



# Federal Election Funding Is Needed To Keep North Carolina Residents Safe in November

By Danielle Root July 17, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is pummeling North Carolina. Over the last seven days alone, more than 13,900 new cases of the virus were confirmed throughout the state.<sup>1</sup> Public health officials have warned that the pandemic may continue through the November general election and into 2021.<sup>2</sup> In order to ensure voters can cast ballots safely and effectively this year, local and state officials in North Carolina must begin bolstering election infrastructure to handle mass reliance on mail voting and implementing measures to keep people safe. Otherwise, North Carolina 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 North Carolina'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.

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## The coronavirus pandemic threatens election safety in North Carolina

- As of July 16, there were more than 93,400 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in North Carolina and more than 1,500 North Carolina residents had died from the virus.<sup>3</sup>
- In an April 2020 letter to state lawmakers requesting essential funding, the Executive Director for the North Carolina State Board of Elections warned of the pandemic upending the November election should the state fail to prepare:

*“We are preparing for more than 4.5 million voters to vote in-person or by-mail in this election... And while we would like to think that coronavirus will be a distant memory by November, we must prepare to address lingering fears, new social norms, and the possibility that the virus could reoccur seasonally as do influenza and other viruses. As elections officials, we must prepare for the worst-case scenario to ensure that voters are able to cast their ballots.”<sup>4</sup>*

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.<sup>5</sup>

- More than 1.6 million people in North Carolina are ages 65 and older.
- More than 4.2 million people in North Carolina under age 65 have preexisting conditions.
- Approximately 986,400 people in North Carolina have a disability.
- Approximately 667,000 veterans reside in North Carolina.
- More than 3.8 million people of color reside in North Carolina.

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.<sup>6</sup>

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 17 experts from North Carolina.<sup>7</sup>

- North Carolina elections board spokesman Pat Gannon said in June 2020 that there has been an increased interest from people to vote absentee by mail this year. State officials expect reliance on mail voting to increase ten-fold in November compared to the 2016 presidential election.<sup>8</sup>

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### 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.<sup>9</sup>
- 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.<sup>10</sup>
- All 50 states and Washington, D.C., allow some form of voting by mail.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>
- A spokesman for the North Carolina Republican Party said, "We always have a plan for absentee voting and obviously we're going to ramp it up this cycle."<sup>13</sup>

- According to Republican state Rep. David Lewis, “North Carolina’s had voting by mail literally since the end of the Civil War, so this is not a new phenomenon for us.”<sup>14</sup>

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 administrators have reported that election costs have increased by upwards of 60 percent compared to past years because of the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

- Executive Director of the State Board of Elections Karen Brinson Bell said in May 2020 that local elections directors need substantial funding to conduct elections properly during the pandemic: “They have day-to-day operations that they have to fund and budget and prepare for, and when something of this nature comes along, that’s totally outside of the budgets that they’ve prepared for.”<sup>17</sup>

## 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.

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## 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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