

Democracy and its advocates must adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic



The COVID-19 pandemic has put much of American life on hold, and efforts to ensure the robustness of US democracy have not been exempt. [Fernando Tormos-Aponte](#) and [Michael Latner](#) write that, to ensure November's general election is as free and fair as possible, electoral democracy advocates must now find new ways of exerting policy influence online and to open up virtual spaces to constituents and advocacy groups.

- Read this article in Spanish/Lee este artículo en español: <https://bit.ly/2WelcV9>

In the effort to improve elections in the United States, democracy-reform advocates had been making [legislative](#) progress—and then the coronavirus pandemic changed everything.

A massive coalition of civic, environmental, religious and justice organizations dedicated to securing voting rights and electoral integrity, has been working with Congress and every other level of government to stop the erosion of American democracy. These coalitions include established voting rights groups like [The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#) and [Common Cause](#), as well as newer coalitions like [Declaration for American Democracy](#). They are working across a range of issues, from felon enfranchisement and automatic voter registration to ending the corruptive practice of partisan gerrymandering. In 2018, millions of activists and voters across the country were mobilized to support these types of reforms.

The coronavirus pandemic has put this work, like so much else, in danger. Basic protections to ensure that every eligible voter in the US is able to cast a vote will require an estimated \$4 billion public investment, as well as a massive mobilization, during a time of physical distancing. Voting rights activists, along with election administrators and the nation's election experts have quickly moved into triage mode. Now, the work isn't just to advance democracy—it's to save it.

As we take measures to physically distance ourselves, electoral democracy advocates must find ways to sustain their mobilizing efforts online. The advocacy and direct action tactics that activists usually deploy in public spaces, like meeting policymakers in the halls of Congress and state legislatures, must now take place virtually, with considerably more barriers to access.

Organizing in times of crisis also means that folks must simultaneously secure the means of their survival while seeking new ways of exerting policy influence—and this poses special challenges for communities who need that influence the most. Residents of communities without access to broadband, caregivers, the unemployed, and underhoused individuals face unique challenges that may obstruct their participation in organizing efforts.

Some advocacy organizations may be able to transition their work online. Others will have little resources and capacities to build upon. Some communities, including disability advocates, have often lacked physical access to organizing spaces, and could be important sources of knowledge and leadership.

Newcomers to activism may face challenges to gaining entry in virtual spaces, which can have both intentional and unintentional barriers for participation. Entering virtual spaces often requires passwords, software licenses, or something as simple as an Internet URL. Conversely, efforts to open virtual spaces to all may grant access to those seeking to disrupt the work. Open virtual spaces and the use of software programs that gather user data may also facilitate repressive action. The unprecedented transition to digital organizing will undoubtedly pose new challenges for organizers.



"Democracy Going" by JmacPherson is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

Research centers including the [Brennan Center for Justice](#), the [UCLA Voting Rights Project](#), and scholars at a [UC Irvine symposium](#) have coordinated to quickly generate an evidence-based consensus on policy objectives. They focus on four linked processes: upgrading to online and same-day voter registration; ensuring that all registered voters in the United States have a mail-in ballot option to accommodate social distancing; providing at least a week of early in-person voting, with enough strategically placed, public health-compliant voting centers to reduce long lines and administrative stress on Election Day; making sure ballots can be tracked electronically and having in place a process for accurate processing, including ample opportunities for voters to verify ballots that have been rejected.

To accomplish this, policymakers must also seek ways to listen and respond to constituents and advocacy groups online. While ignoring digital forms of constituent communications may be easier for policymakers than ignoring activists occupying an office, it is now particularly important to monitor electronic and social media communications closely. The continuity and legitimacy of the US electoral system is at stake.

It can work. By coordinating the release of public letters from the nation's top [election officials](#), [political scientists](#), and [voting rights groups](#), and with hundreds of hours of phone calls, online conference calls, and social media mobilization, electoral democracy advocates were able to secure \$400 million dedicated to increasing the ability to vote by mail, expand early voting and online registration, and additional voting facilities.

Unfortunately, that is less than one quarter of what is probably needed to ensure that every voter in America is able to cast a vote safely and securely in November. Congress looks like it will be on recess until at least mid-May. Voting rights advocates will have no such luxury if they hope to secure necessary funding and protections for voters when Congress comes back into session.

As long as physical distancing limits in-person collaboration, webinars, online forums, virtual petitions and pledges will be critically important tactics to ensure free and fair elections for all voters. But just as election officials and administrators must ensure that emergency reforms follow the hypocritical oath of "do no harm" when it comes to ensuring voting rights, so too the advocates of reform must work to maintain open, participatory spaces where all can have a voice in shaping the fate of our democracy.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <https://bit.ly/2KPcXdV>

About the authors



Fernando Tormos-Aponte – *University of Maryland Baltimore County*

Fernando Tormos-Aponte is a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, a Visiting Scholar at Johns Hopkins University, and a research fellow at the Southern Methodist University Latino Center for Leadership Development.



Michael Latner – *California Polytechnic State University*

Michael Latner is professor of political science at California Polytechnic State University, and Kendall Voting Rights Fellow at the Union of Concerned Scientists. His research focuses on voting rights, electoral systems and political participation.