



STATE OF MICHIGAN
JOCELYN BENSON, SECRETARY OF STATE
DEPARTMENT OF STATE
LANSING

Jocelyn Benson
Michigan Secretary of State

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Protecting America's Democracy: Ensuring Every Vote Counts

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Thank you, Chairman Thompson, and thank you members of the Committee on Homeland Security for inviting me here to speak today.

Democracy is a team sport. Every single one of us here today can agree that we want this fall's election to be successful. We want the vote to be fully and equally accessible to every voter, we want the system to be secure and protected against any threats, foreign or domestic, and we want every citizen to have full faith that the election results are a complete and accurate reflection of the will of the people.

Between a global pandemic and what seems near constant and escalating rhetoric and misinformation about our elections, 2020 has brought historic pressures on our ability to meet this goal. But meet this goal we must, and solutions are there to ensure that we do. I am here today to talk about those solutions, and to emphasize that your partnership – and the partnership of the entire federal government – is an important part of ensuring that success.

Running a Successful Election during a Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Michigan's August Primary

Earlier this month we held a statewide primary in Michigan which served as a blueprint for running safe, secure, accessible elections during the COVID-19 pandemic while also highlighting critical needs that, if addressed, can put every state on a path towards successful November elections.

First, it's clear that even in the midst of a global pandemic, citizens want to vote. More than 2.5 million Michigan citizens voted in our August primary, which – despite the absence of any contested statewide or other high profile races – was more people than ever before in any August primary in our state's history.

Next, citizens need to have a clear, reliable and safe option to vote early – whether in person or by mail. In Michigan, record numbers of citizens chose to vote prior to Election Day, with more than 1.6 million citizens requesting their ballots early and returning them either through the mail or in person at their clerk's office prior to Election Day. Importantly, this amount surpassed our state's previous record of nearly 1.3 million set in the 2016 *general* election. The dramatic increase underscores the importance of expanding of absentee and early voting options to all citizens, and ensuring they know about how to exercise those options.

In May, my decision to send every registered voter a paper application to request to have their ballot mailed to them prior to Election Day, along with the launch of a secure online portal for citizens to request to receive their ballots through the mail, were critical to educating voters about how to vote safely and remotely during a pandemic. Once received voters could return ballots through the mail, at one of our new secure drop boxes across the state, or in-person with their local clerk. While this drew inaccurate and inappropriate criticism from the president, at less than a dollar per voter, it was an extremely cost-effective way to inform voters of their right and ability to vote safely during the pandemic, and had the secondary benefit of serving as a statewide mailing to improve the accuracy of our voter rolls. We are now sending reminder postcards to active voters who have still not applied to vote absentee, and have implemented a statewide system to enable every voter to track their ballot to give them the confidence that it was received on time. The time-tested security provision in place of signature verification will continue to ensure we protect the system against any attempts of fraud. I must note, however, that mail-voting fraud is exceedingly rare. According to the Heritage Foundation's own database on average in each state it occurs only once every six years. As millions of ballots are cast by mail every election cycle, this means that the incidence of mail-voting fraud is infinitesimal. There is simply no evidence suggesting that it will be any different this year.

Finally, voters also need to be able to have the choice to vote in person on Election Day without risking their health. Throughout our state traditional polling places remained open for our August primary, staffed by many of the new election workers we recruited and trained through our statewide Democracy MVP program – which to date has recruited close to 10,000 new election workers. The locations were clean, calm, accessible and sanitized repeatedly throughout the day. Lines were short or nonexistent, social distancing guidelines eliminated the possibility of crowding, and election workers made good use of the personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies bought with federal CARES Act funds and provided to every jurisdiction by the state. Importantly, we even had election workers on standby to be able to account for no-shows or last-minute cancellations and provide new volunteers to ensure every jurisdiction was staffed.

Our primary election demonstrated that proactive, data driven planning and tireless work by state and local election officials, supported by federal resources, results in elections that are safe, secure, accessible and on schedule. This is a good sign for November, and our experiences this year have also underscored needed adjustments that must take place at the local, state and national level in the next three months to fully prepare for every contingency.

Running a Successful Election during a Pandemic: The Plan for November

We've now experienced first-hand why we must enact state policies that are in place in at least 18 other states, but not in Michigan, that allow clerks to begin the processing of absentee

ballots prior to Election Day. Election workers should begin Election Day counting ballots instead of unnecessarily spending hours opening envelopes and preparing ballots for tabulators. This enables more efficient reporting of election results and avoids unnecessary human error.

Our experience also underscores the critical need of recruiting and training a large number of new election workers to deploy in November. Partnerships with local businesses, large employers and sports teams, coupled with an aggressive statewide recruiting effort, enabled us to fill vacancies leading up to and on Election Day itself, ensuring sufficient personnel to open precincts and staff absent-voter-ballot counting boards.

Earlier this year, we prioritized coordination and communication with our state Postal Service leadership. This led to numerous operational improvements on both sides, a true partnership. For example, our Bureau of Elections redesigned our ballot envelopes to better align with USPS standards. This enables ballots to go as quickly as possible through USPS systems, and has reduced the incidence of ballots going undelivered and being returned to voters. The new design also more clearly shows where voters must sign the envelope – a critical security measure of absentee voting – reducing the potential for voter error leading to ballot rejection.

Now, the emerging challenges in efficient postal delivery with the United States Postal Service, exacerbated by a recent reduction in overtime allowances and other changes, have created enormous uncertainties for citizens seeking to utilize an otherwise safe, secure and reliable method to vote absentee. Like other states, Michigan has invested significant time and resources into adjusting its election infrastructure because it believes, and continues to believe, these changes will strengthen its partnership with the Postal Service in improving the voting experience for all Michiganders. It is critical that this partnership continue.

In Michigan we're planning for every contingency, including purchasing and placing close to 1,000 secure ballot drop boxes throughout the state for voters to utilize. We are also pushing for policies to ensure valid ballots postmarked by Election Day and received within a reasonable time will still count, ensuring that voters are not penalized for failures in federal leadership. (Notably, in our August primary, at least 6,400 mailed ballots were received in the days following Election Day and therefore were unable to be counted. We anticipate this number could at least double if changes are not made prior to November).

At this point nothing can truly replace the utility of a fully functioning postal service. The federal government must prioritize fixing these issues or face a potentially significant election crisis come November.

In fact, every need for November can be met with federal investment and support. The federal CARES Act funding was an important down payment on preparing our democracy for November that every state in the country has embraced and utilized. But it wasn't enough. Congress needs to act swiftly, not only to fully fund our postal service, but to provide needed additional funds to states as we continue to prepare for record breaking voter turnout this November.

Again, democracy is a team sport. If we work together we can succeed in holding elections this fall that are secure, on schedule, and an accurate reflection of the will of the people. It's possible, it's doable, and our voters should demand no less from their government.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.