



# Federal Election Funding Is Needed To Keep Arizona Residents Safe in November

By Danielle Root July 17, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is pummeling Arizona. Over the last seven days alone, more than 22,700 new cases of the virus were confirmed throughout the state.<sup>1</sup> Public health officials have warned that the pandemic may continue through the November general election and into 2021.<sup>2</sup> In order to ensure voters can cast ballots safely and effectively this year, local and state officials in Arizona must begin bolstering election infrastructure and implementing measures to keep people safe. Otherwise, Arizona voters will be forced to make an impossible choice: protecting their health or exercising the fundamental right to vote.

But the state can't accomplish this on its own. Congress—including those in Arizona's congressional delegation who have thus far resisted addressing this priority—must do its part by immediately providing an additional \$3.6 billion in emergency funding so that jurisdictions can make all necessary electoral changes and system upgrades before November.

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## The coronavirus pandemic threatens election safety in Arizona

- As of July 16, there were more than 134,600 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Arizona, and more than 2,400 people in Arizona had died from the virus.<sup>3</sup>
- In a March 2020 letter to legislators, Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs warned of the threat the pandemic poses to elections, writing, “Health experts have said it could be months before the risk of infection subsides, with the possibility of a new outbreak after the summer months ... We need to prepare now for any eventuality.”<sup>4</sup> Maricopa County Recorder Adrian Fontes echoed that sentiment, saying in a March 2020 statement, “We are in uncharted territory with the COVID-19.”<sup>5</sup>

A business-as-usual approach to elections will put people's health at risk. Some groups are at higher risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19, including people ages 65 or older; people under 65 with preexisting conditions; people with disabilities; veterans; and people of color.<sup>6</sup>

- More than 1.2 million people in Arizona are ages 65 and older.
- More than 2.8 million people in Arizona under age 65 have preexisting conditions.
- Approximately 616,800 people in Arizona have a disability.
- Approximately 496,200 veterans reside in Arizona.
- More than 3.2 million people of color reside in Arizona.

Expanding access to vote by mail and preserving in-person voting is essential for protecting public health in November. Ensuring people can cast ballots from home will help mitigate the risk of community spread and guarantee all voters are able to make their voices heard even if they do not feel safe voting in-person because of the pandemic. There must also be robust in-person voting options, including at least two weeks of early voting in order to reduce the potential for long lines by dispersing voters across several days.<sup>7</sup>

Expanded access to vote by mail has been backed by more than 800 public health experts as a necessary step to protect public health, including by eight experts from Arizona.<sup>8</sup>

- In April 2020, the Presidents of the Arizona Records Association and Election Officials of Arizona underscored the need for robust vote by mail during the pandemic, writing in an op-ed: “The most compelling reason to pursue the ballot-by-mail option this year is it is the safest option for voters, election workers and voting sites. It provides a way for people to participate in their democracy while implementing the COVID-19 prevention recommendations. It also provides election officials across the state a way to help protect the health of their employees and volunteers.”<sup>9</sup>

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### Vote by mail enjoys broad bipartisan support and does not provide partisan advantage to either major political party

- An April 2020 poll found that 72 percent of Americans of all political leanings support voting by mail.<sup>10</sup>
- A May 2020 study, which analyzed data from 1996 to 2018, concluded that voting by mail does not have a discernible effect on party vote shares or the partisan share of the electorate.<sup>11</sup>
- All 50 states and Washington, D.C., allow some form of voting by mail.<sup>12</sup> Five states vote almost exclusively by mail, including traditionally Republican Utah and the perennial battleground state of Colorado.<sup>13</sup> During the 2016 general election, nearly 75 percent of Arizona voters cast mail ballots.

- According to reports, 79 percent of the Arizona’s GOP legislative caucus already votes by mail.<sup>14</sup>
- The Republican recorder for Yavapai County, Leslie Hoffman, noted that opposition to mail-in voting from fellow Republicans in the state and federal government is based on misplaced concerns: “It’s totally political,’ she said. ‘It has nothing to do with cost savings.’”<sup>15</sup> Hoffman supported the secretary of state’s request to move to an all-mail election in order to help protect voters’ safety.<sup>16</sup>

Congress must provide more funding to help ensure elections are carried out safely. Elections have always been severely underfunded, but the situation is even more dire now that officials must contend with COVID-19. Election administrators have reported that election costs have increased by upwards of 60 percent compared to past years because of the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> The \$400 million provided by Congress in the CARES Act was a good starting point, but experts estimate that \$4 billion is needed if states are to be fully prepared.<sup>18</sup>

- Adrian Fontes, recorder, Maricopa County; Thad Hall, elections director, Coconino County; Patty Hansen, recorder, Coconino County recorder; Leslie Hoffman, recorder, Yavapai County; Virginia Ross, recorder, Pinal County; and Allen P. Tempert, elections director, Mohave County wrote in a March 31, 2020, letter to congressional leaders: “We urge you to include substantial funding in the coronavirus stimulus package so that we have the ability and resources to ensure that our voters can participate safely and with confidence in our elections. \$400 million is a start but it is simply not enough to give all local election officials the support needed to plan and pay for the changes that will be necessary for elections in light of how COVID-19 is creating new norms that cannot be ignored as we continue forward.”<sup>19</sup>
- Secretary of State Katie Hobbs wrote in a March 2020 CNN op-ed: “As part of a \$2 trillion historic package to boost our health care system and provide financial relief to households and businesses, Congress provided a small down payment to our democracy with \$400 million allocated to protecting our elections. But states need billions, not millions, to ensure secure voting.”<sup>20</sup>

## The HEROES Act

The Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives on May 15, includes essential funding to improve election safety during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

Specifically, the act would:

- Provide states with an additional \$3.6 billion in emergency funding for elections.
- Require that at least half of funds states receive go to local jurisdictions, which are responsible for conducting elections and are best equipped to assess administrative needs.
- Direct states to expand vote by mail and in-person voting options, including early voting.
- Eliminate grant matching requirements so that states, whose budgets are already stretched thin, do not have to match federal funds on expedited timelines.

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## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a substantial threat to U.S. elections. Unless states make significant changes to state election systems before November and Congress provides them with necessary funding to do so, Americans will be forced to put their lives at risk in order to vote or will be denied the right to participate in the democratic process altogether. Even those who cannot cast a ballot could become ill by coming into contact with someone they know who contracts the virus through the voting process.

Modifying electoral processes and implementing changes takes time—and the United States is running out of time to prepare for November's general election. To ensure states and localities can take all necessary precautions for conducting elections during the pandemic, Congress must immediately pass the Heroes Act.

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