Recommended Reforms to Protect Voters During the November 2020 Election

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Just Democracy Illinois is a broad-based non-partisan coalition of community groups striving to protect and promote the value of every vote, no matter the geographic, racial, ethnic, or party affiliation of the voter. Our steering committee is made up of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago, CHANGE Illinois, Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights, Chicago Votes, Common Cause Illinois, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and Illinois PIRG. In this time of crisis, our coalition will work to ensure that every eligible voter can exercise their fundamental right to vote in a safe manner in November.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Just Democracy Illinois is guided by its core tenets of community involvement, racial equity, and social justice, as well as the following principles:

- **Keep voters and our democracy secure and healthy.** No voter should have to risk their life in order to exercise their right to vote.
- **Expand voting options.** As many voters as possible should utilize options such as voting by mail, drop boxes, or voting early.
- **Not everyone can vote at home.** A blend of in-person and vote by mail options is the only way we can ensure fully accessible elections with safe and healthy voting for all.
- **Keep changes temporary.** During a crisis, no permanent changes should be made without community input and a race equity impact analysis.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Expand the Use of Vote by Mail**
2. **Ensure the Health and Safety of In-Person Voting**
3. **Secure Maximum Federal Funding**
4. **Ensure the Safety of Poll Workers & Volunteers**
5. **Improve Online Voter Registration**
6. **Educate the Public About Voting Procedures**

1. **Expand the Use of Vote by Mail**

   Every eligible voter who wishes to vote by mail should have ample opportunity to request, receive, and return a vote by mail ballot. We
recommend that election authorities:

- Center racial equity and access for all eligible voters in deciding how to increase vote by mail participation, including vigorous outreach and sending every registered voter an application or ballot. If applications are sent, they should be sent up to three times in advance of the November election, including a pre-paid envelope for returning the form, with sufficient time to receive and return completed ballots.
- Create a universal online ballot request form hosted by the State Board of Elections and provide each voter with the capacity to track their ballot online.
- Ensure that voters eligible to vote in languages other than English receive ballots, ballot request forms, and other materials without additional barriers or burdensome processes.
- Use equitable practices for ballot processing, signature verification, ballot returns, integration of drop boxes and monitoring to guard against disenfranchisement of voters.
- Strengthen and promote Illinois’ permanent vote by mail process for eligible community members with disabilities (5-year list under current law).
- Extend current timelines to provide greater capacity for vote by mail processes, such as allowing 60 rather than 40 days to mail a requested ballot.

2. Ensure the Health and Safety of In-Person Voting

Not everyone can vote at home or feels comfortable doing so, and those who face challenges are disproportionately people of color. Especially given the racial disparities in voter registration access, the need for in-person Election Day Registration (and same day registration during early voting) is still great in Illinois. We recommend that election authorities:

- Collect community input before closing, reducing, or consolidating any polling places, reducing availability of bilingual election judges, reducing early voting time periods or locations, or reducing voter access or registration access in jails.
- No emergency restriction on voter access should be made permanent without a process for meaningful community engagement and a racial equity impact assessment.
- Simplify and streamline the process to ensure that hospitalized, homebound, and quarantined voters can access an emergency ballot.
- Guarantee that voters who applied for or received a mail-in ballot but decided to vote in person still have access to a regular ballot and are not improperly told to vote provisionally.
- Proactively inform voters of their rights against undue electioneering, pressure, or intimidation by candidates and campaigns.
3. **Secure Maximum Federal Funding**
   *We are committed to working with our elected officials and other stakeholders to advocate for as much federal funding as Illinois is eligible to receive, including HAVA funds, CARES Act funds and any additional stimulus packages.*

4. **Ensure the Safety of Poll Workers & Volunteers**
   *We recommend that election authorities:*
   
   - Develop a program with advocates such as Just Democracy Illinois to recruit and train younger election judges.
   - Provide personal protective equipment for election judges and maintain CDC safety standards at all polling places.
   - Audit current polling locations immediately for compliance with CDC standards and guidelines. If polling places are not compliant, find substitute sites with ample time to collect input from voters in those precincts and inform voters of location changes.

5. **Improve Online Voter Registration**
   *We recommend that the Illinois State Board of Elections:*
   
   - Increase online voter registration access for voters without a driver's license or state ID number, as young voters, seniors, and people recently released from incarceration are especially impacted by barriers to obtaining IDs, including the closures of Driver Services offices.
   - Add options to the online voter registration system for selecting language and mail-in ballot preference. The option to register online should be prominent wherever vote by mail ballot request forms are offered.

6. **Educate the Public About Voting Procedures**
   *A coordinated, culturally and linguistically appropriate public education campaign is required to inform diverse communities about voting and voter registration options, vote by mail procedures and deadlines, and steps to guard against disenfranchisement. We want to work in collaboration with election authorities, local governments, and other civil society organizations to:*
   
   - Promote widespread community awareness of the opportunity to vote by mail, including streamlined opportunities for returning voters to confirm their address and request to vote by mail again.
   - Promote widespread community awareness of the opportunity to vote in person during early voting.
• Develop a robust plan for tackling misinformation about voters’ rights.
• Prioritize outreach to voters who are excluded from traditional forms of outreach, including homeless voters; eligible voters in Cook County Jail, on mandatory supervised release, and released on bond; and citizens leaving prison who are eligible to reclaim their voting rights.
• Combat misinformation regarding voter eligibility for citizens in pretrial detention and formerly incarcerated citizens by, among other interventions, ensuring enforcement of Illinois’ new laws requiring civic education for citizens leaving prison or detention (Public Acts 101-441 and 101-442).