

COVID-19 Underscores the Need for Voting Reform in Michigan

Michigan election officials have taken important steps to begin expanding vote-by-mail (VBM) for the November 2020 election, but the state still faces an unprecedented challenge in providing safe and secure voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only one-quarter of votes were cast by mail in 2016, higher than most states, but much less than a VBM surge expected in 2020. Michiganders need to make a number of administrative changes to their VBM process—especially with regard to voter eligibility, ballot processing, and emergency early in-person voting—to be prepared for November.

Specifically, Michigan election officials need to scale up their capacity for VBM, expand the provision of emergency early voting centers, ensure that voters can track their ballots, and require that all counties follow best practices for ballot verification, notification, and ability to correct ballot discrepancies.

Community Health

Some of Michigan's cities have large Black populations, and the COVID-19 outbreak has devastated these communities. Overall, about one-third of Michigan's confirmed cases are Black people, even though only one in seven Michiganders is Black (Burns 2020). Although Michigan expanded coverage of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act in 2014, the state's residents suffer racial and economic inequities in access to health care and other basic services and in health outcomes (Latner 2019).

Michigan is below the national average in terms of state health risks linked to pollution and environmental toxins exposure (US News n.d.). Health disparities and environmental injustice remain widespread in part because voters are not adequately or accurately represented in the state legislature, which is elected from some of the most gerrymandered districts in the country (Keena et al. 2019). Despite a successful reform

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Health and Democracy in Michigan by the Numbers

- 7** rank among states in COVID-19 deaths as of July 6
- 38** rank among states in overall life expectancy
- 34** rank among states for electoral integrity
- 25** percent of 2016 voters who voted mail/absentee

SOURCES: JHU CCI N.D.; NORRIS AND GRÖMPING 2019; EAC 2017; BROWNSTEIN 2019.

movement resulting in the passage of initiatives to clean up Michigan's elections, the legislature has fought to insulate itself from public accountability. This year, the health and safety of voters must be put first.

The Decennial US Census, currently under way, is the basis for political representation in the United States. Michigan's representation in Congress and Michiganders' representation in their own statehouse suffer because the state has several geographic pockets where low census response rates are coupled with lower health (e.g., life expectancy). These regions deserve the same level of political representation and access to clean air and water as any, but action is needed to ensure that all voices in Michigan are heard.

How to Build a Healthier Democracy

Rather than provide every eligible voter a mail ballot, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced on May 19 that all registered voters will receive a VBM application for the August 4 primary and November 3 general elections (SOS 2020). Applications add another costly layer to getting every voter a ballot, which can exacerbate racial, age, and partisan disparities (Morris 2020). Other legislation has been introduced to reduce barriers,

including bills to expand permanent absentee voting, ease voter ID qualifications, and enable electronic transmission of voter ID cards (VRL 2020). Given that it is not known exactly how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect voting this November, Michigan needs to improve capacity drastically. Action must be taken to protect voters' health while increasing access to voting, including the establishment of voting centers where people can register and receive and submit ballots at least two weeks prior to Election Day (Gaber and Campbell 2020). Strategically placed drop-off boxes and early-voting centers located in communities with a history of lower VBM rates will also help reduce the risk of long lines and viral contagion on Election Day (Herron and Smith 2014).

Michigan needs to improve ballot verification training for verification judges and publicly post certification of that training prior to Election Day. Voters should be provided self-adhesive, postage-paid envelopes to return their ballots, and any ballot received by Election Day must be counted (Weiser and Feldman 2020). If a ballot is not initially verified, the voter should receive timely (two to three days) notice and either be sent a new ballot or be provided alternative methods of verifying the authenticity of their vote, within eight days of the final canvass report (UCLA VRP 2020).

For More Information

At UCS, we know that voting is at the heart of people power in a functioning democracy. It is how we choose between competing policy agendas and priorities, how we govern the institutions that govern us. And, crucially, it is how we hold our leaders accountable when they fail to serve the public interest. This election, we are working toward a healthier democracy—one that represents the people and allows science to better serve the public. We, together with our partner organizations, are committed to ensuring that marginalized communities, such as communities of color and low-income communities, are at the forefront of the conversation so political decisions will

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Electoral Preparedness in Michigan

Voting Protocol	Available?
Automatic voter registration	Yes
Online voter registration	Yes
Same-day registration	Yes
No-excuse mail voting	Yes
Early in-person voting	Yes
Statutory ballot tracking	No
Provisions for voters to correct rejected ballots	Needs revision
Ballot rejection procedures	Needs revision
Audits with verifiable ballots	Not required
Voting Protocol Utilized in 2016 US Presidential Election	Percent of Votes Cast in Michigan
Voting by mail	25%
Early in-person voting	2%

Note: Ballot correction and rejection procedure quality are determined relative to recommended national standards and current practices in states such as Colorado and Utah. See UCLA VRP 2020.

SOURCES: BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE 2020; EAC 2017; VAH 2020; VRL 2020.

be made on behalf of the public good rather than narrow special interests.

To learn more about our work at the intersection of voting rights and environmental justice and how to get involved, please visit us: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/help-build-healthier-democracy>.

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