



## June Newsletter

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### **THOUGHTS FROM THE DIRECTOR:**

LATOYA THOMPSON, ESQ

Happy June, Voter Protection Partners! The Mississippi legislature has reconvened, and it is time to see in whose interest our elected officials will act. We have recently heard some statements from our Secretary of State about the general election that prompted both applause and pause. As constituents, we should demand that our leaders are attentive to (1) our health and safety, (2) our right to participate in an election free of avoidable voter suppression, and (3) the facts, including understanding historical and statistical data concerning elections. Our team is committed to facilitating legislative advocacy this month to put pressure on our elected officials to protect both our lives and our right to vote, regardless of party, race, or other categories with which we might associate. We hope you will join us in the fight for a safe and fair election in November by signing up at [www.msdpvoterprotection.com](http://www.msdpvoterprotection.com).

### **Voting Changes Ahead**

#### **Secretary of State Michael Watson**

On May 17, 2020, MS Secretary of State, Michael Watson, released an op-ed entitled [Secretary Watson Election Contingency Op-Ed](#) in which he outlined his current plans for the November election. Watson recognized the challenges COVID-19 presents to our election system and he also acknowledged that we must act now. As unexpected as this pandemic is, the changes we make to our elections will determine if Mississippians feel safe casting their ballot this November.

After reading through Watson's op-ed, we noticed he has some really good plans to provide accommodations for Mississippi voters. His contingency plan includes: implementing additional poll worker trainings regarding proper sanitization and social distancing; urging recruitment of poll workers by utilizing the current student internship program and partnering with colleges and universities to incentivize students; possibly expanding curbside absentee voting, and allowing counties the ability to hire temporary staff to meet the increased demand of absentee voting by using funds from the CARES Act.

The boldest change he mentioned is urging the legislature to adopt an additional absentee excuse to allow all Mississippians to vote absentee in person during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Watson believes this will decrease the size of groups that are going to the precincts and making voting safer](#). The caveat to this suggestion is that it will only apply if we are in a state of emergency declared by the Governor or President, which means voting in as safe a manner as possible will be contingent on the seriousness of the pandemic from the perspective of those two elected officials as opposed to from the perspective of voters and health experts. Expert Marc Lipsitch, DPhil, professor of epidemiology at Harvard and director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, said that

[“fall will be very much like the spring.” and the usual pattern of coronaviruses is likely to continue with new transmission peaking in November and cases peaking in December.](#) Accordingly, Mississippians need legislation making it certain that we can vote in the general election without transmitting or contracting COVID-19 in the process.

Sadly, Secretary Watson made the politicized statement that “the greatest vulnerability to our electoral system would be adopting policies such as universal vote by mail (VBM) and no-excuse early voting, which could leave us vulnerable to instances of voter fraud such as forgery and ballot harvesting.” In the last two federal elections, approximately 25% of US voters cast mail ballots. [Justin Levitt, a professor at the Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, reviewed US elections from 2000 to 2014 and found 31 incidents of voter fraud from that time, during which more than a billion votes were cast.](#) We should not accept unfounded accusations from elected officials as excuses to support the will of [54% of Mississippi voters who want no excuse voting by mail in the general election.](#)

Secretary Watson also recently shared upcoming plans in an official video released by the Secretary of State’s office. In the video, Watson said, “. . .we are making plans for November to make sure that you are safe when you go vote and that you feel safe. I think it’s an important piece as well. We are partnering with the National Guard to make sure we have a secure system.” He subsequently tweeted in an exchange with Representative Zakiya Summers that the National Guard would be “helping us test our cybersecurity preparedness, and have agreed to help us distribute sanitizer and PPE to the precincts” and noted, “I feel safer and appreciative when I see the NG involved [in elections].”

On the contrary, the National Guard has the opposite effect for many of us. During the 2018 elections in Mississippi, voters reported police cars sitting outside polling places to voter protection, not because they felt safe but because they felt intimidated. Understandably so, as [this was a voter intimidation tactic used in the 60’s to counter the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The related tactic of sending armed police officers off duty to polling places to patrol the polling places in minority areas was one of the Republican devices resulting in an almost forty-year long consent decree prohibiting Republican-led “ballot security” measures.](#) That consent decree expired in 2018. While Secretary Watson felt attacked and misunderstood when several people were appalled at an indication that he would have uniformed military at the precincts, he missed the point and basis of those people’s questioning. He referenced military being at the precincts without specifying whether they would distribute items during voting hours or not, inside the poll or outside, in uniform or not, etc. In order to truly make voting feel safe for everyone, we have to be careful how we allow the military to take part in our election process and how we announce, portray, and perceive that participation.

But there is a way to bypass the nature of partisan politics- allow all Mississippi voters the ability to vote by mail and implement no-excuse early voting. Not only will these measures provide citizens with the confidence they need to safely cast their ballots but they will also boost turnout statewide. [Republicans disagree because they believe this will only increase Democratic turnout. This claim is false, according to the New York Times.](#) COVID-19 is not a partisan issue. If Secretary Watson and Republican leaders are truly concerned about all the people of Mississippi, including African-Americans who are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and make up 37.8% of our state, they would work to make these options to vote safely a reality.

### **What do we expect from our legislature?**

Mississippi’s State Legislature reconvened last Tuesday, and [Democratic and Republican leadership have stated that a safe election in November is a top issue on the legislative agenda; however, we have not heard specific policy suggestions from House Speaker Phillip Gunn or Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann.](#) Our Democratic legislative leadership has not only been vocal about the need for ensuring safe elections this year but also about the means through which to achieve safer elections. Senate Minority Vice-Chair, David Blount [has long been a proponent of](#)

[providing Mississippians no-excuse early voting options and believes the legislature should at least consider changes to make voting safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#) Additionally, House Minority Leader, Robert L. Johnson, III voiced support for expanded mail-in voting options, early voting, and online voter registration in a [Facebook live event we hosted on May 22nd.](#)

In that same event, Rep. Zakiya Summers discussed the myth of voter fraud in relation to vote-by-mail that has been perpetuated by top Republicans this year.

“It’s been interesting to see how the argument has been around the need to not want to expand access in a way that we think that would be convenient, safe, secure, and accessible for most Mississippi voters and instead perpetuate this idea that if we [implement] some of these measures like vote-by-mail, no-excuse absentee voting, then we’re actually perpetuating voter fraud, which we’ve seen that that has actually been minuscule across the country.”

[In actuality, mail ballot fraud is exceedingly rare in part because states have systems and processes in place to prevent forgery, theft and voter fraud, such as bar codes on ballot envelopes that allow election officials and/or the US Postal Service to track mail ballots.](#)

**What can we do about it?**

We are expecting our Democratic elected officials to fight hard for safer elections this year. We need to let them know they have our support, and we need to let our Republican elected officials know we are holding them accountable for considering our safety and passing common-sense solutions. It is critical that we all stay involved this year. As we mentioned previously, the legislature just resumed session, and there is a very real possibility that we may pass some sort of election reform this year. However, in order to do that, **we need your help.** Reaching out to your elected officials works. We are recruiting phone bankers and text bankers for the MSDP Voter Protection Team specifically to call voters to reach out to elected officials when important bills come to the floor. If you are interested in getting involved with outreach and advocacy for sensible election reform in Mississippi, [sign up here.](#)

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## State News Desk

1. [“Lawmakers discuss indefinitely extending session as they return to Jackson after coronavirus recess”](#)

The on-again, off-again 2020 legislative session is scheduled to resume Tuesday and is not slated to end until July 12. But leaders in both the House and Senate have held discussions about keeping the Legislature in session – so they could easily return to the Capitol to deal with COVID-19 issues – past the scheduled July 12 conclusion, sources told Mississippi Today.

2. [“Secretary Watson Election Contingency Op-Ed”](#)

While the 2020 general election is still months away, voters across the country are concerned about how state and county officials plan to protect voters and the overall elections process amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Secretary of State Michael Watson wrote the following op-ed as a way to inform Mississippians of current plans for November.

3. [“OPINION: Watson’s Voting Views: Dressing Jim Crow Up in New Clothes”](#)

On May 18, Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson issued a statement on voting in the November election. He begins sensibly saying, “we do not believe voters should have to choose between casting a ballot and risking their own health.”

## National News Desk

4. [“Fact-checking Trump’s recent claims that mail-in voting is rife with fraud”](#)

"The bottom line is that absentee and mail balloting are secure in America," Wendy Weiser, the director of the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center, told CNN. "Election officials, Republicans and Democrats alike, pretty much universally are confident in the system."

5. [“Biden campaign hires national director to focus on voter protection rights”](#)

The presidential campaign of former Vice President Joe Biden has hired a national director for voter protection as expanding access to the ballot box emerges as a chief concern for Democrats, particularly amid the coronavirus pandemic.ning political battle over access to voting.

6. [“Experts are warning coronavirus puts the integrity of the 2020 election at risk. Here’s what could happen in November”](#)

Experts are raising the alarm that the coronavirus poses unprecedented challenges to the 2020 election, and that time is running out to prevent a disaster at the polls. President Donald Trump will square off against likely Democratic nominee Joe Biden in what is shaping up to be a tight race, where small tweaks to voting rules could tip the scales or trigger a constitutional crisis..