

Michigan Update Report

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Introduction

Michigan held its biennial state primary—including contests for Senate, the federal House of Representatives, the state legislature, and local offices—on August 6. Unlike the February 27 presidential preference primary, state primaries were held for both major parties, and nearly two million voters showed up to the polls to make their voices heard. This brief update to our late-July report¹ discusses three election administration headlines, explains what the data shows us about turnout in the state primary, and provides an update on Michigan voter registration.

Election Headlines

1. Four people allegedly voted twice in Macomb County’s St. Clair Shores, a suburb of Detroit. The double-votes were identified in the contest’s paper trail and in the voter file and were immediately brought to the County Prosecutor’s office. The Michigan Attorney General filed charges against all four voters and three involved assistant municipal clerks.²
2. In May, the board of canvassers of Delta County—a small jurisdiction in the Upper Peninsula—initially refused to certify its results for a local election, contravening state law and the Michigan Constitution. While they eventually reversed course and certified the election, the incident illustrates a potential source of controversy ahead of the high-profile November presidential contest in Michigan.³ One Michigan county canvasser—this time, from Kalamazoo County—threatened to vote against certification in November, though he later agreed to certify.⁴
3. Storms resulted in power outages in some of the state’s largest counties, including Kent, Kalamazoo, Oakland, and Macomb Counties, which left some precincts temporarily without electricity. Affected voters were directed to alternate polling locations, and all their votes were counted appropriately.⁵

State Primary Turnout

¹ Janaki Kapadia, “Michigan 2024 State Report, https://www.elexcentral.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/MI-state-report_EPC_2024.pdf

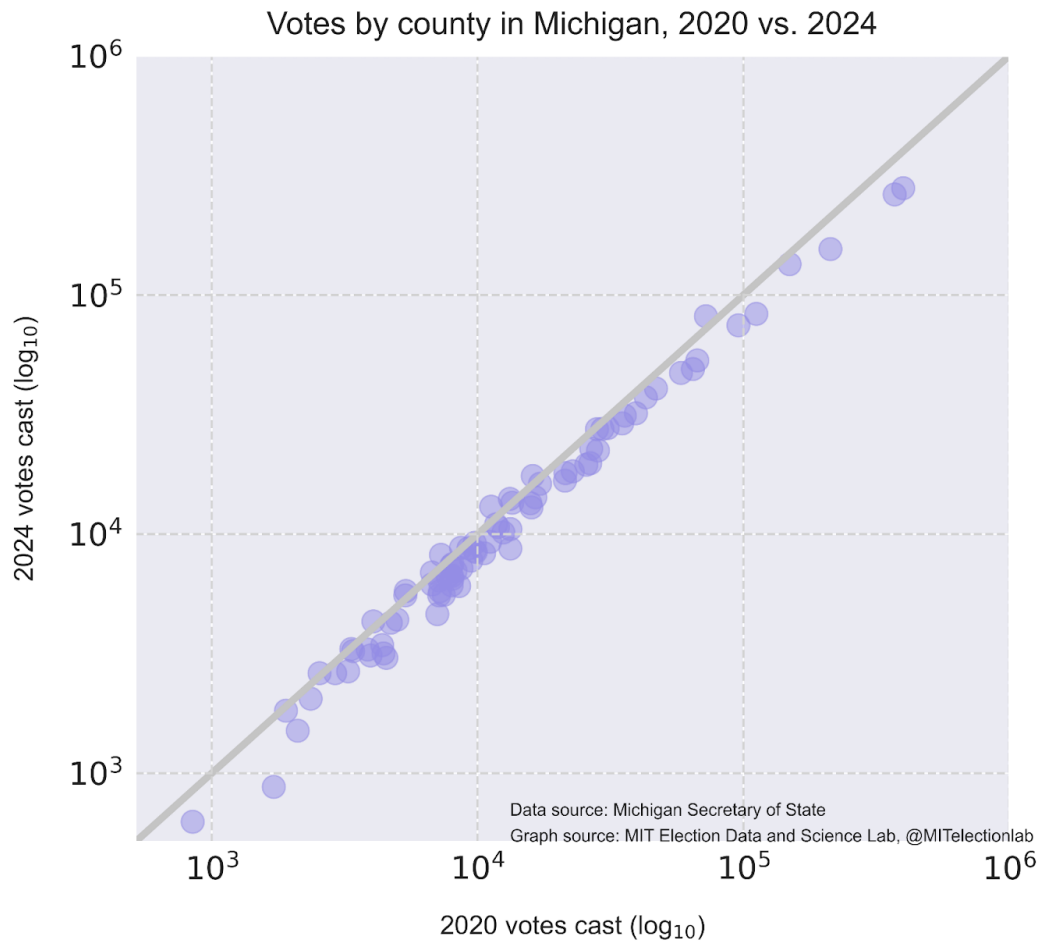
² <https://www.votebeat.org/michigan/2024/08/20/double-voting-macomb-county-michigan-st-clair-shores-voter-fraud/>; <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2024/09/04/no-charges-in-alleged-double-voting/75069270007/>; <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/macomb-county/2024/10/04/michigan-attorney-general-dana-nessel-charges-voters-clerks-double-voting-macomb-county-pete-lucido/75511947007/>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/michigan-county-refuses-to-certify-vote-growing-election-threat/>

⁴ <https://michiganadvance.com/2024/09/04/aclu-sues-kalamazoo-county-election-official-after-certification-comments/>; <https://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/2024/09/kalamazoo-county-election-official-agrees-to-certify-election-aclu-drops-lawsuit.html>

⁵ <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/08/07/michigan-august-primary-election-recap-results-winners-losers/74695599007/>

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20240828213904/https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/08/07/michigan-august-primary-election-recap-results-winners-losers/74695599007/>)

Figure 1: Votes by County in 2020 and 2024

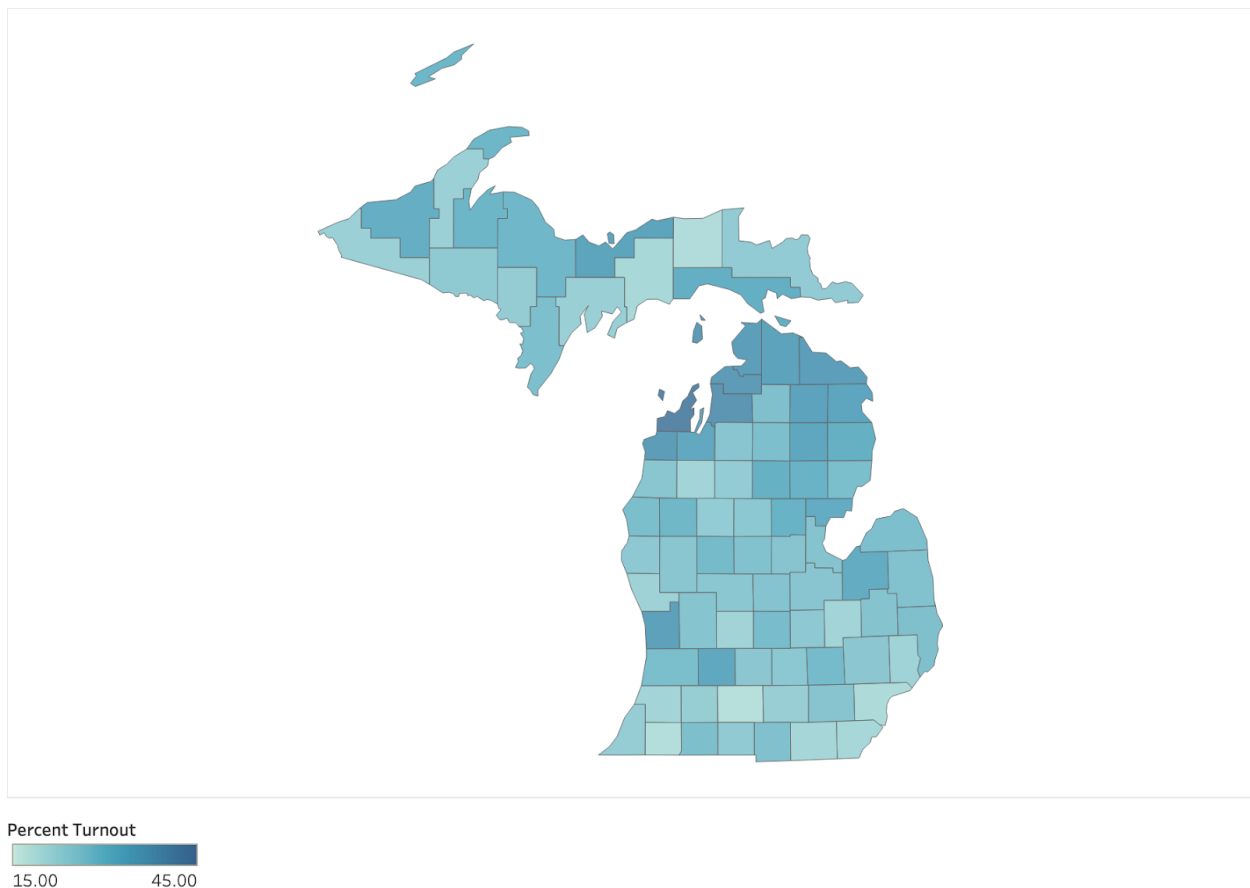
Turnout in the state primary was low, at around 24%, with 2,021,691 votes cast.⁶ This is a decline from 2020's state primary, in which 2,520,850 voters participated.⁷ This decline is particularly notable given that the 2020 state primary was conducted amidst a public health crisis; the 2024 primary was not. The plot above shows changes in the number of votes cast in each county between the two state primaries, while the map below depicts

⁶ <https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/nancy-kaffer/2024/08/07/michigan-primary-results-election-analysis-wins-mike-rogers-elissa-slotkin/74694792007/>
(<https://web.archive.org/web/20240808063233/https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/nancy-kaffer/2024/08/07/michigan-primary-results-election-analysis-wins-mike-rogers-elissa-slotkin/74694792007/>),
<https://mvic.sos.state.mi.us/votehistory/Index?type=C&electionDate=8-6-2024>
(<https://web.archive.org/web/20240829225126/https://mvic.sos.state.mi.us/votehistory/Index?type=C&electionDate=8-6-2024>)

⁷ https://mielections.us/election/results/2020PRI_CENR_TURNOUT.html
(https://web.archive.org/web/20240515191121/https://mielections.us/election/results/2020PRI_CENR_TURNOUT.html)

turnout in each county. These data show a sizable turnout differential over time and between regions. First, the highest-turnout counties in the August 2024 state primary were mostly in Northern Michigan, led by counties like Leelanau and Berrien, where turnout was 10 percentage points higher than the statewide average. These counties also had the greatest growth in vote totals since 2020's state primary. Second, the largest declines from 2020's primary—and some of the lowest turnout figures in 2024—came from the Detroit metropolitan area, home to many of the state's largest counties. There were about 120,000 fewer votes cast in Detroit's Wayne County in 2024's state primary compared to 2020; turnout was just 19%. A similar trend was observed in Southeastern Michigan counties around Detroit. In Oakland County, 110,000 fewer votes were cast in 2024's state primary than in 2020's, and turnout was 25%; in Macomb County, the decline in votes was around 55,000 and turnout was just 21,000; and in Washtenaw County, there were 30,000 fewer votes cast in the 2024 primary, with 26 percent turnout.

Figure 2: Michigan State Primary 2024 Turnout



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growth in vote totals since 2020's state primary. Second, the largest declines from 2020's primary—and some of the lowest turnout figures in 2024—came from the Detroit metropolitan area, home to many of the state's largest counties. There were about 120,000 fewer votes cast in Detroit's Wayne County in 2024's state primary compared to 2020; turnout was just 19%. A similar trend was observed in Southeastern Michigan counties around Detroit. In Oakland County, 110,000 fewer votes were cast in 2024's state primary than in 2020's, and turnout was 25%; in Macomb County, the decline in votes was around 55,000 and turnout was just 21,000; and in Washtenaw County, there were 30,000 fewer votes cast in the 2024 primary, with 26 percent turnout.

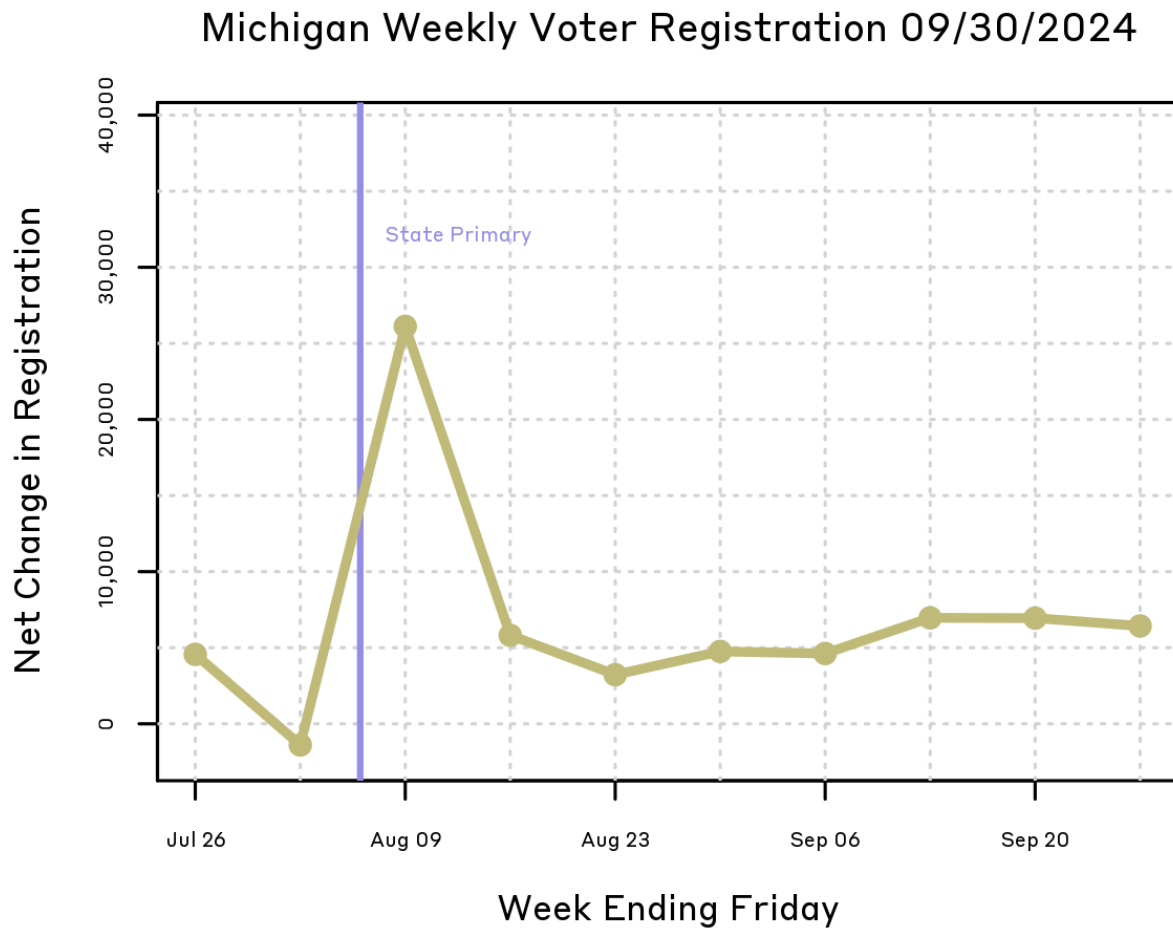
Only around a quarter of Michigan voters turned out to vote. Still, the state primary's turnout was slightly higher than the February presidential primary contests, when 1,919,002 voters turned out—a difference of about 100,000 voters. The number of votes cast declined in three suburban Detroit-area counties (Macomb, Oakland, and Livingston); increases were most significant in Northern Michigan and along the Lake Michigan coast, where turnout in the state primary was also highest.

The difference in turnout between the two primaries is likely due to a few factors. First, President Biden was running in a nearly uncompetitive contest; his most successful challenger was “Uncommitted.” Second, while former president and significant frontrunner Trump did face a competitor in Nikki Haley, only 16 delegates were available—compared to the 39 delegates to be awarded without a primary at the state party-run caucus convention. Meanwhile, there were competitive congressional and legislative districts on the ballot in the August primary.

Voter Registration

We are tracking voter registrations in Michigan in advance of the November general election, with a weekly tracker beginning in late July. As shown in the plot below, Michigan added about 5,000 voters to its registration lists in the last week of July. Following a tiny decrease right before the August primary, registration spiked as 25,000 voters were added between August 2 and August 9. This is likely in part due to same-day registration, given that the state primary occurred during this window. Registrations have stabilized, with around 5,000 voters being added each week.

Figure 3: Net Changes in Voter Registration Totals



Data Source: Michigan Department of State, michigan.gov/sos/elections
 Graph Source: MIT Election Data and Science Lab, @MITelectionlab

Conclusion

Michigan enters the final stretch of the 2024 general election season largely ready for the contentious November general election, though some vulnerabilities have been exposed. First, some county canvassers have demonstrated a willingness to refuse—at least initially—to certify election results in the state, which could produce uncertainty in the minds of voters and a chaotic legal environment immediately after the election. Second, Michigan voters and election administrators are still learning to work with a new set of election policies and options, including statewide early voting. While the state primary generally ran smoothly, turnout was low; presidential turnout rates, featuring around five million voters instead of the two million who voted in August, will put these new procedures to the test.