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Opinion

Vermont Will Have Safe and Secure Elections Without Putting Public Health at Risk By Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos

The current public health crisis has been a serious test for us all, and it's also testing our democracy and how we respond in a crisis.

Just last week the Supreme Court voted 5-4, along ideological lines, to reject an extension of absentee ballot return deadlines for Wisconsin Primary voters, requiring hundreds of thousands to risk their health by standing in crowded lines at busy polling locations in order to exercise their Constitutional right to vote.

This decision failed the test, but things will be different in Vermont.

COVID-19 has infiltrated and upended so many aspects of our lives – we must make sure it does not also infect our democracy.

However, holding fair, free and accessible elections while protecting public health during times of social distancing may mean that as Vermonters we need to prepare to vote in an election that's different from the elections most of us are used to.

Asking voters to congregate at polling places and stand in lines is the opposite of social distancing. We must protect voters and poll workers while preserving the right to vote. No Vermonter should have to choose between their health and casting a ballot. So, there is no doubt in my mind that we will need to make some adjustments.

Here's the hard part: we have no idea what this pandemic will look like as we approach the August Statewide Primaries and November General Election, or what that will mean for the health of our communities, and how our elections are administered.

We also can't wait until the final hour to decide: if any changes are to be made to our Vermont elections process, they must be made soon so they can be carried out thoughtfully, carefully, and deliberatively, with the necessary planning and time to deploy.

There is no doubt in my mind, no matter the decision we make, our 2020 elections will rely on a significant increase in by-mail voting. Whether that means having a ballot sent to every registered voter

or pushing a much greater number of voters to request a ballot by mail through our existing election procedures, we will need to take the steps necessary to heavily reduce in-person voting at the polls on Election Day.

Fortunately, we are already well-positioned in Vermont.

Vermont's 45 day, no-excuse early/absentee voting system already allows any registered voter who wishes to vote early by mail to do so. In both the 2016 and 2018 General Elections roughly 30% of Vermont voters voted this way.

Online voter registration and ballot requests already make it so that voters can safely register to vote, request, and track their ballots without risking exposure for themselves, our Town Clerks, or election workers. For those without internet access, a ballot may be requested over the phone or by mail.

We worked with our Legislators, and the Governor's office, to ensure we have the flexibility to take whatever steps necessary so that every voter who wishes to vote can do so safely.

Vermont has received \$3,000,000 in COVID-19 relief funding from Congress for elections, giving us the resources necessary to successfully implement any necessary changes or expansions to our election procedures.

We will be working hand in hand with engaged stakeholders and partners, including our Town Clerks, who are the front doors to our democracy for Vermonters - I am so thankful for everything they do to administer our elections here in Vermont, and recognize that so many aspects of their jobs have become burdened with added challenges or responsibilities.

No matter what the COVID-19 pandemic situation looks like in August or November, we are doing the work now to make sure that Vermonters can safely exercise their Constitutional right to vote. No one solution is a silver bullet, but as we weigh all of our options with our partners, we know we will find what's right for Vermont.

Regardless of the exact steps we take, as a voter you can help by making sure your registration information is up to date. Please take a moment to log in to your MyVoterPage at <https://mvp.vermont.gov> to make sure that both your registration address and your mailing address are correct and updated.

Our democracy must continue to thrive, even in times of crisis. Know that I, as your Secretary of State, won't settle for anything less than safe, secure, and accessible Vermont elections this year.

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