

Voting in Times of Uncertainty

Maegan Morris

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What have you heard about the elections this year?
2. What do you think might be different about the elections due to the pandemic?

Do you know how to vote during the Covid-19 pandemic? It may come as a surprise that even something like voting will be affected by the coronavirus. Just like grocery shopping and using public transit, the way we cast ballots may need serious changes to protect your health and that of your community. In this article, we'll address what's staying the same and what's changing for this election.

Is an Election Even Possible?

As rumors circulate about a postponed election, many people are confused about whether there will even be a vote this November. The likelihood

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of this happening is *very* low. In the 244 years since the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. has never delayed a federal election, even during the Civil War, the Great Depression, or the

Spanish Flu. In fact, there are many safeguards in the U.S. Constitution that protect elections from being postponed or canceled.

First, the Constitution grants the power of selecting the day and time of election to Congress. (It cannot be changed by executive order.) The only way to delay or move a federal election is through new legislation, a process that takes a lot of time. To postpone the election, our government would have to follow these steps:



A member of Kentucky's National Guard sanitizes a voting station. Photo by Capt. Cassandra Mullins.

1. The House drafts and approves a bill to move the election.
2. The House version of the bill goes to the Senate for possible modification and approval.
3. The House and the Senate agree on the same version of the bill.
4. The president signs the bill into law.

What happens if Congress agrees to delay the election? According to the Constitution, the President and Vice President still must be out of office by January 20th after the election.¹ Even if an election were postponed until after this date, the current President and Vice President are finished with their terms on January 20th. The Constitution provides very specific, if complicated, guidelines on who will replace the President and Vice President in case this occurs.

Voting During a Pandemic

This will not be the first year the U.S. will hold elections during a global pandemic. Voters and poll workers effectively used social distancing and facemasks during the 1918 elections, which hap-

pened at the height of the Spanish Flu pandemic. However, like today, state governments' policies varied from place to place, meaning election procedures were not uniform. Nowadays, we have already seen differences in how states responded to Covid-19, both in locking down and opening back up. Some states have been more aggressive than others in their efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus. Likewise, states will make different decisions about how voting will work.

Many states have updated their voting procedures temporarily to allow voters to register on-

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line and mail-in their ballots. This year it is estimated that more than 50% of the voting population lives in areas that will permit all-mail elections.²

However, if you do not reside in Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, or Washington, then it is likely you are

unfamiliar with elections done entirely by mail. In fact, for many of us, this will be the first time we vote by mail.

What does it mean to vote by mail? It's basically the same as absentee voting. In some states, absentee ballots are given to people who have a qualifying excuse for not voting in person. Voters fill out these ballots, return them by mail, and their vote is counted just like anyone else's. While most states are not permanently changing to voting by mail, many are allowing voters to request absentee ballots this year. And you do not need a qualifying excuse; Covid-19 is the qualifying excuse.

Fear of Fraud

Some people might worry that with mail-in voting, there is more chance of ballots being miscounted, lost, or tampered with. Or, as President Trump tweeted on June 20, 2020, ballots could be printed by other countries and mailed in.³ Indeed,

there are isolated incidents of fraud associated with mail-in voting, but with millions of people voting, these incidents represent a very small percentage of the whole. According to a 2017 study, voting fraud is extremely rare in the U.S. — between 0.00004% and 0.0009%. In 2018, a quarter of all ballots were mailed in, so the U.S. does have significant experience making absentee ballots work.⁴

What Can you Do?

First, find out how the pandemic has affected voting procedures in your state. Visit your state's election division website. And then, vote! If it's by mail, vote as early as possible. If it's in person, figure out how to vote safely. Wear a mask, keep social distance, and sanitize your hands before and after. Voting is a privilege and a responsibility. We are in a time of uncertainty, but it is still possible to make our voices heard via the voting booth. As Thomas Jefferson said, “We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.”

Sources: 1. Const. amend. XX. Sec. 1. [Article] U.S. Const. art. 2. sec. 3. cl. 1; 2. Brian Hinkle Wendy Underhill, “Voting Outside the Polling Place: Absentee, All-Mail and Other Voting at Home Options,” (NCSL, 2020), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx>; 3. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/22/881598655/fact-check-trump-spreads-unfounded-claims-about-voting-by-mail>; 4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53353404>.

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AFTER YOU READ:

1. Look at the four subheadings. Two are questions and two are not. Turn the two that are not into questions. Work with a partner and write down all four questions and then answer them based on the information provided in the text.
2. Make your own plan for voting. How will you vote? What are key dates you should have in your calendar? If you can't vote, think of someone who can and make a plan to share information about voting with them.