

*Holding Power Accountable***Common Cause Urges Congress to Hold Emergency Hearings to Examine Wisconsin and Other States' Responses to Our Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

April 8, 2020

Dear Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Chairwoman Lofgren, and Ranking Member Davis:

Americans should not have to decide between risking their lives and exercising their right to vote. All Americans must have their voices heard and votes counted during the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of Common Cause's 1.2 million members, Congress must ensure that our democracy and the right to vote are protected during the COVID-19 crisis. As soon as Congress reconvenes, we strongly urge your committees to hold emergency hearings to examine why Wisconsin voters were forced to risk their lives by standing in lines at polling places on April 7<sup>th</sup>, as well as explore how other states are adjusting their elections to ensure that all voters can be counted during this pandemic.

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, thousands of Wisconsin voters were forced to make the decision of risking their lives by standing in line for hours or not being able to exercise their sacred right to vote. Throughout wars, the civil rights era, and much of the United States' history, millions of Americans have fought, and in some cases died, for the right to vote. It is unconscionable that Wisconsin unnecessarily forced its residents to decide between protecting their health and voting.

Wisconsin's decision not to switch its election day, as many states have already done, disproportionately affected communities of color. In Milwaukee, which is approximately 40% African American, only five of the initially planned 180 voting locations were open. Some voters in long lines were even forced to endure hail during a thunderstorm because people were not allowed inside due to social distancing. Additionally, at least 1.2 million Wisconsinites applied for absentee ballots, but ballots from several hundred thousand voters have not yet been received, meaning many of these voters may have been disenfranchised.

Congressional hearings must examine why Wisconsin failed to move its election to a later date or switched to predominantly vote-by-mail. Key questions that must be asked of Wisconsin's elected officials include:

- All other states with elections scheduled for April postponed their voting or shifted to predominantly vote-by-mail because of fears that holding an election in the midst of a pandemic could endanger poll workers and voters. During one of its emergency sessions, why didn't the legislature vote to move the April 7<sup>th</sup> election to a later date or extended the return of absentee ballots until a later date to allow more voters to participate by mail?
- If certain elected officials had to wear full head-to-toe personal protective equipment (PPE), which many Wisconsin voters presumably didn't have access to, in order to vote, why wouldn't the legislature move in-person voting to a later date to make the process safer for its residents?
- Wisconsin's failure to change its election date may lead to thousands of voters contracting coronavirus, hundreds of Wisconsinites dying, and hundreds of thousands of eligible voters being disenfranchised. Why didn't you follow the advice and recommendations of public health experts, other states' election officials, and many Wisconsin residents?
- For voters requesting an absentee ballot, why wouldn't the legislature waive the witness signature requirement, which meant that in order to vote absentee, a person who was quarantined had to be willing to expose oneself to the risk of COVID-19 and find a person willing to put themselves at risk as well?

Since 1970, [Common Cause](http://www.commoncause.org) has been working to hold power accountable through lobbying, litigation, and organizing. Our non-partisan, pro-democracy work has helped pass hundreds of reforms at the federal, state, and local levels. We now have 30 state chapters and more than 1.2 million members around the country who are working to strengthen our democracy.



The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge to our democracy, and Congress must immediately act to ensure no other states repeat Wisconsin's appalling inaction. In order for all Americans to have their voices heard and votes counted, Congress must invest in our democracy this year by immediately funding states with at least \$2 billion, or else we'll face potentially catastrophic consequences--millions of disenfranchised voters.

Thank you for protecting the health of our democracy, while simultaneously ensuring public health and strengthening our economy.

Sincerely,



Karen Hobert Flynn  
President  
Common Cause

cc: Members of the Senate Rules and Administration Committee and the Committee on House Administration

