



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

By Danielle Root July 17, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is pummeling Florida. On July 12, more than 15,000 new cases of the virus were reported throughout the state, breaking the national record for most new cases reported in a single day.<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 Florida must begin bolstering election infrastructure to handle mass reliance on mail voting and implementing measures to keep people safe. Otherwise, Florida 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 Florida'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 Florida

- As of July 16, there were more than 315,700 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Florida, and more than 4,600 Florida residents had died from the virus.<sup>3</sup>
- During Florida's spring primary, the pandemic presented "significant challenges with polling places being unavailable, difficulty in acquiring hand sanitizer and other supplies, and substantial numbers of poll workers deciding not to work."<sup>4</sup>
- A bipartisan group of county election officials (Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections) wrote to Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) in May 2020 stressing the need for elections funding and implementation of affirmative policies to keep voters and communities safe.<sup>5</sup> According to Broward County Supervisor of Elections Peter Antonacci, "There is little doubt that the virus will have an impact on both the August and November elections."<sup>6</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>7</sup>

- More than 4.3 million people in Florida are ages 65 and older.
- More than 8.4 million people in Florida under age 65 have preexisting conditions.
- More than 1.8 million people in Florida have a disability.
- More than 1.4 million veterans reside in Florida.
- More than 9 million people of color reside in Florida.

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>8</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 five experts from Florida.<sup>9</sup>

- The following six Florida counties plan to proactively send absentee ballot applications to all registered voters: Broward County; Palm Beach County; Miami-Dade County; Seminole County; Hillsborough County; and Pinellas County.<sup>10</sup> According to Elections Supervisor for Palm Beach County Wendy Sartory Link, “My push for vote by mail isn’t political in any way . . . It’s just safety. It’s a safety-driven measure.”<sup>11</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>12</sup> Nearly 47 percent of votes cast in Florida’s 2020 spring primary were cast absentee, compared to just 21.5 percent in 2016.
- 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>13</sup>
- All 50 states and Washington, D.C., allow some form of voting by mail.<sup>14</sup> Five states vote almost exclusively by mail, including traditionally Republican Utah and the perennial battleground state of Colorado.<sup>15</sup> Arizona, another reliably Republican state, conducts elections almost entirely by mail.

- The Republican Party of Florida is encouraging Floridians to vote by mail in upcoming elections.<sup>16</sup>
- Republican Pasco County Supervisor of Elections Brian Corley enthusiastically supports vote by mail, saying, “It’s safe, it’s secure and voters absolutely love it. I want every voter to have that option . . . It doesn’t matter what political party you are . . . It shouldn’t be politicized.”<sup>17</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>18</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>19</sup>

- Collier County Supervisor of Elections Jennifer Edwards and Orange County Supervisor of Elections Bill Cowles co-authored a March 31, 2020, letter to congressional leaders: “\$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>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.

*Danielle Root is the associate director of voting rights and access to justice at the Center for American Progress.*

## Endnotes

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