



# 17 Ways Companies Can Help Americans Vote Safely

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Every federal election, there are several major, nationwide efforts to encourage voters to register and cast a ballot. But this year is different. Not only will the 2020 U.S. elections determine the future of the country—as elections always do—but the conduct of the elections could have public health consequences as well. COVID-19 has changed many aspects of daily life, but it cannot be allowed to dissuade Americans from voting or put voters' health at risk.

If voters have to wait in long lines at polling places that haven't taken sufficient precautions, there is a risk that they will be exposed to COVID-19. They may catch the disease and spread it to others, resulting in serious health consequences and prolonging the worsening economic hardship that millions of Americans—and many American businesses—are currently experiencing.

To avoid this outcome, the United States needs all hands on deck—and that includes the business community.

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## Why companies should help

Corporate political involvement is sometimes not well received, particularly when it comes to putting money behind certain candidates. But encouraging every citizen to exercise their right to vote is another matter. These efforts are a social good, and they help to build goodwill both with customers and employees. One study of companies' efforts to encourage voter participation found that “senior leadership believes the effort is not only good for democracy, but also good for business.”<sup>1</sup> Business benefits include “meeting consumer expectations for engagement in social and political issues, raising brand awareness with new audiences, and increasing employee satisfaction.” These benefits are supported by research.<sup>2</sup>

Right now, the country needs this help from the business community more than it ever has before. The COVID-19 crisis is presenting local and state election officials with unprecedented challenges. Election officials across the country—both Republicans and Democrats—lack sufficient resources to tackle coronavirus-related expenses. They are facing a major shortage of poll workers, a lack of safe, in-person polling locations, and the need to process an unprecedented volume of mail-in ballots. This comes at a time when state revenues are plunging because of reduced economic activity and a rising number of COVID-19 cases. The chaos and confusion of primary elections in Wisconsin and Georgia provide a window into what may happen across the country this election if states and localities don't have the resources they need.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, helping Americans vote this November is an opportunity for companies to demonstrate their commitments to racial justice. This year, the protests that followed the death of George Floyd spurred many companies to announce their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Companies across industries—from Nike to Netflix—posted messages and even advertisements that announced their solidarity with the protestors.<sup>4</sup> Those companies now need to demonstrate that these commitments are genuine—and not simply marketing schemes. One way to do that is to encourage voting.

Voting is one of the primary ways that demands for change are translated into action. It is also a racial justice issue. African Americans, Native Americans, and other communities of color have been engaged in a struggle for full political rights for the entire history of the United States.<sup>5</sup> And that struggle continues—efforts at voter suppression disproportionately target communities of color. Consider just one small example: wait times to vote. One study found that residents of African American neighborhoods were 74 percent more likely than residents of white neighborhoods to have to wait in line for longer than 30 minutes.<sup>6</sup> Another recent study found that Black and Latino voters, nationwide, wait an average of about 45 percent longer than white voters to cast a ballot.<sup>7</sup>

Some corporations are already taking significant steps to encourage voting. For example, the Time to Vote initiative, started by the CEO of Patagonia, an outdoor apparel company, has already secured pledges from more than 700 companies to “[ensure] employees have a work schedule that allows them to vote or, if applicable, resources for mail-in ballots” in 2020<sup>8</sup>—building on a similar effort in 2018. The first 383 companies to sign the pledge collectively had more than 2 million employees.<sup>9</sup> In prior elections, some of the participant companies designated staff to provide information to all employees about key election dates and held in-office voter registration drives.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, a number of companies have made efforts to encourage voting among their customers. In the 2018 midterm elections, tech companies such as Spotify and Twitter displayed reminders in their apps to encourage users to vote on Election Day and to inform them of key deadlines.<sup>11</sup> Snapchat launched an in-app voter registration platform, which registered 450,000 voters in 2018, and will release new tools this month.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, both Uber and Lyft offered voters free and discounted rides to the polls.<sup>13</sup> Lyft has already committed to providing some users with free rides to polls for the 2020 election.<sup>14</sup>

These companies should be applauded for their efforts, but America needs businesses to do even more. This year, it's not only about the right to vote, or about building trust with business stakeholders, or even about racial justice—though businesses should commit to all of those goals, businesses also need to think about keeping people healthy in the midst of a pandemic. The more healthy, low-risk people who can volunteer to be poll workers, the more people who vote early or by mail, and the more resources that corporations can provide to support a safe and socially distanced election, the fewer people would likely contract the coronavirus while exercising their democratic right to vote.

This is why Business for America, a co-author of this issue brief, is launching Operation Vote Safe (OVS)—an effort to mobilize a national network of civic-minded businesses to provide assistance to election officials in their communities. OVS aims to make sure that no one has to put their health at risk while voting and to eliminate any question about the legitimacy of the 2020 election. Companies can participate by connecting with OVS online<sup>15</sup>—and by reviewing the recommendations in this brief and committing to help with this fall's election.

In decades past, businesses have always played a part in encouraging participation in U.S. elections. Storefronts have long been the default site of voter registration drives and other activity to promote civic engagement—because brick-and-mortar businesses realized they are an important part of the public square. With the increasing use of technology and an ongoing public health crisis, more businesses need to accept that they have a role to play. Much of the public square has shifted to online platforms and to in-person businesses that have the capacity to allow social distancing. If those businesses do not adopt a new sense of civic responsibility, democracy could be in trouble.

In 2020, the health of America's democracy is at stake—as is the actual health of many Americans. The more that corporations are willing to do, the more likely it is that their business partners, employees, and customers will all be able to work, to participate in the economy, and to keep business afloat—and the less likely everyone is to lose loved ones to the coronavirus.

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## How companies should help

Fortunately, there is a lot that companies can do. In order to have safe and fair elections, as many people as possible need to vote by mail, or vote early, if state law permits. There also needs to be safe, adequately staffed, in-person voting options for those who rely on in-person voting.<sup>16</sup> Polling places need to have plenty of space and plenty of personal protective equipment (PPE) available. And Americans need help registering to vote, particularly given that the coronavirus has caused a massive decline in voter registration efforts.<sup>17</sup>

Below is a menu of ideas for companies to help with each stage of the voting process, including ideas suited to businesses with a range of particular strengths. For example,

companies with many young professional employees can encourage them to volunteer as poll workers; companies that own large venues can offer those spaces as additional polling locations; and businesses that are easily able to reach a large audience can advertise key election deadlines and can encourage their users, viewers, or listeners to register to vote and cast ballots early or by mail.

Some of these recommendations will require outreach to local election officials, and many of the ideas would benefit from that coordination. The U.S. Vote Foundation, a nonprofit organization that helps U.S. citizens register to vote and request absentee ballots, maintains a nationwide registry of local election officials where contact information can be found.<sup>18</sup> Business for America is also building partnerships with state election officials and working to connect them with businesses that are willing to help.

### Ways to help facilitate voter registration

Voter registration is the essential—and not always easy—precursor to voting. It is even more important now, because voters who fail to register early can miss pre-election deadlines and opportunities to vote early. For those who choose to vote by mail, registering to vote well ahead of Election Day helps ensure they receive a ballot with enough time to mail it back and have it count. Although same-day voter registration, where available, is an excellent option for individuals who miss traditional deadlines, Americans should be encouraged to register to vote as soon as possible to speed up the process and avoid problems at the polls. This year, most jurisdictions have, unfortunately, already seen a drastic decline in voter registration.<sup>19</sup> Here are some ways corporations can help to reverse the trend:

1. **Help notify your audience and customers about voter registration.** Many people are busy, particularly now, and it takes some effort to find out how to register to vote. But companies with web- or phone-based apps can provide that information, as Spotify, Twitter, and Snapchat did in 2018, through notifications and pop-up reminders that tell people how to register and remind them of the local deadlines. Streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Disney+ could include banners in their apps' interface that contain similar information; as could providers of videoconferencing software such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. And even brick-and-mortar stores such as retail and fast-food chains can ask customers if they would like voter registration information (and provide it in hard copy) or include that information on customer receipts, both digital and paper. Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia allow voters to register online<sup>20</sup>—companies should direct voters to these online registration portals when possible. However, they should also provide information on in-person registration options for those who may not have easy access to the Internet.
2. **Help notify employees about voter registration.** Similarly, it's an easy lift for companies to provide this information to their own employees so that registering to vote takes up less time that could be spent on work and family obligations.

3. **Host voter registration and absentee ballot application drives at high-traffic locations.** Taking the step of actually registering corporate employees to vote is a great idea. Even better, however, is using high-traffic and, particularly, outdoor locations to offer voter registration to everyone, with appropriate social distancing in place. The coronavirus has made voter registration drives difficult or impossible for many of the usual hosts such as churches, schools, and nonprofits.<sup>21</sup> But holding voter registration drives outside of grocery stores, drive-thrus—and even less conventional spots such as food banks and coronavirus testing facilities—could enable people to register who otherwise might find it to be very difficult.
4. **Recruit the help of celebrities, local and national, to encourage the public to register to vote and remind people of important election deadlines.** In some cases, the leaders of companies themselves are influential in their communities, on social media, and in other public forums. They should use their platforms to encourage voter registration and voting, and they should enlist others to do so as well. Product sponsors or corporate mascots could also serve as messengers.

#### Ways to help encourage voting by mail and early voting

Voting by mail is a time-tested, secure, and efficient way to run elections—indeed, members of the military have been voting by mail since the Revolutionary War.<sup>22</sup> Although every state offers absentee ballots to at least some voters, many states have recently expanded their mail-in voting options to allow more people to vote by mail during the pandemic. This is a critical step for keeping voters safe—it eliminates the need for in-person contact, and it reduces the burden on polling places on Election Day. But many voters have never voted by mail and are not familiar with the process; they may need additional education to successfully cast a ballot by mail.

Additionally, for those who can't vote by mail, or who choose to vote in person, early voting is another way to vote more safely and reduce crowds on Election Day. Encouraging both vote by mail and early voting—by implementing the ideas below—may be the best way to safely accommodate every voter.

5. **Help educate your audience, customers, and employees about voting by mail and early voting.** Some voters need to be educated on the importance of voting by mail, the process of obtaining a mail-in ballot, and applicable deadlines for requesting and returning mail-in ballots. For those who choose to vote in person, they should also be informed of early voting opportunities. As with voter registration information, any company that has the ability to communicate with employees, customers, or the wider public can help disseminate this information.
  - **In particular, emphasize the importance of signature requirements for absentee ballots.** Voters are generally required to affix a signature to their mail-in ballots or the accompanying envelope. And what many of them fail to realize is that, unlike most things that require a signature in daily life, the appearance of this signature matters—mail-in ballots may be rejected if the ballot signature does not

match a signature on file, typically a signature from the voter's state ID. The most common reason that absentee ballots were rejected in 2016 was because they had a nonmatching signature or no signature at all. Collectively, these signature issues accounted for nearly half of all rejected absentee ballots.<sup>23</sup> Companies should inform voters that it is essential that they sign their ballot so that the signature matches the one on their state-issued ID (often a driver's license).

6. **Provide absentee ballot applications to employees or customers, where possible.** In some states, companies can distribute absentee ballot applications to employees and the wider public and even provide postage, depending on state law.
7. **Provide paid time off for employees to vote—by mail or in person.** As noted above, many companies have already made a commitment to ensure their employees have a schedule that allows them time to vote. Every company should not only make this promise but also commit to a simple strategy for implementing it: paid time off. It is often not easy to make time to register to vote, or to apply for an absentee ballot, or to go to an in-person polling location, particularly in the midst of a pandemic during which many employees are also balancing child care at home and other responsibilities. Allocating paid time off for these activities would make it straightforward and easy for employees to take care of their civic responsibilities.
8. **Provide mail-processing equipment.** One of the biggest challenges that many election officials are facing is how to count an unprecedented number of mail-in ballots. Lack of sufficient equipment to open envelopes and extract ballots could cause delays in ballot counting and create uncertainty about election results. Companies that have access to mail-processing equipment, and that would be willing to lend it to election officials, would be performing a major public service. Companies should check to make sure that providing equipment to election officials is consistent with state and local law.
9. **Offer spaces for ballot drop boxes.** An emerging challenge to mail-in voting is the capacity of the U.S. Postal Service. However, a number of localities have provided safe and fast return of absentee ballots via secure ballot drop boxes that are placed throughout a community. Companies that have property at convenient locations can volunteer their space for the placement of such drop boxes.

### Ways to encourage voting safety on Election Day

Even if efforts to increase early voting and voting by mail are a wild success, there are still those who, for a variety of reasons, depend on the availability of in-person voting on Election Day.<sup>24</sup> It remains essential, therefore, that there are enough polling places, with enough safety measures in place, to serve all in-person voters on November 3. Right now, these facilities are expected to be “strained beyond capacity”<sup>25</sup>—which is why one of the centerpieces of Business for America's Operation Vote Safe is encouraging businesses to find ways to help local election officials tackle Election Day challenges, including by implementing some of the recommendations below.

10. **Offer large spaces to be used as polling locations—including lobbies, sports arenas, and other well-ventilated areas where it is easy to social distance.** So far, the entire NBA and four additional professional sports teams have agreed to allow their stadiums to be used as early voting locations.<sup>26</sup> Any companies that have large spaces available should reach out to their local election officials as soon as possible, while planning for polling locations is still underway.
11. **Provide safe and free transportation to the polls.** For individuals who vote in person, either early or on Election Day, public transportation is another possible risk for spread of the coronavirus. But not everyone has easy access to transportation during polling hours. Lyft has already made a commitment to provide free rides to polling places. City bike-share and scooter companies should also offer free transportation options—two-wheeled transport is a great option for social distancing for those who live within biking distance of a polling place. The scooter and bike-sharing company, Lime, provided promo codes for free rides to the polls in 2018 and has announced its intent to do the same in 2020, in addition to providing voter registration information through the Lime app.<sup>27</sup>
12. **Provide polling places with much-needed supplies.** Election administrators are in need of a wide array of supplies to help equip new polling locations: pens, paper towels, duct tape, tables, and chairs. Additionally, they're sorely in need of materials to keep those polling places safe: hand sanitizer, plexiglass barriers, face masks, and other sanitary equipment. Companies that have an excess of these supplies—perhaps for offices that are currently closed—could provide much-needed assistance by offering them to local election administrators. Some companies have even shifted production to be able to donate these supplies; for example, brewing company Anheuser-Busch has announced that it is making hand sanitizer to provide to polling places.<sup>28</sup> RB Sigma, a provider of medical equipment, is contributing hundreds of thousands of surgical masks to the Ohio secretary of state to protect voters and poll workers.<sup>29</sup> Technology companies, which rely less on physical equipment, could also assist by providing cybersecurity and election technology consulting.
13. **Provide support and protective gear to voters waiting in line.** Even with other support, some voters may end up waiting in long lines. Companies could implement an Election Day plan to ensure that those who are waiting are able to do so safely and comfortably, providing food and water, umbrellas, and chairs for those who cannot stand for long periods of time—as well as masks and hand sanitizer. They could also pay local artists to provide socially distanced entertainment.

**Note:** Federal law prohibits the making of payments to individuals as an incentive to vote<sup>30</sup> or providing other things of value.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, corporations routinely offer free or discounted goods and services to voters, and federal authorities do not appear to have ever enforced this prohibition against such nonpartisan efforts.<sup>32</sup> However, companies should consult their lawyers and consider not making any free goods or services contingent on casting a ballot (e.g., offer any discounts or freebies to all comers on Election Day, not merely those who display an “I Voted” sticker).

### Ways to help recruit and retain poll workers

One Election Day necessity is in uniquely short supply: workers to operate the polling places. Traditionally, most poll workers are older adults who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. As a result, many of them are declining to work at the polls this year, and there are severe shortages of willing poll workers. In Kentucky alone, the state needs an additional 15,000 workers to operate the polls.<sup>33</sup> Even in states where voting has been conducted almost entirely by mail, election workers are needed to help with voter registration, ballot counting, and other election-related tasks. Below are some ways companies can help recruit and retain those workers. Note that poll worker training and other requirements vary by location, but one source of general information on volunteering as a poll worker is PowerThePolls.org.<sup>34</sup>

14. **Invite employees who are at low risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms to volunteer as poll workers—and give them paid time off to do so.** Young professionals without health complications may be among those best situated to volunteer on Election Day if they have the option of taking time off of work. Of course, companies may have reservations about asking their employees to volunteer, given reasonable fears about the coronavirus. One way to mitigate those concerns is simply to be clear, in any communications, that volunteering at the polls carries some risk and that doing so is fully at the discretion of individual employees. Companies could also take the step of providing free PPE to all employees who volunteer as poll workers.
15. **Recognize—and incentivize—the service of poll workers.** In the current environment, poll workers are taking a personal risk in order to serve their community. Companies could celebrate that service by finding ways to publicly recognize poll workers. They could even work with local election officials to raffle off prizes to poll workers or to provide them with gift cards and other rewards for their service, if state and local laws permit.
16. **Offer free child care for corporate employees or other individuals serving as poll workers.** One major obstacle to all kinds of work during the pandemic is a shortage of child care. Providing child care would make it much easier for parents with families to contribute their time. Ideally, child care services would be conveniently located—at polling locations if space permits. But such services must comply with public health guidelines and applicable state law.

17. **Ask corporate executives to lead by example by volunteering as poll workers themselves.** For those corporate leaders or other high-profile individuals who are not in high-risk categories, volunteering as a poll worker and publicizing that choice is an excellent way to encourage others to give their time as well. It also demonstrates a very tangible commitment to helping the community.

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### When companies should help: As soon as possible

Election Day is now less than 60 days away. Some of the suggestions above can be implemented even in the days and weeks immediately prior to the election. But many of the most critical policies—expanding polling-place and drop-box locations; providing mail-in ballot supplies; recruiting poll workers—have to happen relatively soon in order to be effective.

With that in mind, companies should decide on how they are going to help as soon as possible. Those that do will have healthier employees, customers, and communities—and the thanks of a grateful nation.

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