



COVID-19: How's it Changing Elections?

BY BRIAN HINKLE

It's not news that COVID-19 is affecting every aspect of society, [including elections](#). States and localities have historically administered elections mostly through in-person, Election Day polling places, and these present challenges when a pandemic is underway.

Legislators, state executives and election officials have been working overtime to come up with solutions. States are updating their [election emergency](#) powers provisions to give governors and election officials more latitude to move polling places or postpone elections. Other states are expanding

absentee and mail voting and working to preserve in-person voting options. These issues present both practical and legal problems for administering elections. While much of the action around elections has come from governors and secretaries of state, as legislatures get back into session, lawmakers will begin to debate solutions as well. Legislation has already been introduced and enacted in some states, and more is to come.

The election landscape has changed dramatically and will continue to shift. Most of the changes so far only apply to the primaries, and it remains unclear whether these developments will affect the

Did You Know?

- One-quarter of all voters in the 2018 general election cast their ballots by mail.
- More than 200,000 polling places and 600,000 poll workers were in operation on Election Day in 2018.
- Nearly 42.5 million ballots were mailed to voters for the 2018 election.

election in November. With this uncertainty, states can take steps now to ensure they are prepared for whatever may come, with or without COVID-19.

State Action

States have acted in four distinct areas to prepare their elections to run as smoothly as possible during this pandemic: postponing primaries, expanding options for absentee voting, moving to all-mail elections, and ensuring in-person voting is accessible and safe. All these changes are currently temporary for the primaries, and it is unclear if they will still be in place in November.

■ **Postponements.** As of this writing, at least 18 states have postponed primary elections or runoff elections. Three states, Connecticut, Georgia and Louisiana, have postponed their [primary elections](#) twice. These postponements have been done almost entirely through executive action by governors and state election authorities, except for Pennsylvania and Ohio, which did so through legislation.

■ **Expanding Absentee Voting.** Many states have expanded absentee voting, although they have taken different approaches. Some states—including [Connecticut](#), [Georgia](#), [Idaho](#), [Iowa](#), [Michigan](#), [Nebraska](#), [New York](#), [North Dakota](#), [Rhode Island](#), [South Dakota](#) and [West Virginia](#)—determined the best option is to send out absentee ballot applications to all voters. There are also policy choices to be made within the framework of sending applications to all voters: Should the state provide prepaid postage? Should applications be sent to all registered voters, or just active voters? Should existing witness, notary or ID requirements be waived? As with elections in traditional circumstances, there will be a patchwork of approaches across the 50 states and territories.

[Idaho](#) and [New Mexico](#) have created new online portals where voters can request an absentee ballot. Now [12 states](#) have this option.

States have also expanded access to and eligibility for absentee ballots. [Alabama](#), [Delaware](#), [Massachusetts](#), [New Hampshire](#) and [Virginia](#) issued new interpretations of existing excuses, including concerns about the coronavirus, to qualify for absentee voting under state law.

■ **Moving to all-mail elections.** A few states have decided to shift to what will essentially be all-mail primary elections. Before COVID-19, five states had [all-mail election systems](#): Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and Utah. [Hawaii](#) is the most recent adopter and had scheduled its transition to all-mail to occur this year. In response to COVID-19, [Nevada](#) and [Maryland](#) have announced plans to conduct upcoming primaries and special elections entirely by mail, with each voter being mailed a ballot. [California](#) became the first state to announce it will send mail ballots to every registered voter in

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November due to public health concerns. In most all-mail elections, some in-person voting option is still offered for those who cannot, for whatever reason, receive or vote a ballot at home.

■ **Making in-person voting safer.** Finally, states are puzzling out how to make in-person voting safe and accessible. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [recommended](#) similar safeguards for polling places as it has for other public places, including hand-washing, avoiding touching the face, wearing face coverings and social distancing. Social distancing can be difficult in a polling place, but marks on the floor and other measures can be taken to ensure safety.

States are also having difficulty recruiting enough poll workers. In Wisconsin's recent election, members of the National Guard served as poll workers in some precincts. No matter which approach states choose, polling places will not be shuttered completely, and "hybrid" elections—with some in-person voting and some absentee or mail voting—may become the norm. More creative solutions are sure to come.

Federal Action

In March 2020, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ([CARES Act](#)). In addition to the \$425 million in new [Help American Vote Act funds](#) already approved in January, the economic relief bill included \$400 million in federal grants to the states to help them prepare their elections during the pandemic. The [U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#) oversees the administration of these grants and has already received requests for funding from 53 states and territories. States are required to provide 20% matching funds for these grants.

Additional Resources

- [NCSL's Voting Outside the Polling Place webpage](#)
- [NCSL's Election Emergencies webpage](#)
- [NCSL's 2020 State Primary Election Dates webpage](#)
- [NCSL's COVID-19 and Elections webpage](#)
- [NCSL's Canvass monthly newsletter](#)
- [National Vote at Home Institute](#)

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