



Federal Election Funding Is Needed To Keep Georgia Residents Safe in November

By Danielle Root July 17, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is pummeling Georgia. Over the last seven days alone, more than 23,900 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 Georgia must begin bolstering election infrastructure to handle mass reliance on mail voting and implementing measures to keep people safe. Otherwise, Georgia 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 Georgia'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 Georgia

- As of July 16, there were more than 131,200 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Georgia, and more than 3,100 people in Georgia had died from the virus.³
- The state proved unequipped to carry out an election during its June primary: Voters who had requested absentee ballots never received them forcing them and others to jeopardize their health by waiting in hours-long lines at polling places, particularly in Black neighborhoods. Insufficient resources and inadequate training for poll workers caused delays at in-person voting sites placing people at unnecessary risk.⁴
- The Georgia Association of Voter Registrars and Election Officials warned in a July 2020 letter to Sens. Perdue and Loeffler that while their staff is committed to ensuring all voters can safely vote in November, “The COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges for carrying out these responsibilities as we work to not only protect the right to vote but also the health and safety of our voters ... While county election officials know what it will take to run safe and secure elections this year, we need to act soon to ensure that we are prepared.”⁵

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.⁶

- More than 1.4 million people in Georgia are ages 65 and older.
- More than 4.3 million people in Georgia under age 65 have preexisting conditions.
- Approximately 915,200 people in Georgia have a disability.
- Approximately 609,500 veterans reside in Georgia.
- More than 5 million people of color reside in Georgia.

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.⁷

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 13 experts from Georgia.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 Nearly 47 percent of votes cast in Georgia's 2020 spring primary were cast absentee, compared to just 2 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.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

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 administra-

tors have reported that election costs have increased by upwards of 60 percent compared to past years because of the pandemic.¹³ 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.¹⁴

- Tonnie Adams, elections supervisor, Heard County; Deidre B. Holden, supervisor of elections and registration, Paulding County; Joseph Kirk, director of elections, Bartow County; and Greg Rigby, supervisor of elections, Carroll County, co-authored a March 2020 letter to congressional leaders, stating: “\$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.”¹⁵
- In July 2020, The Georgia Association of Voter Registrars and Election Officials wrote, “While we applaud Congress for approving \$10.9 million in election funding for Georgia through the CARES Act, we believe that this amount falls short of what is needed for safe and secure elections in 2020. Because of this, we urge you to support substantial additional funding for elections in the next coronavirus stimulus package.”¹⁶
- Executive Director of Richmond County’s Board of Elections Lynn Bailey testified on July 8, 2020, at an Election Assistance Commission hearing that Georgia’s June 9 primary cost about 60 percent more than past elections because of the pandemic and that election-related costs will likely to be even higher in November due to increased turnout.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.

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Endnotes

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