THE P.E.E.R. TO PEER

PLAYBOOK

Proven bipartisan solutions for safe voting

COVID-19 has brought about new challenges to administering safe, secure, and successful elections, and policy responses during the pandemic have been diverse and multifaceted. In an effort to support the best policies being enacted across the country, MAP launched the <u>P.E.E.R. Project: Partnering to Ensure Election Resiliency</u> in March. States' experiences throughout the primary elections offer important lessons as other state legislatures and election officials prepare for November's general election. The most important policies that have gained bipartisan support in states around the country continue to be **1) mailing all registered voters absentee ballot request forms**, and **2) temporarily removing excuse requirements for absentee voting where they exist.**

As the danger of a national resurgence of COVID-19 remains clear, election administrators must turn their attention to the general election. MAP's **P.E.E.R. to Peer Playbook** compiles a set of state policy recommendations, drawing on successful bipartisan legislative examples since March. While no one set of solutions will be appropriate for every state, this core group of recommendations has emerged as proven and impactful, while gaining support amongst legislatures and the general public. By focusing on these initiatives, and correcting implementation mistakes made during primaries, legislators will help guarantee a seamless, secure, and safe election in November, creating a path for more resilient elections in the future.

1. SEND ABSENTEE BALLOT REQUEST FORMS TO ALL VOTERS

Proactively sending absentee ballot request forms has been a strong, bipartisan response to continuing elections and protecting public wellbeing during COVID-19. Sending ballot request forms strikes a comfortable balance: it increases ballot accessibility; adds an additional layer of voter verification; and allows citizens to participate according to their preference, while reducing in-person crowding at the polls.

In addition to state executive action in places like Wisconsin and Georgia, several legislatures have taken bipartisan action to send ballot request forms, including Missouri, California, Illinois, and Vermont.

"The best way to reduce COVID-19's threat to election integrity lies in sending absentee ballot request forms to registered voters, which proactively eliminates poll crowds through a safe and secure voting method and—as studies have shown—does not disproportionately benefit either party."

TIP

Sending absentee ballot request forms can lead to a significant increase in both absentee and overall turnout. While many states are already preparing for an increase in absentee ballots this year, any action to proactively mail out ballot request forms should be accompanied by a review of ballot processing procedures and secondary policies, such as signature verification processes, or restrictions on ballot canvassing timeframes.

2. REMOVE EXCUSE REQUIREMENTS TO VOTE ABSENTEE

"No-excuse absentee voting reduces the transmission risk of COVID-19, while also enabling voters to participate—just like Kentucky's successful primary election, in which 85% of all ballots were cast absentee after removing excuse requirements this past spring."

The simplest step that states can take to protect the health of citizens without inhibiting access to the ballot is to remove excuse requirements for absentee voting. This critical step will reduce transmission risk of COVID-19 on election day, and will allow voters to choose their most preferred method to make their voice heard. Bipartisan action to remove excuse requirements in light of the coronavirus includes those taken by South Carolina, New Hampshire, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Indiana, and others. Critically, many states enacted temporary measures that permitted successful primaries, but now must turn their attention towards implementing similar measures before November.

Make sure that you're prepared for an influx of absentee ballots if your state currently has limited absentee voting infrastructure and chooses to remove excuse requirements before November. By investing in ballot processing systems and standardizing ballot formats across the state, or extending ballot receipt deadlines to accommodate the surge—as Utah did in their recent primary—policymakers can minimize uncertainty and the risk of overwhelming ballot processing systems.

TIP

3. ELIMINATE WITNESS AND NOTARIZATION REQUIREMENTS

Allowing absentee voting, but requiring multiple witnesses or notarization adds counterproductive obstacles to the voting process. Ensuring a straightforward and standardized signature verification process, along with well-maintained voter rolls, can replace the security function that witness requirements address. Several legislatures have taken bipartisan action to limit or remove these overburdensome requirements, including New York and North Carolina.

"By replacing witness and notarization requirements with other security measures, we can allow for flexibility to comply with public health guidelines without sacrificing election integrity."

TIP

While ballot security is always a top priority, including a provision for a risk-limiting audit—as included in this new Indiana election security package—can help eliminate the potential for fraud.

4. ENSURE SAFE IN-PERSON VOTING

"Eliminating the risk of COVID-19 transmission events on Election Day is not only a necessity, it's the duty of elected and appointed officials."

The importance of maintaining in-person voting options remains; lawmakers are grappling with the two-pronged challenge of preparing for an influx of absentee ballots and ensuring safe and accessible in-person voting options. States such as Mississippi and New Mexico, who have taken legislative action on topics such as mandating hazard pay for poll workers, or creating electoral health and safety task forces, are positive examples.

Administering safe and fair elections during the COVID-19 pandemic has already, and will continue to challenge our electoral infrastructure. The appropriate policy responses will consider your state's starting point, and take a "both, and" approach by bolstering absentee voting, pandemic-proofing in-person voting, and enhancing the capacity of elections officials to safely and securely accommodate this voting mix.

TIP

5. STAY UP TO DATE ON FEDERAL ELECTION GUIDANCE AND GRANTS

Policymakers should continue to use available federal resources, and be aware of the possibility of further assistance in future relief legislation. Many states took advantage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), a $400 million election assistance matching fund included in the CARES Act, to transition voting operations over the past few months. Lawmakers and election officials should stay up to date on how their state is using these funds, as well as the Election Assistance Commission's guidelines on fulfilling the 20% state matching requirement.

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As COVID-19 remains an active threat in the U.S. and, tragically, the death toll continues to rise, businesses, schools, and organizations have adapted to a new reality in which many Americans continue to hold legitimate concerns of transmission risks. Lawmakers must be prepared to replicate the successful efforts of many states to minimize these risks during primary voting since March. It's critical that states act now to coordinate their preparedness plans, and communicate those plans to voters early and consistently. During a time of great uncertainty, one thing remains sure: American democracy demands elections, and elections require participation.