Policy Responses to COVID-19

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Conducting Elections During the Pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic presents major challenges for US elections. Measures necessary to protect the public and prevent the spread of the virus, like shelter-in-place orders, quarantine and self-isolation, as well as fear of infection will keep many Americans away from polling places. Those who choose to or need to vote in-person will have to navigate lines and indoor voting locations that place people in close proximity, and interact with high-touch surfaces. Poll workers, who are traditionally older and therefore more at risk, are now in short supply.

To ensure that national elections are able to proceed and all those who wish to vote may exercise that right, state and local election officials should:

- Consider whether they are able to sufficiently expand and adjust vote-by-mail capabilities to handle most ballots by mail by November, and if they plan to, start that work now;
- Roll out non-partisan voter education programs to provide clear guidance on vote-by-mail options, including phone support, mailers, and online content that provide remote help and step-by-step instructions for marking mail-in ballots;
- Adjust in-person voting by expanding early voting and election day voting hours; distributing personal protection equipment (PPE) to poll workers; adding to the roster of existing polling locations to make up for lost capacity due to the need for social distancing measures; creating well marked, safe, well ventilated locations for lines that enable physical distancing; and implementing measures that allow physical distancing while voting.

Background & Context

COVID-19 puts election officials in a tough spot. They must preserve the right to vote, while protecting both voters and poll workers from infection and honoring individuals' decisions to avoid the risk of in-person voting. Since social distancing, quarantine and isolation remain critical tools for controlling the spread of the coronavirus, states must quickly redesign their voting systems to allow people to cast their ballots while physically distanced or, should they choose, staying home.

The congregation of voters at polling locations, which may have longer than usual waiting times if they can accommodate fewer machines per location, could create new infection hotspots. Historical data show that during election years the spread of upper respiratory tract viral infections, like the common cold or flu, is no worse than during non-election years. This suggests that basic hygiene measures at poll locations might be sufficient to contain the spread of ordinary viruses. Yet, there is a lot we do not know about SARS-CoV-2. The virus is both more infectious and deadly than the common cold or flu, justifying more caution. Since it is spread between people through droplets released when coughing, sneezing or simply breathing out, indoor locations without proper ventilation are conducive to more infections. According to
a study of the effect of the April 2020 Wisconsin primary elections on the spread of COVID-19, in-person voting might be responsible for about 7.7% of the total number of new cases in the state in the five weeks after the elections. As more primary elections are taking place, researchers will be able to study these events and shed more light on whether in-person elections boost the spread of the novel coronavirus. But based on our knowledge as of now, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recommended switching to vote-by-mail when possible as a precautionary public health measure.

Regardless of the actual risks, fear of contracting COVID-19 while voting in-person is expected to decrease turnout rates. In addition, we can expect increasing numbers of people to be sick or quarantined and unable to reach polling places as the winter months set in. Groups of individuals most at risk of infection, like essential workers, or those that are most at risk if infected, like senior citizens and those with pre-existing health conditions, may be in effect disenfranchised if insufficient provisions are made for alternatives to the act of voting in-person. In the absence of proper measures to increase the number of polling places and adequately staff them, the precautionary measures to ensure physical distancing and sanitize voting facilities will slow down the process and create long lines that might further discourage eligible voters from casting their vote.

Policy Recommendations

1. Mail-in Ballots

   Expanded use of mail-in ballots, which could be accomplished in different ways, could help. Some states are dropping barriers to vote-by-mail to encourage voters to use this system. For example, in May, California’s governor issued an Executive Order in response to COVID-19, switching the state to all-mail elections for the 2020 General Election, for which all registered voters receive mail-in ballots by default. Other states have switched to “no-excuse” absentee voting systems, in which any voter can freely request a mail-in ballot without having to provide a reason, or have allowed voters to list concern over COVID-19, or the need to self-isolate or quarantine, as a valid reason for requesting an absentee ballot.

   Expanded vote-by-mail does have the potential to preserve close-to-normal voter participation levels. During Wisconsin’s April primary, for which vote-by-mail options were quickly expanded, voter turnout rates were in line with historical trends despite the COVID-19 outbreak. This can be directly attributed to expanded vote-by-mail options in the state: At least 71% of those who cast their ballots voted by mail, a substantial increase compared with previous years. Kentucky’s June primaries saw a boost in turnout that some commentators attribute to greater access to absentee voting.

   But massively scaling up mail in balloting is not simple, and can be bungled without careful planning. States must quickly evaluate their existing vote-by-mail capabilities, and make the strategic decision of whether it is feasible to fully scale up in time to heavily rely on vote-by-mail for November.
The Georgia primaries that took place on June 9th of this year serve as a cautionary tale. Georgia expanded absentee voting, and absentee ballot applications were mailed to all active voters. But managing a sudden increase in volume of both applications for and actual mail-in ballots created major implementation problems and delays.

Many Georgia primary voters did not receive the ballots they applied for. About one million voters did cast mail-in ballots, roughly 30 times the number of absentee ballots cast in the 2016 primary elections, an increase that overwhelmed officials. At the same time, election officials underestimated voters’ willingness to cast their ballots in person. In counties with large Black populations many polling stations were closed due to COVID-19 concerns. The result was hours-long lines in many, often majority-minority, districts.

Vote-by-mail also requires managing a complex logistical system that includes collecting voter information, such as eligibility, addresses and digitized signatures, large scale printing of ballots, preparing voter packages, and coordinating mailing and return with the Postal Service. There will be choke points. Observers are concerned that the Postal Service will not be able to handle vote-by-mail in 50 states at once. And, the election service industry, which usually handles the printing of ballots and provides the machinery for signature matching to confirm voter eligibility, currently does not have the capacity to serve all states simultaneously in a general election.

To avoid problems like those that arose in Georgia, successful management of vote-by-mail requires that election authorities understand, plan ahead for and address the unique operational challenges that vote-by-mail present; establish high cybersecurity standards to protect the upstream network of information necessary for its implementation; and establish a robust service infrastructure using post offices and other ballot drop off locations.

A conscious, planned effort must also be made to ensure that expanded vote-by-mail does not significantly change the composition of the group of people that cast their votes. Most studies of states that have implemented all-mail or “no-excuse” absentee voting show that vote-by-mail changes the aggregate demographics of those who vote to the disadvantage of low-income individuals and minorities.

Evidence from Oregon’s all-mail elections, a system that was introduced statewide in 1998, and California’s “no-excuse” absentee voting system, which existed in the state before its May 2020 Executive Order, suggests that expanded vote-by-mail can shift the demographics of the electorate toward people with higher incomes and better education levels. The evidence is not uniform: a recent study in Colorado found that vote-by-mail increased turnout compared with in-person voting, especially among traditionally underrepresented groups. But it is clear that, to avoid disadvantaging already underrepresented groups, states should take care to pair expansion of vote-by-mail with ancillary measures designed to make sure marginal voters can participate in voting by mail.
Such measures should include well designed voter education programs. Election authorities should design education programs and targeted informational campaigns that help voters learn to successfully cast their vote even without the type of in-person interactions some usually need. They can publish educational material online, but, further, should actively engage with less internet-savvy voters by contacting them by mail, phone or email, or, with proper safety precautions, conducting door-to-door educational campaigns. Election officials should also make sure to disseminate clear information on how to mail back the ballot, when it is due, and how late ballots will be handled by election offices.

Notarization or witnessing requirements should also be reconsidered. They have the potential to dampen uptake of vote by mail, especially among the elderly, lower socioeconomic strata voters and other disadvantaged groups. Many states—among them Alaska, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Virginia, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Alabama—currently require notarization of mail-in ballots for absentee voting or at least that the ballot envelope be signed by witnesses. These states should consider suspending these requirements during the pandemic, and instead verify voter identity by signature matching to decrease the burden on voters of casting their ballot via mail.

2. Adjustments to In-Person Voting

Given the hurdles to successful implementation of vote-by-mail, large numbers of voters will still need to vote in-person. States will therefore have to begin to prepare now for in-person voting that is adjusted to both protect public health, and accommodate large volumes of voters.

Solutions should include:

- **Spreading out the physical flow of voters** to allow for effective physical distancing while voting, by spacing out voting booths and setting them up in large well-ventilated gathering spaces (including school gyms, but also possibly arenas and other large civic spaces). If the particular state’s weather allows, election authorities should set up voting locations in outdoor areas, including, where possible, stadiums. This will help address what the evidence currently suggests—that the novel coronavirus is most easily spread in confined, enclosed spaces.

- **Adding to the roster of existing polling places** to maintain overall capacity. The need to allow for physical distancing within polling places will eliminate certain traditionally used spaces, and will mean fewer voters can be processed at those polling places that remain in service. Election officials need to start planning now to find additional polling locations to augment those they have used in the past, simply to maintain capacity, and avoid frustrating and potentially dangerous crowds.

- **Planning for and accommodating longer than usual lines.** With some polling places closed, most containing fewer voting machines than usual, and the speed of voting slowed by the need to clean machines between voters, lines will
contain more people than usual. To protect public health and preserve physical distancing, these lines will have to be shifted outdoors, and spread out to enable voters to stand six feet apart. Election authorities will have to make sure there are well marked, organized and safe locations for these lines, and may have to close certain polling locations that cannot accommodate such lines safely.

- **Extending the times available to vote.** Election officials should consider extending early-voting windows and extending voting hours on election day. Providing more time options to voters will decrease numbers of voters at peak hours, reducing the chance of contagion among large crowds of people. Authorities should also consider making election day a holiday, to decrease the peaks in voter turnout seen before and after the traditional work day.

  - **Recruiting poll workers widely** from segments of the population less threatened by COVID-19. To staff their polling locations, election officials tend to rely on retirees—a group more at risk of severe complications from COVID-19, and who have opted out of serving as poll workers in large numbers since the pandemic started. Election officials should start now to recruit and train younger and healthier individuals to allow more voting locations to remain open.

  - **Providing polling locations with ample PPE and cleaning and disinfecting supplies**, and training poll workers to both use those supplies and enforce prudent public health measures, such as physical distancing and wearing masks indoors.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people conduct almost every aspect of their lives, including the way they vote. As the November general election fast approaches, states and localities are being pushed to quickly adopt vote-by-mail\textsuperscript{27} as an alternative to potentially hazardous in-person voting, especially as subsequent waves of COVID-19 infections\textsuperscript{28} depress potential in-person turnout. However, states will need to quickly scale up and adapt their vote-by-mail systems to maintain accessibility and fairness. Election officials will also have to adjust in-person voting to protect public health and accommodate large volumes of voters to provide a back stop for vote-by-mail. States have just over four months to set up voting systems that are effective and safe—work that should begin now.
About the Author

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Dr. Carnovale researches, writes and develops content related to science-based policy and emerging technology for Science & Society. Prior to joining Science & Society, she was a researcher and instructor at the Energy, Resources and Environment Program of Johns Hopkins University, SAIS. An economist by training, Maria received her Ph.D. in Public Policy from Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy. She also holds an MS in Economics of Innovation and Technology and BA in Economics from Università Bocconi in Milan, Italy.
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