



May Newsletter

THOUGHTS FROM THE DIRECTOR:

LATOYA THOMPSON, ESQ

Hello, Voter Protection Partners! I am so excited to be part of the newly formed Mississippi Democratic Party Voter Protection team, along with our fabulous organizers, Jarrius Adams and Merritt Baria. Voter protection typically focuses on increasing access to voting and ensuring that every vote counts during the absentee ballot voting period through election day. This year, thanks to native Mississippian Stacey Abrams, Fair Fight 2020 has established a voter protection system early in the cycle in Mississippi through the Mississippi Democratic Party.

This is an unprecedented opportunity to do a deeper level of work in Mississippi with partners and with the party structure in counties, counties being the hub of most elections in Mississippi. An early start on our goals is especially important when faced with the serious challenge of making sure voting is safe during this ongoing health pandemic. Our job -- mine and yours -- as Voter Protection Partners is to identify and advocate for a path forward that increases both access to voting safely and the likelihood of legitimate votes counting. We hope you will stay informed about this important work and get involved. This work will impact our state and nation for years to come. Join us at www.msdpvoterprotection.com, on Facebook and on Twitter.

WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?

COVID-19

On March 10, 2020, hundreds of thousands of Mississippians went to the polls to cast their votes in the presidential primary. On the next day, March 11, 2020, Mississippi learned of its first official COVID-19 diagnosis. Since March 11, 2020, we have had well over 6,000 Mississippians diagnosed with COVID-19 and over 200 deaths.

Almost a month after Mississippi's primary, the state of Wisconsin held its primary on April 7, 2020, in the midst of a statewide COVID-19 stay-at-home order. 1.5 million votes were cast in the Wisconsin primary. [A record 1.1 million votes were cast via mailed-in absentee ballots. \(Wisconsin allows no-excuse absentee voting.\)](#) The other several hundred thousand voters voted in person.

Poll worker shortages, no doubt due to health safety concerns, caused consolidation of polling places, which caused long lines. [Some people had to stand in line over four hours to vote, and some people had to leave before they had a chance to vote.](#) All were taking a health risk. Wisconsin's Democratic Governor attempted to delay the primary election for safety, but Republicans in the state successfully fought in the courts to have the election take place as planned, leaving voters to choose between exercising their right to vote and safeguarding their health. [Sadly, the](#)

[Wisconsin Department of Health Services reported that 52 people who voted in person or worked the polls on election day have tested positive for COVID-19 since the primary.](#)

What happened in Wisconsin could easily happen in Mississippi in November and in all other elections scheduled in between, such as the upcoming Congressional primary runoff and special elections. But that does not have to be the case. Our Secretary of State has requested CARES Act funding, almost \$5 million of free money to Mississippi for expenditures to make voting safer in light of COVID-19. These funds can pay for election day measures, such as sanitizing equipment and purchasing personal protective equipment for poll workers, as well as expenses to expand access to voting, such as extra staff to process expanded early voting and prepaid postage for absentee ballots. The latter option provides substantially more protection, especially for Mississippi voters who disproportionately suffer from underlying illnesses and are therefore, particularly high risk persons.

The COVID-19 risk in November weighs heavily on the minds of voters. [An April 2020 poll stated that over 70% of Mississippi voters are concerned about disruptions in the November elections due to COVID-19, and 54% favor the allowance of all Mississippi voters to vote by mail this November.](#) This is not surprising considering that 5 states vote entirely by mail and 28 have no excuse absentee mail-in voting. While the remaining 17 states generally have had restricted absentee-voting (our state included), several of these states have expanded their absentee-voting program as a result of the pandemic, including Republican-run states like Alabama, Indiana, and West Virginia. These states are finding no-excuse early voting to be a practical solution in mitigating the spread of the virus.

[Previous Mississippi Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann formed a bipartisan election task force which suggested enacting online registration and no-excuse early voting. Sadly, despite Hosemann's backing, Republican legislators blocked the changes, and the legislative improvements never took place.](#) Considering expert projections for the long length and multiple waves of the pandemic, many Mississippians - of all political parties, who do not qualify to vote early under our current law, will likely face the same choice as voters in Wisconsin - protect our right to vote or protect our health. As the non-partisan Brennan Center says, ["holding an election safely and accessibly during a pandemic shouldn't be a partisan issue. It's a patriotic duty."](#)

Going Forward

[Republicans in Wisconsin argued that expanding absentee voting could lead to voter fraud and was impractical.](#) As for the fraud allegation, which is a common argument against expanding voting access, [the nonpartisan Brennan Center says voter fraud is very rare, and numerous studies, including one commissioned by the Trump administration, have conclusively demonstrated that most allegations are baseless.](#) The good news regarding impracticality is the sooner we expand access to mail-in and in-person early voting, the more time we have to work out the logistics and practical aspects of it. This is a good time to make the changes necessary to protect everyone's health and allow every eligible voter to vote when the legislature reconvenes on May 18, 2020.

Leaders on both sides have acknowledged that change is forthcoming. [Bobby Moak, chairman of the Mississippi Democratic Party, suggests the state expand mail-in voting now for the general election.](#) Senator David Blount has expressed his readiness when the state legislature reconvenes to amend an absentee voting bill before the legislature to ensure that everyone can vote and vote safely. [Senator Blount hopes lawmakers in Mississippi will follow the lead of states like Alabama, Indiana, and West Virginia in considering and passing a proposal to expand early voting options, at least during emergency situations such as a pandemic.](#) Governor Reeves said "we will do everything we possibly can to ensure that every Mississippian who wants to vote has the opportunity to vote" and "not at the expense of the health and safety of our people." Let's hold the Governor to that.

As Senator Blount says, “We must protect the right to vote for every Mississippian in every election, regardless of pandemic.” It’s time for us to do our part in ensuring a free, fair, secure election in November. It will be up to us to hold our elected officials accountable for offering a safe option for Mississippians to vote during this pandemic, for which there is no certain end in sight. If protecting the right to vote is something you are passionate about, get involved. Write your [legislator](#), [Secretary of State Michael Watson](#), and [Governor Tate Reeves](#) to act *now* so all Mississippians can vote safely in November. You can also reach out to us at voterprotection@mississippidemocrats.org, sign up on our website at www.msdpvoterprotection.com, and follow us on Facebook and Twitter to stay informed of further opportunities to be part of bringing about change.

State News Desk

- 1. “Legislators could grapple with expanded early voting when session resumes”**

When the Legislature returns from its coronavirus-forced recess – presumably in May – Sen. David Blount, D-Jackson, hopes lawmakers will take up and pass a proposal to expand the early voting options, at least during emergency situations such as a pandemic.

- 2. “Secretary Watson says online voter registration on the table”**

With elections scheduled for 2020, Watson said postponements have had a big impact on their functionality. Many local and state elections have already been moved in order to protect the voters.

- 3. “Mississippi should act now to allow no-excuse absentee voting before November election”**

The threat presented by the coronavirus pandemic has forced Mississippi to take unprecedented measures to protect our community. The state has instructed Mississippians to stay inside...

National News Desk

- 4. “Both parties must protect the November election from COVID-19”**

Holding an election safely and accessibly during a pandemic shouldn’t be a partisan issue. It’s a patriotic duty.

- 5. “Voters face potential life-or-death choices in states with limited absentee voting”**

The coronavirus pandemic has turned the simple act of voting into an impossible calculation about whether to exercise a constitutional right or protect your health. And the virus has injected a new sense of urgency to a long-running political battle over access to voting.

- 6. “Trump slams mail-in voting, says it ‘doesn’t work out well for Republicans’”**

President Donald Trump took aim Wednesday at voting by mail, saying Republicans lose out in the process that several states are already using to cut the risk of transmitting the coronavirus.