

COVID-19 Underscores the Need for Voting Reform in Arizona

Arizona has emerged as a battleground state in the struggle for voting equality and the fight to protect the health of voters. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Arizona voters cast their ballots by mail in 2016, demonstrating readiness for a surge in vote-by-mail (VBM) in 2020. However, Arizonans need to make a number of administrative changes to their VBM process—especially with regard to voter eligibility, ballot processing, and early in-person voting—in order to be prepared for November.

Arizonans have a history with VBM. In part because Arizonans can register as permanent absentee voters, about 80 percent of the state's votes were already expected to be cast by mail this November. The biggest threats to healthy democracy in Arizona concern whether voters can be safely registered prior to the election, whether all voters have an equal chance of having their votes count, and whether there will be open, safe, and sanitary polling places for early voting.

Community Health

Although Indigenous people make up less than 5 percent of the overall Arizona population, they make up 16 percent of the COVID-19 deaths for which race and ethnicity are known (Leingang 2020). Overall, Arizona is a healthy state, ranking 11th in life expectancy, but Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people experience the worst health. Arizona expanded Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act in 2014, but it has recently received waivers that reduce coverage for people who have serious health needs (Schubel 2019).

Similarly, although Arizona is near the national average in terms of state health risks due to air pollution and toxins exposure, the state's disadvantaged communities disproportionately bear the impact of summer heat and water contamination from mining (US News n.d.; Hollow 2009; James and Nicla 2019). Health disparities and environmental injustice remain widespread in part because voters are not adequately or accurately represented in the state legislature (Latner 2020).

Many Arizonans already vote by mail, but this system can be improved.

Health and Democracy in Arizona by the Numbers

17 rank among states in COVID-19 deaths as of July 6

11 rank among states in overall life expectancy

36 rank among states for electoral integrity

68 percent of mail/absentee votes cast in the 2016 US presidential election

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

The Decennial US Census, currently under way, is the basis for political representation in the United States. Arizona's representation in Congress and Arizonans' 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 Arizona are heard.

How to Build a Healthier Democracy

Given uncertainty about COVID-19's impact on voting this November, Arizona can ensure the safety of its citizens and credibility of its electoral process with a few election upgrades before the 2020 election. For example, Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) analyses show that facilitating automatic and same-day registration will improve voter eligibility and participation (Latner 2018). Action must also be taken to protect voters' health while increasing voting access, including the establishment of voting centers in rural areas and Indigenous tribal lands where people can register and receive and submit ballots at least

Electoral Preparedness in Arizona

Voting Protocol	Available?
Automatic voter registration	No
Online voter registration	Yes
Same-day registration	No
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 Arizona
Voting by mail	68%
Early in-person voting	3%

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 2016; VAH 2020; VRL 2020.

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).

Arizona 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

Arizona must establish same-day voter registration, early-voting centers, and improve their vote-by-mail protocols in order to protect voters' health.

of their vote, within eight days of the final canvass report. All voters should also be able to track their ballots electronically from when they are sent to when they are counted. UCS has collaborated with the UCLA Voting Rights Project and the University of New Mexico School of Social Policy to produce a report on the need for expanded access to VBM; it discusses these and similar recommendations (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 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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