



Ensure Safe Elections for All

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To ensure that the 2020 general elections can be conducted safely, policymakers must pursue social distancing measures that reduce the density of polling places on Election Day. In the past we have seen how easily polling places can be overwhelmed with voters — an even more dangerous problem in light of the pandemic. But calls for all mail-in or all online voting by November underestimate the difficulty of implementing these processes in such a short span of time. Without careful planning, it is likely that the most vulnerable populations would be disenfranchised. **Given the limited timeframe that would hamper experimentation with new methods, state governments should significantly expand already existing alternatives: mail-in voting and early voting. This, combined with a public education campaign to increase understanding of these opportunities, will go a long way toward ensuring safe and reliable elections.**

Best practices from states have already adopted mail-in voting include:

- Allowing a 30-day period, up to and including election day, to cast a ballot
- Dissemination of ballot requests no later than 30 days prior to election day
- Providing pre-paid return envelopes and a ballot tracking feature

Since research has shown that certain constituencies — the young, minorities, and low-income voters — are not likely to utilize mail-in ballots, safe voting-in-person measures to accommodate those voters should include:

- Allowance of early voting for a 30-day period prior to election day
- Identification of large facilities for use as polling places to accommodate social distancing measures
- The creation of an app to track wait times at polling places

There will need to be a significant public information campaign around these measures to give people confidence in the process. Because mail-in votes have gone uncounted or rejected due to perceived irregularities, and both mail-in and early voting have in some states been offered only for cause, constituents may be distrustful or confused as to these methods' availability. Sustained public engagement efforts can ensure that people utilize these alternatives.

All these measures will need uniform implementation through federal legislation, coupled with federal funding to assist states and localities to institute them, as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Without federal legislation, we could see a patchwork response reflecting partisan considerations of who would benefit from increased or suppressed turn out — which could threaten the legitimacy of the election and cast a shadow over those elected.