct all their elections by mailing a ballot to every active registered voter. Hiatt's group could see that not only did that model work very well, but consistently positioned Colorado at the top of national turnout numbers. That addressed Hiatt's desire for higher involvement and inclusion. While not a core element, she was also aware that her counterparts in the Republican party were not going to hold a primary in 2020. Since Kansans could re-register party affiliation as they wished, she hoped an easy to exercise option where a ballot was going to arrive by mail might encourage some unaffiliated voters and even a few moderate Republicans to sign up, and that could expand the base of her party.

On the "many candidates" side of things, KDP Secretary George Hanna introduced her to the notion of the Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) model that had been adopted statewide in Maine. It easily allowed for the adjustment of cast ballots to drop off candidates whose support did not reach the needed threshold and assign those votes to the voter's next most favorite candidate. It was the caucus model without the lines and dusty gym.

On September 18, 2019, Hiatt and Meers met with respected local County Clerk, Jamie Shew at a favorite Dem-leaning bohemian hangout, Aimee's Coffee House in Lawrence. The decision was made. They would go with a 100% mailed-out ballot model, offering full pre-paid return postage, with an in-person caucus option on May 2, 2020 for those who wanted to do things the old-fashioned way, and use RCV for the vote-tallying model. Although supportive, Jamie maintained an element of concern when he stated, "Pulling this off will be a great legacy for both of you....or it won't!"

Of course, they did not know, no one knew, that six months later they would be conducting an election in the middle of the worst pandemic in 100 years. But, looking back, the decision to build in the resilience of a full mailed-out ballot election model would appear prescient.

Calling in the pros

As is so often the case, deciding is easier than doing. The team realized they needed assistance to both plan and then execute their new "vote at home" plus RCV approach.

From Colorado, they tapped Amber McReynolds, CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI), who previously had run Denver's mailed-out ballot elections for over a dozen years and even helped write the 2013 Colorado bill.

Rob Richie and Scott Siebel from FairVote brought the expertise in implementing ranked choice voting, supplemented later by Maria Perez who organized voter training sessions.

They would leverage Whitney Quesenbery for the detailed ballot envelope and insert materials with best practice guidelines from the Center for Civic Design to make sure voters had a clear understanding of what to do.



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Jennifer Morrell from the Democracy Fund was asked to help conduct a risk-limiting audit (RLA) at the end to make sure they had counted the ballots properly. (they did)

A number of vendors were called upon to lend their support. K&H printing handled the centralized envelope and ballot preparation including individualized Intelligent Mail Barcodes (IMB's), while Dominion Voting Systems would handle the centralized ballot scanning and tallying.

Nathaniel Parks directed the oversight and implementation of this project. Julia Barnes provided critical strategic direction across the administration and fundraising, as well as worked closely with FairVote on daily oversight. Elizabeth Jaff led a national fundraising effort, highlighting Kansas's historic primary to election reform advocates and interested national donors. The KDP focused primarily on in-state fundraising from Kansas Democrats. Most notably, the Johnson County Dems (and Chair Nancy Leiker) contributed a sizable matching donation. Additionally, Ethel Edwards, Shawnee County Democratic Chair provided volunteers and staff for ballot processing. And there were others, too.

Managing the pieces – in a pandemic

While it didn't always seem that way at the time, things went relatively smoothly from late September 2019 to March 2020. But by then, the impact of the COVID-19 virus was being felt nationwide. Other states were postponing their primaries or trying to shift to more "absentee" ballots at the last minute. Some even discussed cancelling altogether.

In early March, as news of possible travel limitations and even shutdowns swept the country, Hiatt placed a late-night phone call (something that had become commonplace in their work!) to Meers and asked solemnly, "This isn't so much a work call, but a personal call: how bad do you think this really going to get?"

Vicki knew Ben had completed his Master's work in Public Health (a career contingency plan that never materialized). Meers had actually specifically studied epidemiology and public health behavior in Europe from 2008-2010. Rising cases of infection, news from Europe and the US's slow response had him concerned about the likelihood of a "stay-at-home" order and what would happen if the planned in-person caucus sites were unavailable.

Sure enough, on March 30, Dwight Keeling received bad news: six of the planned in-person voting sites had canceled (Cedar Wellness Center in McPherson; Pittsburg State University Overman Student Center; Bethel College in Newton; Hocker Grove Middle School in Shawnee; Indian Creek Technology Center in Shawnee Mission and Kansas City Kansas Community College in Kansas City). The in-person option was falling apart.

By then, as is their monthly practice, the team had already obtained the full state voter file from the Kansas Secretary of State's office, had passed it off to the DNC in Washington, D.C. for any clean-up needed, and then provided the "scrubbed" list to K&H to print the ballots and envelopes. So, pandemic or not, they were ready to proceed with the distribution of the materials.



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Less than a week after Governor Kelly issued a statewide stay-at-home order to begin Monday March 30 at 12:01 a.m. (issued on March 28), in a rare in-person meeting necessitated by the delivery of Party computer supplies, Vicki and her husband and Ben sat on Vicki's back porch in western Shawnee,

Kansas, keeping six feet apart, while they watched the dog cavort in the backyard. Over a beer (or was it two?) they decided to pull the plug on all the in-person caucus sites. Instead, they would pivot from a "postmarked by" days before the primary to a later "received by" mailed-ballot date. The final plan: ballots would be mailed on April 7 and needed to be received by May 2. They also added supplemental mailings to include late-Party registrants and people reporting not having received their ballot.

And then the fun really began. As Ben said, "There is this thing about large numbers. When you mail out over 400,000 ballots, if even 1% of people have a question, that's 4,000 phone calls!" Without any centralized office as everyone was sheltering at home, handling that level of workflow was daunting. And those phone messages included everything under the sun: from which pen to use, to could they save the party postage by applying their own stamp, to confused registered Republicans screaming that they never received their ballots.

The team did its best to meet via Zoom. But when it comes to processing ballots, that is an in-person task. And the enormity of the effort had everyone working every day in April, Easter included. Approaches were taken to keep everyone safe. But it was still worrisome.

There were some odd moments along the way. The Kansas Democrats' office is in part of a hotel complex. The hotel owner is a former party chair and it was one of the few hotels that stayed open as everything else shut down. So, the team rented out some rooms to handle the ballot sorting and processing. For security, all the rooms had hard copy physical keys, not digital entry, and were clearly marked "Do Not Enter" – with motion activated security cameras set up for added protection.

A few days after the ballots went out, but while none had arrived back yet, one of the cameras triggered at about 2AM. It turns out a member of the hotel cleaning staff had walked in, looked around at the empty tables and chairs, but noticed a supply of Clorox and sanitizing wipes that were on hand to make sure the ballot processing staff would be able to stay safe. Off they went with the cleaning person.

Other trials of real-life election management included a couple who literally microwaved their ballots and sent a photo in asking for replacements, and a person who sent back a completed anonymized ballot but in a plain envelope with just a bed and breakfast logo in the corner.

While you would never do this in an official state-run election, the team looked up that address in their master voter file and discovered there were three voters registered there: one Democrat, one unaffiliated and one Republican. The latter two clearly had not been sent a ballot, and research of the return records showed the former had not come through with a signed official return envelope. So, in the interest of inclusion, the ballot was accepted.

Speaking of identification, again while best practices in a state-run election would mandate full signature verification against those on file, in the case of a party-run primary, there was no such file. So,



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the team simply matched the voter-specific barcode on the envelope with the Secretary of State's voter file to ensure only one vote per person was accepted.

One thing that almost bit the group was an overlooked part of the process: scanning those barcodes. No one ever mentioned it might be a good idea to have some automated barcode scanners in place

when the return ballots started arriving. Hand checking over 100,000 ballots would have buried the team. Fortunately, some nice allies in Maine's Democratic Party overnighted some scanners on loan and the panic passed. This speaks to the need to really lay out a detailed workflow plan with every step and every processing station identified to avoid last minute scrambles.

Before we get to the results, a word about the cost. The bill came in at about \$700,000, or thought of another way, about the usual annual operating budget for the state party. So, there is a good reason the fund-raising people got some shout-outs at the beginning of this case. It was no small lift. But there were also savings from not having to rent and staff the 50 caucus sites.

Celebrating success

Joe Biden won the 2020 Kansas Democratic primary. But that was not big news as by the time the primary was underway, all the other candidates had suspended their campaigns. What was big news was the turnout. As folks in the business of conducting elections like to say, "It's not about who wins. It's about who votes!" Here are the results, compared to the 2016 caucus.

Year	Registered Voters	Votes Cast	Turnout %
2016 (caucus)	~450,000	39,266	8.7%
2020 (primary)	423,000	146,873	34.7%

Not only was this a stunning success in absolute comparison to 2016, it was notable on the national level. At 34.7% turnout Kansas ranked in the top half of all primaries conducted as of May 2020, and easily beat nearby Oklahoma (29%), Arkansas (28%), Texas (25%) and Missouri (23%). Only Nebraska (39%) can get bragging rights, and they had 11 counties voting all by mailed-out ballots, too. Of course, we are not considering Colorado, with their well-oiled, state-run, mailed-out ballot machine which led the nation in turnout in 2020 (53%).

As Vicki Hiatt remarked at the end of the interview to gather the information for this case study, "It could have gone better, but not by much!"

Note: on the following pages are examples of the materials mailed to Kansas voters in this election.

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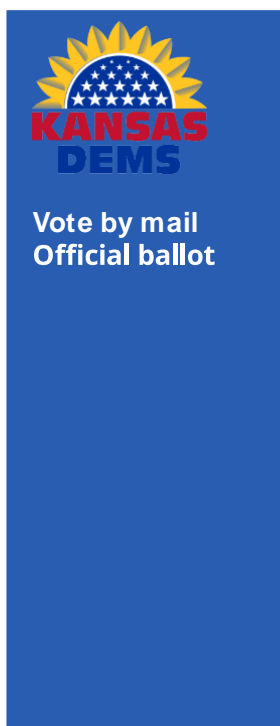
© 2020 National Vote at Home Institute. The NVAHI is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to serving policy makers, elections officials, and in this instance party officers serving as elections officials in helping them institute best-practices policy, plan and conduct secure and efficient elections offering voters the benefit of higher levels of mailed-out ballots.



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Outgoing ballot envelope



Kansas Democratic Party
P.O. Box 1914
Topeka, KS 66601




RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Official Ballot Enclosed

Valentina Voter
5678 MLK Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999-1234


Vote by mail official ballot
Postmark your ballot by April 24, 2020

Contact information

 Kansas Democratic Party
501 SE Jefferson St, STE 30
Topeka, KS 666017

 <https://kansasdems.org>

 info@kansasdems.org

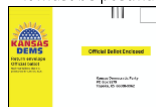
 (785) 234-0425

How to return your ballot



Vote by Mail

Mail your ballot in the yellow postage paid envelope. Make sure to return early - it must be postmarked by April 24, 2020.



Caucus Day Location

Drop off your ballot in person prior to Caucus at your caucus location.

To find your caucus day location, visit:
<https://kansasdems.org/2020primary>



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Return ballot envelope



Official Ballot Enclosed

**Kansas Democratic Party
PO Box 8879
Topeka, KS 66608-9962**



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STOP! Did you...

- ☐ Sign the voter's declaration in your own handwriting?
- ☐ Put your ballot in the envelope?



Voter's declaration

I swear under penalty of perjury that I am a registered voter in the State of Kansas and eligible to vote in the presidential preference primary of the Democratic Party of Kansas, that I have not previously voted in this presidential preference primary election, and that I am not voting in any other jurisdiction for this presidential preference primary election.

Voter, sign here in ink. Power of attorney is not acceptable.

X

Date (MM/DD/YYYY)

Print name

If you are unable to sign, make your mark and have a witness sign below:

Witness, sign here _____



phone: (785) 234-0425



web: <https://kansasdems.org/2020primary>



email: info@kansasdems.org

**VOTER RESIDENTIAL
ADDRESS**



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SAMPLE BALLOT ONLY



Official Ballot Kansas Democratic Party 2020 Presidential Preference Primary

May 2, 2020

Instructions for marking a Ranked Choice Ballot

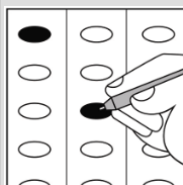
To rank your candidates, fill in the oval:

- In the 1st column for your 1st choice.
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice.
- In the 3rd column for your 3rd choice.

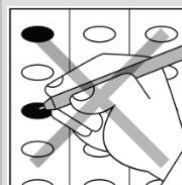
Making selections:

Rank candidates in the order of your choice.

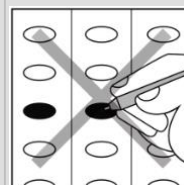
You may rank as many or as few candidates as you wish, up to 5 choices.



Fill in the oval completely.



No more than one oval in a column.



No more than one oval for a candidate.

For the Democratic Nomination for President of the United States

	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Joseph R. Biden	<input type="radio"/> ¹	<input type="radio"/> ²	<input type="radio"/> ³	<input type="radio"/> ⁴	<input type="radio"/> ⁵
Elizabeth Warren	<input type="radio"/> ¹	<input type="radio"/> ²	<input type="radio"/> ³	<input type="radio"/> ⁴	<input type="radio"/> ⁵
Tulsi Gabbard	<input type="radio"/> ¹	<input type="radio"/> ²	<input type="radio"/> ³	<input type="radio"/> ⁴	<input type="radio"/> ⁵
Bernie Sanders	<input type="radio"/> ¹	<input type="radio"/> ²	<input type="radio"/> ³	<input type="radio"/> ⁴	<input type="radio"/> ⁵
Uncommitted	<input type="radio"/> ¹	<input type="radio"/> ²	<input type="radio"/> ³	<input type="radio"/> ⁴	<input type="radio"/> ⁵

SAMPLE BALLOT ONLY



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Secrecy Sleeve



How and when to return your ballot

- Mail your ballot so that it is received by Saturday, May 2, 2020.



Your Presidential Primary vote

This ballot is only valid for the Democratic Presidential Primary. Voting for President in the general election will occur on Tuesday, November 3, 2020.

Learn more about voting by mail in Kansas at:
<http://www.sos.kansas.gov/elections/registration-voting/>



Have questions? Get in touch!



Kansas Democratic Party
501 SE Jefferson St, STE 30
Topeka, KS 66607



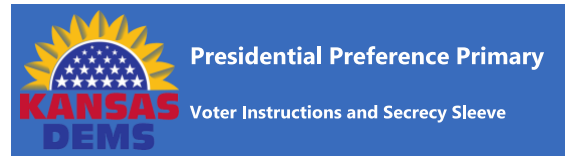
<https://kansasdems.org>



info@kansasdems.org



(785) 234-0425



What is in my vote by mail ballot packet?

- Official ballot
- Voter instructions/secrecy sleeve
- Official return envelope

To return your ballot:



Vote by Mail

Mail your ballot so that it is received by Saturday, May 2, 2020. Use the enclosed prepaid return envelope.

Learn how to mark your ranked choice ballot

KANS05020002 - SECRECY E





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Fill in your ranked choice ballot

How do I fill in my ranked choice ballot?

When you fill in your ballot make sure to:

- fill in no more than one oval per column
- fill in no more than one oval per candidate

1. Fill in the oval completely for your first choice candidate in the column labeled '1st choice.'
2. Fill in the oval for your second choice candidate in the column labeled '2nd choice.'
3. Continue until you have ranked as many candidates as you want, up to five choices.

For President 4 Year Term (Rank candidates in order of your choice)	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Washington, George	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jefferson, Thomas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hamilton, Alexander	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adams, Abigail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

More info on ranked choice voting

- Ranking more candidates does not count against your 1st choice candidate.
- Continue until you have marked as many candidates as you want, up to five choices. Ranking more than one candidate does not hurt your 1st choice candidate. Lower ranked candidates are backups that are reviewed only if your top choice does not receive 15% of the vote in your Senate District.
- For more on how ballots are tallied, visit our party's website at:
<https://kansasdems.org/2020primary>

Mark, seal and sign your ballot

How do I complete and package my ballot?

1. Find full instructions on your ballot.
2. Mark your ballot using only a black or blue pen.
3. Tear and remove the top stub of your ballot along the perforation.
4. Refold your marked ballot and place it inside this secrecy sleeve.
5. Place the ballot and secrecy sleeve into the official return envelope.
6. Write your name and the address where you are registered to vote in the return address space on the official return envelope.
7. *Do not* put your name or any other identifying marks on the secrecy sleeve.
8. *Do not* place anything other than the secrecy sleeve and ballot into the official return envelope.
9. Sign and date the affidavit of voter located on the back of the official return envelope.
10. Seal the envelope flap.

