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20 Ways Cities Can Promote Safe and Effective Elections in November

By Danielle Root   August 17, 2020

Much has already been written about steps that election officials at state and local levels, such as state secretaries of state and boards of elections, can take to ensure the November general election is conducted safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. These officials, who are primarily responsible for election administration, are being urged to adopt commonsense policies and make technical upgrades to election infrastructure.[1]

Cities, too, have an important role to play in helping ensure Americans are not forced to choose between their health and making their voices heard in November. Although they generally do not have a direct hand in overseeing state and federal elections, city officials and employees can be hugely influential in making sure elections are carried out safely and effectively this year. In particular, cities can help facilitate voter registration and participation, mitigate voter confusion, and provide valuable support to local election officers in carrying out their duties.

This issue brief is designed to serve as a toolkit that city officials can use to promote safe elections and voter participation during the pandemic as well as in future election cycles. Specifically, it outlines 20 steps cities can take to help protect American elections this fall, including the following:

• Proactively send voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications to all voting-eligible residents, with return envelopes and prepaid postage.

• To help ensure safe and efficient access to polling locations, make city bike sharing free during voting periods and create free, specialized, and accessible bus lines during early voting and on Election Day that shuttle voters directly to and from polling places. Such initiatives must comply with public health guidelines. For example, drivers must have adequate personal protective equipment, and buses and bikes must be thoroughly and regularly sanitized.

• Offer all city employees paid time off to vote or serve as poll workers during early voting periods and on Election Day. Qualified students should be provided automatic excused absences and educational credit for voting or serving as poll workers.

• Partner with local food banks, grocery stores, and pharmacies to host voter registration and absentee ballot application drives, as well as drives to recruit poll workers during the weeks and months leading up to Election Day.

Cities have an important role in protecting elections during a pandemic

As a general rule, city officials lack the authority to set standards for administering state and federal elections.[2] But while policy changes and technical upgrades to election infrastructure are essential for protecting voting processes this year, they are not the only ways to make a difference and promote access to the ballot box.

Cities have numerous avenues for helping to ensure Americans can exercise their fundamental right to vote without endangering their health. For instance, by volunteering city property to serve as polling places or designated drop-box locations, cities can help promote social distancing during voting periods and make casting ballots more convenient and safer for more people. Offering paid time off to city employees for serving as poll workers will help ensure polling locations are fully staffed. And mayors can harness the influence of civic-minded corporations by partnering with them to offer employees and consumers incentives for assisting in the administration of and participating in elections. City-based action is especially important in places where state-level leadership is severely lacking.

The proposals included in this brief aim to further the following three goals:

1. Facilitating voter registration and participation
2. Recruiting and retaining poll workers
3. Promoting voter education

Worth noting from the outset is that not every proposal included in this brief is universally applicable. Depending on the particular jurisdiction, some proposals may exceed city authority or may be infeasible due to logistical constraints. As a matter of course, cities must perform due diligence before implementing the proposals outlined herein in order to ensure they comply with state and local law as well as with public health guidelines. That said, this toolkit includes at least one step each U.S. city can take to protect voters and elections during the coronavirus pandemic, and many proposals can be customized to meet a city's unique needs and circumstances.

Actions to facilitate voter registration and participation

The pandemic has hamstrung many in-person activities that Americans typically rely upon to register to vote, including campus registration drives and door-to-door canvassing efforts.[3] In many places, Department of Motor Vehicles operating hours have

been slashed considerably, further restricting peoples' ability to add their names to the rolls.[4] Moreover, COVID-19 has made it difficult for elections to be conducted through a business-as-usual approach, given the numerous points of contact with people potentially infected with COVID-19 and with contaminated equipment.[5]

There are various steps cities can take to help facilitate voter registration, while ensuring voting is made safe and convenient for their residents. For example, cities should consider taking some or all of the following actions:

1. Proactively send voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications to all voting-eligible residents, with return envelopes and prepaid postage.

2. Partner with local food banks, grocery stores, and pharmacies to host voter registration and absentee ballot application drives, as well as drives to recruit poll workers, in the weeks and months leading up to Election Day.[6] Such drives can also be held at city housing locations as well as outside COVID-19 testing sites and state unemployment insurance agencies.[7]

3. Work with election officials to launch mobile vote centers that travel through city neighborhoods, helping people register to vote and apply for and return absentee ballots.[8] Mobile vote centers can provide residents with critical registration and voting information as well as with information about serving as poll workers.

4. Add banners to all city webpages directing residents to online voter registration or registration application websites as well as websites for absentee ballot applications.[9] Webpage banners should include regular updates on important election deadlines. Cities should work with food delivery and ride-sharing services, financial institutions, and fitness-based web streaming companies to do the same.

5. Partner with colleges and other educational institutions to provide students with voter registration applications, absentee ballot applications, and important election information as part of their "welcome back" packages, along with masks and sanitary supplies. All materials must be available in alternate formats and plain language.

6. To help ensure safe and efficient access to polling locations, create free, specialized bus lines during early voting and on Election Day that shuttle voters directly to and from polling places in compliance with public health guidelines.[10] Drivers must have adequate personal protective equipment, and buses must be regularly sanitized.

7. Make city bike sharing free during early voting periods and on Election Day and partner with private bike-sharing and scooter companies to similarly offer free services during voting periods.[11] As noted above, such initiatives must comply with public health guidelines, and bikes must be sanitized regularly during voting periods.[12]

8. Recruit ride-sharing companies to provide free or significantly discounted transportation to voters and election workers during early voting periods and on Election Day.[13] Again, it is important that such initiatives comply with public health guidelines. Drivers and riders must have adequate personal protective equipment, and vehicles must be regularly sanitized.

9. Work with local election officials in volunteering city buildings as polling places and city property as designated drop-box locations.[14] Partner with corporations to volunteer building interiors, lobbies, and sports arenas as polling place and drop-box locations.[15]

10. Offer all city employees paid time off to vote during early voting periods and on Election Day and partner with businesses to do the same.[16] Moreover, provide eligible high school students with automatic excused absences and educational credit for casting ballots during voting periods and partner with colleges to do the same.

11. Where possible, donate excess supplies—such as pens, tables, chairs, and masks—and sanitary equipment for use at voting locations, as well as 6-foot markers to ensure social distancing. Create a plan to ensure city officials are prepared to deliver chairs, water, and umbrellas to voters waiting in long lines during voting periods. Cities can partner with local artists to provide entertainment so as to encourage people to stay in line once they arrive at polling places.

Actions to recruit and retain poll workers

Poll worker shortages pose a major threat to upcoming elections. If there are not enough poll workers, early voting periods will be severely curtailed or eliminated entirely, and many polling places will be forced to close.[17] As a result, voters will have no choice but to wait in hourslong lines at the few polling places that remain open, risking community spread of COVID-19. The need for more poll workers cannot be overstated. Without enough people to staff polling places in November, jurisdictions across the country risk catastrophe. Cities can help recruit and retain poll workers by offering incentives and honoring those who serve at the polls. They should consider undertaking the following actions:

12. Offer city employees paid time off for serving as poll workers during early voting periods and on Election Day and provide them with hazard pay.[18] As an extra incentive, provide city employees who volunteer with at least one additional vacation day that can be used postelection. Cities should partner with private entities to offer paid time off to employees who serve as poll workers and provide prizes or discounted products and memberships for consumers who serve.[19]

13. Make Election Day a school holiday to encourage eligible students and teachers to serve as poll workers and participate in elections.[20] Alternatively, high school students serving as poll workers should be provided automatic excused absences as well as school credit.[21] The same should be offered to college students.

14. Similar to summer jobs programs, partner with businesses to pay or provide stipends to young people who serve as poll workers.[22] Cities should look to partner with private foundations for similar purposes.

15. Honor those who served as poll workers with a letter of thanks from the mayor published in a local newspaper. Each poll worker will be provided the option of having their name listed in the letter of thanks and will receive a certificate of public service from the city.

16. Explore offering free child care services for those serving as poll workers. Child care services should be conveniently located at or near polling places if space permits and must comply with public health guidelines, including guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding child care programs.[23]

Actions to promote voter education

Voter confusion is a common problem during elections. Voter registration procedures and voting processes are often unnecessarily complicated and require Americans to jump through numerous hoops to add their names to voter rolls and cast ballots that count. The pandemic has led election officials across the country to adopt and implement a slew of new voting policies, update electoral procedures to comply with public health guidelines, and change the locations of in-person voting sites.[24] Although these changes are necessary, they also mean that voter confusion poses a greater threat to upcoming elections than it did in past cycles. By partnering with local election officials, cities can help ensure residents have all of the information they need to participate safely in the democratic process. To this end, cities should consider the following proposals:

17. Partner with election administrators to host virtual town halls where neighborhood residents will be provided with important election information and deadlines, including information pertaining to polling locations and transportation routes to and from polling places.[25] Officials also should highlight early voting and Election Day locations that comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access guidelines and are reachable via public transportation. Moreover, residents should be offered guidance on creating safe-voting readiness kits with necessary supplies for in-person voting that include masks, sanitary equipment, pens, necessary paperwork, and forms of identification. All guidance must be available in alternate formats and plain language.

18. Recruit local celebrities to participate in public service announcements reminding people of important election deadlines, while encouraging people to register and vote, apply for absentee ballots, and serve as poll workers.[26] Celebrities can host livestreamed sessions talking residents through the process of registering to vote, applying for absentee ballots, and signing up to serve as poll workers.

19. Work with election officials to host virtual walk-throughs of polling places to inform voters of what they can expect when they show up to vote in person during early voting periods or on Election Day. Walk-throughs can be livestreamed so that residents can ask questions in real time and should later posted on official webpages and social media accounts through Election Day. Designated officials should be assigned to answer residents' questions submitted throughout the entirety of voting periods.

20. Require city entities to provide city employees and students with regular, scheduled reminders regarding important election deadlines and information about updated election procedures, including which early voting and Election Day locations are ADA compliant. Advertise election information and reminders of voter registration and absentee ballot deadlines throughout the city, including at bus stops and train stations. Partner with private entities to do the same for employees and customers or consumers through webpage pop-up reminders and email or messaging notifications.

Conclusion

When it comes to protecting the democratic process in the midst of a pandemic, cities have a critical role to play. Whether acting on their own or in partnership with election officials and private entities, cities are instrumental in facilitating voter registration and voter participation; recruiting and retaining poll workers; and promoting voter education so that people know where and how to register and cast ballots. Although the proposals outlined in this brief are especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, they should be applied and executed each election cycle. In doing so, city administrators can help expand the franchise and ensure that the fundamental right to vote is fully realized by all Americans.

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Endnotes

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2 There are some limited exceptions. One example is where cities and counties are consolidated into a single government entity, for example Denver or San Francisco. These entities and those like them may have broader election-related authorities they can utilize. See National League of Cities, "List of Consolidated City-County Governments," available at https://www.nlc.org/list-of-consolidated-city-county-governments (last accessed July 2020).

3 Sam Levine, "'We can't afford to wait': coronavirus could shut out droves of new U.S. voters," The Guardian, April 23, 2020, available at https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/23/coronavirus-fight-to-vote-us-voters.

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