

Oral Statement of

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Coronavirus and Homeland Security Virtual Forum Part 11: Election Security & Integrity
During a Pandemic

The Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives

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Thank you, Congressman Langevin and Congresswoman Underwood for hosting this important forum on the security and integrity of our elections during the pandemic. During this challenging time, there are three major threats to our election security that I would like to highlight for you.

1. Biggest security threat: Lack of preparedness

By far the biggest threat to our election security this November is the coronavirus—and the threat that our nation’s election administrators will not be prepared to run a safe, accessible, secure and credible election in the midst of a pandemic. Over 100,000 Americans have already died from the virus, and public health experts expect a resurgence this fall. We need to recognize the challenges that this imposes on our capacity to hold safe and secure elections.

To protect public health and to ensure fair and secure elections, we are going to need substantial changes to how we run elections this year. First and foremost, states will need to prepare for significant surges in absentee and mail voting—and ensure that every eligible voter can vote by a mail ballot if they want one. They will also need to ensure that everyone has access to safe and accessible polling places, including by extending early voting; that every voter has remote access to voter registration; and that there are adequate cybersecurity measures in place, among other things.

Whether or not any election rules change, we are still going to see significant changes to how Americans vote. Most American voters are already entitled to an absentee or mail ballot, and more and more are choosing that option this year. In Wisconsin, for example, 73% of voters chose to vote absentee in the primary, compared to 6% in 2018. In Nebraska, a whopping 85% of voters voted absentee. As of a week ago, Pennsylvania has already received more than 16 times the absentee ballot requests as the primary four years ago, and Georgia has already received 1.5 million requests, compared to 200,000 in the 2016 general election.

Election officials are working hard to make the changes needed, but the bottom line is that most are not yet prepared to handle a pandemic election. They don’t have the infrastructure, equipment, and staffing they need to run elections with so many mail ballots, or the resources to protect the health and safety of voters and election workers at polling places and elections offices, let alone to enhance security measures. They will not be prepared unless they get a substantial infusion of resources, which only Congress can provide.

This is a critical election integrity and security issue. At the most basic level, a lack of preparedness could threaten the health security of the American public, risking a dangerous spread of the virus. Indeed, there have already been reports of election officials and voters getting sick during the primaries. Our unpreparedness could also undermine the security of our democratic institutions. Our intelligence agencies report that the main goal of foreign adversaries is to undermine the legitimacy of our elections. If we cannot manage to run a credible and fair election, we will do their work for them. During the primaries, we have already seen glimpses of the problems that could be magnified in November. Large-scale breakdowns in our election systems and voter disenfranchisement could undermine Americans' confidence in the election and open the door to attacks on the legitimacy of American government and democracy.

We cannot allow this to happen. States and localities need support right now to protect our election. We estimate that this will cost \$4 billion, or \$3.6 billion over what Congress has already allocated. This is only a tiny fraction of the Congress's stimulus funds (only 0.02% of prior appropriations) a small price to pay for the health of our democracy and public.

2. Threat of malicious attacks on our election infrastructure and foreign interference

The second major threat is the risk of foreign interference and malicious attacks on our election infrastructure. The risks revealed in 2016 have not gone away. All U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies have warned that foreign adversaries are still actively seeking to undermine our institutions, and that American elections remain vulnerable to attack. The risks have only increased, since the virus has introduced new vulnerabilities and exacerbated old ones. For example, many officials are working from home, remotely accessing voter registration databases and other election systems. This presents significant security risks to our election infrastructure.

The virus has also exacerbated the risks of attack to our voter registration systems. In 2016, Russian operatives targeted registration systems in all 50 states. Ultimately, in several states, they successfully penetrated registration systems and were even in a position to delete or change voter data in at least one state. Attacks on voter registration systems could have even more devastating effects this year, given how central those systems are to administering absentee and mail voting. Attacks on online registration systems could prevent people from registering, or worse. Election officials need resources to protect against these threats too.

3. Threat of disinformation, including fear-mongering about voter fraud

Third, there is a significant threat that the election will be marred by disinformation, and fear-mongering about voter fraud. In fact, our national security experts warn that a key tactic Russia and others are deploying to attack our elections is spreading disinformation online. All the changes resulting from the pandemic make voters more vulnerable to disinformation, including to lies designed to prevent them from voting. In order to combat this, a significant investment in public education is key.

We also have a disinformation threat from within—the public relations campaign to undermine confidence in the integrity of America's absentee and mail ballot systems. There have been many unsubstantiated claims that these systems are rife with fraud, including by President Trump, but they are false. They are also damaging to our democracy. Such claims may cause vulnerable Americans to avoid obtaining and casting absentee ballots, putting their health at risk, or they may be used to justify unfair measures to restrict access to voting. Further, these kinds of false allegations are typically used to justify unfair measures to restrict access to voting. In fact, over the past decade, many states have used fraud as an excuse to put in place new laws that make it harder for eligible Americans to vote; many of which have been struck down or modified by courts finding they were intentionally discriminatory or unduly interfered with Americans' voting rights. These claims further undermine confidence in our election system, and our standing in the world as the leading democracy. If Americans do not trust election outcomes, it would strike the heart of the American system, which depends on such trust and peaceful transitions of power to function. What is more, Americans need to understand that our absentee and mail voting systems are secure.

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If we want to increase the overall security of our elections, we need to act quickly to ensure that election officials have the resources they need to run the election and to employ state-of-the-art security measures. By proactively addressing these three threats, we can ensure a safe, secure, and credible election this November. If we do not, our democracy will suffer.