

Open Letter to Protect the 2020 Elections

As of June 2020, more than 1.4 million Americans have already been infected by the COVID-19 virus and more than 100,000 have died, with the death toll continuing to rise each day. We have not seen a challenge of this magnitude to our society in modern times, and our entire nation has been thrown into turmoil as we struggle to contain the spread and impact of the virus. Though states are slowly beginning to ease protections and restrictions, as public health experts and scientists, we know that this pandemic is far from over and will continue to impact our lives for months and years to come. One thing that is particularly concerning is the undeniable fact that COVID-19 will impact the upcoming fall elections in the United States, unless we prepare now.

If more than half of the 100 million plus voters initially [expected](#) to turnout in 2020 cast their votes in-person on Election Day, a self-inflicted spike in COVID-19 cases could overwhelm our healthcare system capacity. To mitigate this risk, we will need to ensure that voters have a range of options to cast their ballot that avoids lines and crowding on Election Day. We must encourage as many people as possible to voting absentee while creating as many in-person voting options as possible that are safe and compliant with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines in order to reduce the likelihood of lines and crowding on Election Day.

COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that causes [symptoms](#) ranging from cough, chills, and fever to breathing difficulties, muscle pain, and loss of taste and smell. Scientists often measure the contagiousness or transmissibility of infectious disease using an epidemiologic metric known as the [basic reproduction rate](#) (R_0). The value of R_0 for COVID-19 has [been shown](#) to be associated with [physical distancing](#). Coronaviruses spread mainly through respiratory droplets, and is effective at "[community spread](#)" where people may be infected in public spaces, including in and around polling places.

While there are many models predicting the progression of the pandemic, there is no doubt that COVID-19 will continue to fundamentally affect our economy and society until a reliable vaccine is developed and safely administered to millions of people nationwide. The [CDC](#) projects that death rates in several regions of the country will continue to increase at least into June, and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [warns](#) about the possibility of multiple future resurgences.

The timeline for COVID-19 vaccine development is uncertain and there is no guarantee that vaccines currently in development will make it through Phase III clinical trials. While multiple governments and private companies are currently pursuing promising potential formulas, clinical trials alone could take [12-18 months](#). Once the vaccine has been approved, administering it to millions of people will be a monumental task that will take many months.

In the meantime, there are significant portions of the US population that will continue to be at higher risk of infection. Older adults, who are more likely to be recruited as poll workers during elections, experience [higher rates](#) of severe illness and death. [Spatial clusters](#) of cases are found disproportionately in counties with greater non-white, uninsured, and high-poverty populations,

compounding the problem. These same populations are [more likely](#) to need in-person voting, illustrating the risk that the virus poses to the integrity of our election.

The accumulation of available science points to a triple threat to our health, our democracy, and the economy this November: vulnerable populations will need multiple options to participate in the election, and need to be encouraged to vote by mail when possible. Vote by mail also can reduce the risk of mild and asymptomatic spreaders interacting with other voters and elections workers on Election Day, further reducing the potential for more outbreaks. Without a substantial upgrade in the nation's capacity to conduct elections vote-by-mail, we risk a spike in transmission of the disease, which could require another round health and economic impacts, as well as potential shelter-at-home orders.

By [expanding access](#) to absentee ballots, we can ensure that voters, especially those at highest risk, can cast their ballots safely without leaving their homes. Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Washington have years of experience running near universal vote-by-mail elections, and their best practices should be adopted across the country. Recently, states such as Alaska and Kansas have shown that moving to vote-by-mail can overcome disruptions experienced by other states during the primary elections.

Unless states offer voters a range of options through which to submit completed ballots, many voters – particularly people of color, Native Americans, people with disabilities, limited-English proficient citizens, students, and other historically marginalized citizens – simply will not have equal access to the ballot box.

In addition, [millions of Americans](#), due to disability, lack of residential mail access, language access barriers, or other needs still need to vote in-person on or before Election Day. So we must expand access to early voting locations, days, and hours so that in-person voters can spread out across many locations and times and avoid high-risk scenarios such as crowded polling places. All of those in-person voting locations must be accessible and operated in compliance with the [CDC's](#) safety protocols for polling places. The federal [Election Assistance Commission](#) and data from the recent national election in South Korea also provide important guidelines on how we can optimize emergency resources.

The [Brennan Center for Justice](#) estimates that the average cost per voter to scale up vote-by-mail capacity ranges from \$12-\$14 per voter. Even using 2016 national voter registration estimates, the minimal cost for scaling up vote-by-mail ranges from \$1.9 billion to \$2.2 billion. This estimate includes costs for features that facilitate the vote-by-mail option, including secure absentee ballot request technology and improved absentee ballot processing, ballot tracking, secure drop boxes, and additional ballot processing facilities and staff. In order to advance progress, Congress must provide at least an additional \$3.6 billion in 2020 to help states adapt their voting systems for the current pandemic environment to ensure that we are able to safely and securely conduct our elections.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council, and Sector Coordinating Council's Joint COVID Working Group has developed a [timeline](#) to guide states in the many stages of preparation and recommend that

election officials start getting ready *now* in order to be prepared for November. The National Association of State Election Directors has collected these and many state and local government [resources](#) to aid election officials in the transition.

We know how to meet this challenge and can do so. We also know that states cannot move forward without adequate resources. Congress must now exercise its authority to empower state and local governments with the funding and guidance needed to ensure a safe and secure election, and states must immediately begin operationalizing the necessary changes as soon as possible to be prepared for the November election.

Respectfully yours,

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