



Federal Election Funding Is Needed To Keep South Carolina Residents Safe in November

By Danielle Root July 17, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is pummeling South Carolina. Over the last seven days alone, more than 13,300 new cases of the virus were confirmed throughout the state.¹ Public health officials have warned that the pandemic may continue through the November general election and into 2021.² In order to ensure voters can cast ballots safely and effectively this year, local and state officials in South Carolina must begin bolstering election infrastructure to handle mass reliance on mail voting and implementing measures to keep people safe. Otherwise, South Carolina 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 South Carolina'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.

The coronavirus pandemic threatens election safety in South Carolina

- As of July 16, there were more than 63,800 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in South Carolina, and more than 1,000 people in South Carolina had died from the virus.
- Ben Whitmire, director of public information at the State Election Commission said in July 2020, “We know that the number of Covid cases are expanding in the state at record levels and are more concerned today than ever about the impact on November.”³ According to Whitmire, the state faces a number of challenges in November related to the pandemic: “Aside from the administrative issues of polling places, poll managers, Covid-19 supplies, and processing absentee ballots, our ability to educate voters on changes (or lack thereof) will play a key role in a successful November election.”

- In March 2020, the State Election Commission sent a letter to the state’s governor, writing, “As the coronavirus continues to spread across South Carolina and the country, we are concerned about the safe conduct of the June Primaries, November General Election and all other elections scheduled for 2020.⁴ The main issue is that our elections, as currently prescribed by law, require large numbers of people to congregate in one place.”

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.⁵

- Approximately 899,900 people in South Carolina are ages 65 and older.
- More than 2 million people in South Carolina under age 65 have preexisting conditions.
- Approximately 528,700 people in South Carolina have a disability.
- Approximately 363,200 veterans reside in South Carolina.
- More than 1.8 million people of color reside in South Carolina.

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.⁶

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 three experts from South Carolina.⁷

- In its March 2020 letter to the governor, the State Election Commission identified expanded vote by mail and early as vital during a pandemic, writing: “As voters look for ways to safely cast a ballot, we expect voters will likely avoid polling places and seek to vote absentee by mail” and “[t]he goal of early voting is to relieve congestion at polling places on election day by spreading out the voting process. . . . These potential solutions to conducting safe and secure elections in the midst of a pandemic are put forth in the spirit of identifying solutions that will enable the voters of South Carolina to continue to express their will through elections.”⁸

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.⁹
- 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.¹⁰
- All 50 states and Washington, D.C., allow some form of voting by mail.¹¹ Five states vote almost exclusively by mail, including traditionally Republican Utah and the perennial battleground state of Colorado. Arizona, another reliably Republican state, conducts elections almost entirely by mail.¹²
- South Carolina Republican Party Chairman Drew McKissick applauded a new state law allowing every registered voter to vote absentee by mail in the June primary election, saying, “Given our unprecedented circumstances, the legislature acted appropriately in making an emergency solution available for an emergency situation for the voters of South Carolina.¹³ The SCGOP appreciates the work put into this effort and supports this legislation.”
- The South Carolina Republican Party in May 2020 encouraged people to vote by mail.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

- Duncan Buell, member of the Board of Voter Registration and Elections, Richland County, wrote in a March 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.”¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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.

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

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "CDC COVID Data Tracker: United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State," available at <https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases> (last accessed July 17, 2020).
- 2 Helen Braswell, "Some social distancing may be needed into 2022 to keep coronavirus in check, new study says," Stat, April 14, 2020, available at <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/14/some-social-distancing-may-be-needed-into-2022-to-keep-coronavirus-in-check-new-study-says/>; Michelle Fay Cortez, "We Will Be Living With the Pandemic Well Into 2021," Bloomberg, June 18, 2020, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-06-18/we-will-be-living-with-the-coronavirus-pandemic-well-into-2021>.
- 3 Yelena Dzhanova, "Election officials fear voting changes will confuse voters in November," CNBC, July 11, 2020, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/11/election-officials-fear-changes-could-confuse-voters-in-november.html>.
- 4 Jacob Reynolds, "S.C. Election Commission urges Governor, others, to consider changes to voting due to coronavirus," WTLX, March 30, 2020, available at <https://www.wtlx.com/article/news/politics/sc-election-commission-urges-governor-others-to-consider-changes-to-voting-due-to-coronavirus/101-20bc28bd-a78a-4f78-b7b9-18a291ea3860>.
- 5 Danielle Root, "States Should Embrace Vote by Mail and Early Voting To Protect Higher-Risk Populations From Coronavirus," Center for American Progress, May 14, 2020, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/news/2020/05/14/485072/states-embrace-vote-mail-early-voting-protect-higher-risk-populations-coronavirus/>.
- 6 Danielle Root and others, "In Expanding Vote by Mail, States Must Maintain In-Person Voting Options During the Coronavirus Pandemic," Center for American Progress and NAACP, April 20, 2020, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/news/2020/04/20/483438/expanding-vote-mail-states-must-maintain-person-voting-options-coronavirus-pandemic/>.
- 7 Gregg Gonsalves and others, "Final Mail Voting and COVID-19," Center for American Progress, May 5, 2020, available at https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/05/05061221/21DemocracyTeam_finalmailvotingandcovid19.pdf.
- 8 Marci Andino, "Petition for Original Jurisdiction - Emergency Relief Requested," South Carolina Election Commission, March 30, 2020, available <https://www.democracydocket.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2020/04/2020-04-22-South-Carolina-COVID-19-Petition-Complaint-and-Notice-of-Return-TO-RESPONDENTS.pdf>.
- 9 Chris Kahn, "Most Americans, unlike Trump, want mail-in ballots for November if coronavirus threatens: Reuters/Ipsos poll," Reuters, April 7, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-poll-idUSKBN21P3G0>.
- 10 Daniel Thompson and others, "Universal Vote-by-Mail Has No Impact on Partisan Turnout or Vote Share" (Stanford, CA: Democracy and Polarization Lab at Stanford University, 2020, available at http://www.andrewbenjaminhall.com/Thompson_et_al_VBM.pdf.
- 11 National Conference of State Legislatures, "Voting Outside the Polling Place: Absentee, All-Mail and other Voting at Home Options," available at <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx> (last accessed July 2020).
- 12 National Conference of State Legislatures, "All-Mail Elections (aka Vote-By-Mail)," available at <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/all-mail-elections.aspx> (last accessed July 2020); Michael Wines, "Voting by Mail Could Be What States Need. But Can They Pull It Off?," The New York Times, April 11, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/coronavirus-voting-by-mail-elections.html>.
- 13 Jacob Reynolds, "'We want everybody to vote' Gov. McMaster says after signing absentee voting bill," WTLX, May 13, 2020, available at <https://www.wtlx.com/article/news/politics/elections/we-want-everybody-to-vote-gov-mcmaster-says-after-signing-absentee-voting-bill/101-18661e27-a7bd-4e44-9fc8-ab3bfaf73669>.
- 14 David Weigel, "The Trailer: The mail voting debate gets more confounding," The Washington Post, May 21, 2020, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/paloma/the-trailer/2020/05/21/the-trailer-the-mail-voting-debate-gets-more-confounding/5ec573fe88e0fa67270015e4/>.
- 15 Miles Parks, "Republicans Signal They're Willing to Pay Up To Avoid An Election Day Disaster," NPR, July 10, 2020, available at <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/10/888165568/after-pleas-from-officials-republicans-signal-openness-to-more-election-funding>.
- 16 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020, Public Law 36, 116th Cong., 1st sess. (March 27, 2020), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/house-bill/748/text>.
- 17 Brennan Center for Justice, "Election Officials Call for More Election Funding in Next Stimulus Bill," March 31, 2020, available at <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/election-officials-call-more-election-funding-next-stimulus-bill>.
- 18 Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act, H.R. 6800, 116th Cong. 1st sess. (May 15, 2020), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/house-bill/6800/actions>.