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ELECTION 2020

# States Explore More Vote-By-Mail Options to Cope With Coronavirus

Early voting and vote by mail have risen in popularity, but moving all balloting to postal system would be costly



An election worker moves boxes of vote-by-mail ballots for the presidential primary in Renton, Wash., earlier this month.

PHOTO: JASON REDMOND/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Alexa Corse and Dustin Volz*

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WASHINGTON—States are exploring ways to expand voting by mail and early voting ahead of the November general election to make sure balloting proceeds if the coronavirus pandemic persists.

Election officials from state and local governments across the country held conference calls over the past week with the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies on the logistical, financial and legal obstacles to rolling out expanded vote-by-mail initiatives, according to people who participated in the calls.

A call last Friday featuring the U.S. Postal Service looked at the feasibility of implementing widespread mail voting, including the costs for mail-in ballot services and whether they could be reduced. Another call this week included the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to assess the coronavirus threat over the rest of the year.

Early voting and voting by mail have increased across the country over the past two decades. Election experts said the coronavirus pandemic could supercharge that trend, overhauling how elections are conducted and accelerating the shift away from voting in person at a local polling site on Election Day.

The massive relief package passed by Congress on Friday offers \$400 million to the states for coronavirus contingencies involving elections, including voting by mail if states choose. Democrats had pushed to mandate vote-by-mail options in every state, but were rebuffed by Republicans, who said the matter should be left to the states.

State and federal officials said that rapidly moving to vote-by-mail systems within a matter of months poses formidable challenges, among them how to quickly print, process and count ballots and guard against tampering.



Election workers sort vote-by-mail ballots by party for the presidential primary at King County Elections in Renton, Wash., this month.

PHOTO: JASON REDMOND/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Giving all U.S. voters the option to vote by mail for the November general election could cost as much as \$1.4 billion, generally on top of what states already spend, according to the Brennan

Center for Justice, a public-policy think tank.

“It’s not necessarily possible for every jurisdiction in the country to ramp up to full vote by mail by November,” said Ben Hovland, chairman of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, a federal group that promotes best practices for elections, and one of the officials discussing options with states. “I think it’s fair for every jurisdiction to expect an increase in vote by mail in 2020, so we’re having a lot of conversations about what they can do to prepare for that.”

The discussions are taking place in part through communication channels the Department of Homeland Security set up with state officials after the 2016 election to confront cybersecurity threats to elections. The calls on voting options have been so popular that at least one exceeded capacity and some officials were unable to join, participants said.

In looking for voting alternatives, election officials are seeking advice from counterparts in Colorado, Washington and elsewhere that already rely heavily on mail-in voting. Colorado Director of Elections Judd Choate said last week that nearly a dozen states have contacted him asking for advice since the outbreak began.

All states allow some voters to cast mail ballots, but a third of states apply conditions for residents to use that method, such as being away on Election Day or having a disability. Some states conduct all-mail elections, though they generally also offer in-person voting and ballot drop-off sites.

The coronavirus has already caused some states to delay primary elections. Ohio ordered its polls not to open for its March 17 primary and state lawmakers passed a plan to extend voting by mail until April 28.

Coronavirus is now counted by state officials as an acceptable reason to vote by mail in West Virginia’s May 12 primary. Maryland is conducting an April 28 special congressional election by mail to limit coronavirus exposure. Georgia’s secretary of state said absentee-ballot request forms will be mailed to every registered voter ahead of the state’s May 19 primary. Washington, D.C., said Friday it will encourage mail-in ballots for its June 2 primary.

Election officials need months to prepare options for the November vote, a date set by federal law, so they need to get contingencies under way.

Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft said that while he is open to changes, a decision shouldn’t be rushed. He said his concerns include logistics and protecting mail ballots from tampering. And, he said, there could be problems for voters who mail ballots or vote early, like some did for Democratic presidential candidates who then dropped out before primary day.

“If you want to have the safest election, you have people show up on election day,” said Mr. Ashcroft, a Republican.

Others say voting by mail can pose other challenges, such as for voters with certain vision disabilities.

Casting ballots by smartphone or laptop is discouraged by cybersecurity experts as vulnerable to tampering. Voting by mail gained renewed attention as a reliable way to vote after the intelligence agencies’ assessment about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Vendors for mail-voting products said they have had a spike in queries, according to four companies in the business.

“A lot of states are talking to us, a lot of counties are talking to us,” said Jeff Ellington, president and chief operating officer of Runbeck Election Services Inc. The company offers mail-voting services including ballot printing and works with local governments in several states, including California, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Utah and Florida.

Even those who support a rapid expansion of mail voting said scaling up wouldn’t be easy, given the change can require different vote-counting machines such as specialized high-speed scanners and public awareness campaigns.

“Our election infrastructure right now is not currently prepared for the dramatic increase in mail voting that we’re going to have to anticipate and allow,” said Wendy Weiser, head of the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center.

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