Virus-proofing the Vote:
An analysis of Illinois March 17th Primary Election & Recommendations for the November General Election
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois’ March 17th primary: An Analysis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended Statewide Reforms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand access to absentee voting, transition to vote by mail</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded early voting locations and hours</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritizing clear and consistent communication with voters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properly staffing and preparing polling places</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Cause Illinois Programs</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt a Polling Place</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Protection</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illinois held its primary election on Tuesday, March 17, 2020, under a cloud of controversy as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, which was already affecting the state. Illinois had its first reported case of COVID-19 on January 24, 2020, via a traveler from Wuhan, China. Six weeks later, on March 8th, state officials suspected the first confirmed case of community transmission (the state's 7th confirmed COVID-19 case). The following day, on March 9, 2020 -- eight days before the scheduled primary election -- Governor JB Pritzker issued a disaster proclamation for the state.

The governor's proclamation of a state of emergency increased pressure from health officials and community and organizational leaders to delay the election. While the Chicago Board of Elections considered the idea, it reportedly "received strong pushback from elected officials in favor of sticking to the schedule." Tensions continued to mount between city and state officials over the issue of delay, culminating in the following exchange the morning of the election between the Governor's chief of staff and the spokesperson for the Chicago Board of Elections:

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Illinois was not the only state dealing with the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on its primary elections. The day before Ohio’s primary, also scheduled for March 17th, Governor Mike Dewine asked courts to delay the election. Ultimately, in person voting was cancelled and the legislature passed a law extending absentee voting to April 28th. On March 14th, Georgia’s primary,

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originally scheduled for March 24th, was postponed to May 19th. Since then, several other states have postponed their primary elections.

Ultimately, Illinois chose not to delay its election, and voters headed to the polls on March 17th under a cloud of uncertainty. There, many voters were met with problems, prompting an immediately blame game in the early hours of voting, with the spokesperson for the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners saying it was the Board’s preference to have delayed the election and that “this was a snowball we could all see coming down the hill.”

One of the biggest issues was the closing or changing of polling locations, with little to no advance notice. Some polling places were changed early -- specifically, those that were closed the first week of March because they were nursing homes or other venues with high-risk populations. Ultimately, over 170 sites were relocated. Still, “nearly 50 housing facilities for low-income seniors were used as polling locations” on election day.

Meanwhile, in addition to the planned polling place closures that were announced in the days before the election, many polling places were closed on an emergency basis the morning of the election due to a shortage of poll workers. Chicago election officials recognized the potential issue regarding poll

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workers not showing up before the election, with Chicago Board of Elections Chair Marisel Hernandez pleading with healthy residents to “Please, please heed our call and volunteer. Help us.”

Election officials increased the rate of pay and even waived training requirements, offering to deputize poll workers on the spot. The governor’s office stated that it had offered to send in the National Guard to staff polling places, but that city election officials reportedly refused the offer.

As a result, voters took to social media to complain about getting to their designated polling place only to find it closed and being redirected to other polling places, some miles away from their neighborhood. Below is a sampling of complaints posted publicly regarding polling place closures on Election Day:

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Ben Bradley @BenBradleyTV · Mar 17
Our local polling place is closed. Sign (and @cookcountyclerk website) say my closest polling place is Bridgeview courthouse, 12 miles away. That’s not going to be good for turnout.

WE ARE NOT A POLLING PLACE TODAY – YOUR CLOSEST POLLING PLACE IS IN BRIDGEVIEW

Clevo @ClevoZW · Mar 17
Voting today was quite the ride in Chicago. The polling place, I was supposed to go to was closed down. We went to the place that we were directed to from our original place. We get there and it’s the wrong place.

Achronal Art @AchronalA · Mar 17
Our 5th ward 1st precinct polling place at 5480 S. Kenwood was CLOSED without notice. We had to go to the Canter School at 4990 S. Blackstone & they didn’t have the proper equipment so we had to cast provisional ballots.

#VoterSuppression #ElectionDay #Chicago @GovPritzker
In addition to polling place closures, voters reported long lines that posed a health risk to voters:

Emma Tai @emmachungming · Mar 17
170 people in line at the West Belmont Library in the 36th Ward, trying to do their civic duty under the most wretched of circumstances. This is a public health disaster.
Others reported that polling places were ill-equipped to deal with the pandemic, lacking sanitizing supplies and communication with election officials.

The chaotic primary quickly led to a debate to assign blame between local and state officials. In the end, it was a failure across levels of government that led to these serious problems. Ultimately, despite fears about the coronavirus, overall Illinois turnout “was just slightly below average.” The state saw an increase in early voting (600,000 vs 423,000 in 2016) and vote by mail (296,000 vs 162,000 in 2016).¹¹

RECOMMENDED STATEWIDE REFORMS

Unfortunately, it does not appear that the coronavirus pandemic will resolve in time to be of no concern for the November election. Indeed, experts generally agree that the U.S. will likely see a resurgence of cases in the fall following a summer abatement of infection, with the nation however being better prepared in terms of capacity and therapeutics to deal with the effects of the virus.\textsuperscript{12}

**Illinois must learn from its March primary and prepare now to protect the vote in November.**

**Expand access to absentee voting, transition to vote by mail**

As the pandemic grows, the national debate is now focused on voting by mail in order to avoid exposing vulnerable populations to the virus and to adhere to social distancing guidelines.

Currently, eligible Illinois voters must file an application to vote by mail, and their ballot is considered an "absentee" ballot under Illinois law (10 ILCS 5/1-3.5). This is in contrast to true vote by mail states like Oregon where all eligible voters are mailed a ballot and no request is necessary.

Transitioning to an all vote by mail system is a complex, costly, and time-consuming process, and state officials would be unable to implement such a system by November. **Illinois should immediately focus then on expanding access to its current absentee voting system.**

First, the state must embark on a broad Public Education Campaign, in cooperation with community organizations across the state, informing voters of their right to vote by mail. Ideally, this campaign begins in late summer 2020 and extends up to Election Day.

Second, the state must work with local election authorities to create a central website to accept absentee voting applications. Currently, there is a patchwork across the state at the county level in terms of online access to such an application and ease of use.

Third, every eligible voter should be mailed a notice of the application process and deadlines, and be directed to complete the form online. The state should use data from the U.S. Census Bureau to determine internet access and should mail a printed application to the same households who received a printed census questionnaire in their first census mailing. This process should begin in late August/September 2020.

Fourth, there must be clear procedures in place to accommodate those who have requested or received an absentee ballot but who choose to vote in person instead. Such procedures must be a core part of poll worker training. Notices should be posted or distributed at polling locations advising voters of their right to cancel their absentee ballot and vote in person instead.

Fifth, election officials should work to protect the interests of those who may be hospitalized in the weeks leading up the election. For example, Cook County permits Hospital/Nursing Home/Rehabilitation Center Voting but limits it to fourteen days before an election, requires a signed certification from a doctor, and requires that the form then be physically delivered to the county clerk’s office. Given that COVID-19 patients are often hospitalized for weeks at a time, election officials should reevaluate such requirements.
Sixth, election officials must prioritize the health of the workers who will be processing the influx of vote by mail applications and ballots. This includes ensuring there is enough staff to meet demand and providing staff with safe working conditions including protective masks, gloves, and sanitizer where appropriate.

**Expanded early voting locations and hours**

State officials must also anticipate record high turnout, despite coronavirus fears, and accordingly spread out voting as much as possible over as long a period as possible. Illinois should learn from neighboring Wisconsin, which is held a high-stakes primary on April 7th and saw widespread poll worker resignations and polling place closures.13

Illinois must not make the same mistakes and it should not presume that an increase in absentee voting will dramatically ease congestion at the polls, especially if, as in the primary, the number of polling places are reduced across the state and record turnout is anticipated.

Much like health officials are attempting to “flatten the curve” to ease hospital capacity during the coronavirus pandemic, so should election officials work to flatten the turnout curve by greatly expanding early voting locations and hours.

**Prioritizing clear and consistent communication with voters**

Voters are generally accommodating polling place changes, should they receive enough notice in advance. While it may not be possible to ensure timely communication for every polling place closure, election officials should strive to be in clear and constant communication with voters across mediums with

13 https://twitter.com/MollyBeck/status/1245479118516490240
regard to the status of their designated polling place. Ideally, election officials would embrace an opt-in text notification program where voters are notified of any last-minute polling changes. At a minimum, election officials should agree on a protocol to (1) make polling place closure decisions as early in the process as possible and (2) inform voters of such decisions across mediums (television, internet, and mail if possible).

**Properly staffing and preparing polling places**

Learning from the primary election, it is clear that election officials across Illinois must **aggressively recruit a new generation of poll workers** from a population poll that is low-risk for serious COVID-19. No poll worker should have to choose between risking their health or serving their democracy.

On Election Day, every effort should be made to protect these workers as well as voters. Measures that should be considered include supplying each polling place with hand sanitizer, masks, wipes for the machines, as well as masking tape to mark out social distancing barriers, and clear instructions that voting booths should also maintain such required distance. **Ideally, there would be a separate hotline established to deal with coronavirus-related election issues**, such as a lack of supplies or failure to adhere to social distancing, so that election officials can clearly deal with those issues versus issues like machine malfunction or ballot questions.
Common Cause Illinois has members and supporters across the state, and our organization is ready to mobilize them to help protect the vote in November.

**Adopt a Polling Place**

One of the clear lessons learned from the March primary is that protecting our elections is a multifaceted effort. Our proposed Adopt a Polling Place program would be available to individuals as well as organizations and would empower them to serve as an assigned resource to ensure that a given polling place operates as smoothly as possible on Election Day.

**Recruiting and train a new generation of poll workers**
A top priory for our volunteers will be recruiting polling place workers from their community. Specifically, we anticipate they will work with us, local school districts, and Campus Compact to recruit eligible high school students and college students over the summer, with a goal of recruiting at least 500 new poll workers across the state.

**Ensuring accurate and timely communications**
Another responsibility for our Adopt a Polling Place volunteers will be to monitor and report any polling place changes, especially last minute ones. Key to this will be to build relationships with other groups in the local community who can then disseminate this critical information to their members as well.

**Protecting the Polling Place**
On Election Day, our Adopt a Polling volunteers will be equipped with a Go-Box for each polling place, which will include sanitizer, wipes, paper towels, measuring tape, etc. and a 1-866-OUR-VOTE yard sign to place outside the...
polling place. Complying with all federal, state, and local laws and requirements, they will offer to assist in ensuring any social distancing guidelines are adhered to and offer to help poll workers move chairs, voting booths, etc. as needed and as appropriate. Importantly, they’ll serve as frontline observers to be able to flag issues that may not be reported into the Election Protection hotline.

**Rallying the Vote**

Finally, one of the key tasks for our Adopt a Polling Place volunteers is to rally the vote and encourage community at the polling place. We will help them organize poster making, balloons, etc. to create a welcoming environment for voters who do go to the polls, and to aid those who may be waiting in long lines (helping to find seating for elderly or disabled voters, ordering Pizza to the Polls, etc.)

**Election Protection**

Unfortunately, as we have recently seen with the primary election in Wisconsin, a pandemic does not suspend nefarious attempts to suppress the vote. This November, not only will voters face unprecedented challenges at the polls because of health concerns, but they will still face traditional election issues such as suppression, equipment malfunction, and more. This year, our Election Protection program will be more important than ever.

Traditionally, Common Cause Illinois has worked with the Election Protection network (1-866-OUR-VOTE), and we will continue to be a critical partner in that endeavor in November, staffing phone lines and offering live voter support across the state.

In addition, we will continue our recruitment of Election Protection Poll Monitors, stationed at their local polling location to serve as a resource to voters and to monitor and identify any issues that appear on election day. Training these volunteers will take on special importance this year as they will be trained
not simply on traditional election issues (voters being turned away from the polls, a lack of necessary materials, voter suppression efforts, closed polling places, etc.) but our training program will be expanded to deal with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on our election systems as well.

Finally, our experience in the primary and our study of the Wisconsin primer has led us to adopt a parallel virtual Election Protection program. For the first time, we will recruit online volunteers to serve as poll monitors online, trained and deployed to social networks to monitor for reports of election issues that may not be called in to 1-866-OUR-VOTE.

CONCLUSION

While the course of the coronavirus pandemic is unpredictable, one thing that is certain is that it will indeed impact the November 2020 election. Election officials cannot wait to begin implementing reforms to address the problems exposed in the March primary and to prevent additional problems during what is anticipated to be a presidential election with record turnout. Swift action is key. The scope of the problems and their corresponding proposed solutions are large, and successfully protecting the vote will require quick and comprehensive collaboration between state and local election officials as well as community organizations. Common Cause Illinois stands ready to help and ensure every eligible voter is able to exercise their right to vote in November.

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