



South Carolina Association of Registration and Election Officials, Inc.

ISAAC CRAMER
CHAIRMAN
LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE

Dear Governor McMaster, Senator Peeler, and Speaker Lucas:

On behalf of local election directors and officials in South Carolina, we are writing to communicate what we believe is imperative for all future elections.

Specifically, we cannot overstate the devastating consequences if the state of South Carolina does not plan now for the November election.

The following items are what we recommend for the conduct of elections in November:

- 1) No Excuse Absentee Voting
- 2) Remove the witness signature requirement
- 3) Allow counties to process ballots beginning the Friday before the election
- 4) Allow for the use of absentee ballot drop boxes

No Excuse Absentee Voting

Due to the current pandemic, No Excuse Absentee voting is more important than ever. In the recent June Primary, the legislature expanded absentee voting for all voters—creating an unprecedented number of absentee ballots. Based on our success and experience during the Primary Election, all voters should have the option to vote absentee by mail for the General Election. Addressing this decision now ensures that voters will have ample time to request and receive absentee ballots in a timely manner.

After conducting the 2020 Primary Elections, the resounding sentiment from election officials was that we need ample time to adjust and implement changes because of COVID-19. Usually by mail absentee voting accounts for 30% of the overall absentee vote. But this year we saw a 370 % increase—66% of ballots were cast by mail in the June Primary. This development required us to be prepared for a level of mail never seen in South Carolina.

Across South Carolina, numerous counties faced presidential election-like numbers in a compressed timeline, frustrating voters and making it increasingly difficult to mail and process applications in a timely manner. Advising the public that No Excuse Absentee Voting is available would allow voters to feel safer during this hectic time, as well as giving county officials time to prepare for the increase of absentee applications and ballots.

Furthermore, many voters are now confused about absentee voting because they were allowed to vote without an excuse in June. Almost daily, we receive absentee voting applications which have “Due to the Coronavirus” written by the voter as an excuse. We strongly advocate for eliminating the 17 reasons to vote absentee and giving ALL voters the ability to vote absentee. At the very least, we are in favor of adding a reason to vote absentee due to the “state of emergency.” Expanding the option to vote absentee to all will ensure our voters stay safe during any pandemic or natural disaster.

Remove the witness signature requirement

Removing the witness signature requirement has been a priority of SCARE's. Regardless of voting in a pandemic or not, the witness requirement provides no safeguard other than punishing voters who are otherwise eligible to vote. While we can validate a voter's signature in the voter registration database, there is no way to validate a witness signature. Moreover, many voters are struggling to cope with the idea that they must find someone else to sign their ballot while sticking to social distancing requirements. A large portion of our voters are older than 65, and they are at high risk for COVID-19. There should be no barriers to voting, but the witness signature requirement forces voters to risk their health to participate in an election.

We advise not waiting for a judge to make a determination days before the election. When Judge Michelle Childs made her ruling on May 26th, counties across South Carolina had to scramble to reprint materials to notify voters that witness signatures were no longer required.

Allow Counties to Process Ballots Beginning the Friday before the election

We cannot thank the legislature and governor enough for allowing counties to open outer envelopes the day before the election. However, based on our experience in June, there is still not enough time. Counties can only open the outer envelope (25% of the actual process) the day before the election, leaving them to open the "ballot here in" envelope, unfold the ballot, tear each stub from the ballot, and begin to flatten the ballots on Election Day. And even after all the ballots are opened and flattened, high-speed scanners can only scan roughly 50 ballots per minute.

In one example from June 8th, the day before the Primary, removing the outer envelope of approximately 3,000 ballots took six hours. On Tuesday morning it took 7 ½ hours for the election workers to complete the process of opening the "ballot here-in," removing the ballot, tearing the stub, flattening the ballot, and reading them into the scanner for tabulating. Based on the numbers from June, we expect the number of absentee ballots to either double or triple in November. In the 2016 General Election this county had over 14,000 absentee ballots. For 2020, simply doubling the number of absentee ballots would severely delay elections results.

We believe election officials need more time to start the processing of absentee ballots. While it was a needed change, the current law has only increased our efficiency by 25%. Therefore, we propose allowing each county to begin opening the outer envelope on Friday, and then allowing them to begin processing absentee ballots on Monday. All results would be given at 7 p.m., Tuesday, when polls close.

Allow for the use of ballot drop boxes

As the increase in absentee by mail voting occurs, voters need a secure method to return ballots without entering congregated areas. Contactless delivery of ballots can be accomplished by providing secure drop boxes, as used statewide in Utah, Arizona, and other states. Owned by the county office, these boxes would act as a safe receptacle for ballots. Statistics show that as the number of ballot drop boxes in a county increases, the number of ballots returned in drop boxes also increases. Additionally, drop boxes would reduce the traditional reliance on USPS couriers—removing the "middle man" between the voter and the county.

There are proper procedures and laws to govern drop boxes. Language of the bill could be as follows:

The local county elections office must prevent overflow of each ballot drop box to allow a voter to deposit his or her ballot securely. Ballots must be removed from a ballot drop box by at least two people, with a record kept of the date and time ballots were removed, and the names of people removing them. Ballots from drop boxes must be returned to the counting center in secured transport containers. A copy of the record must be placed in the container, and one copy must be transported with the ballots to the counting center, where the seal number must be verified by the county auditor or a designated representative. All ballot drop boxes must be secured at 7:00 p.m. on the day of the primary, special election, or general election.

Final Thoughts

Protecting our voters is our goal. While this idea means conducting open and fair elections, it also extends to the health of our community. Following our four recommendations would protect the public by minimizing crowds and long lines during in-person voting. By allowing no excuse absentee voting and removing the witness signature, South Carolina can display its leadership across this nation through protecting the public health of its citizens. Our election officials need adequate time to implement the policies, processes, and procedures for the November 3, 2020 presidential election. It is critical that the legislature act quickly in regards to the conduct of the election so we may focus our resources effectively and plan for our future successfully.

Respectfully,



KATY SMITH, CERA
PRESIDENT
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE



ISAAC CRAMER
CHAIRMAN
LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE

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