

People with COVID-19 and those self-isolating must not be denied the vote

*Voting is a basic democratic right. But while many countries have put special measures in place to enable people with COVID-19 and those self-isolating to vote, some have made it impossible for them to do so. **Erik Asplund, Bor Stevense (International IDEA), Toby James (University of East Anglia) and Alistair Clark (Newcastle University)** look at the different approaches taken by countries holding elections in 2020. Those with elections in 2021 need to act now.*

Belize's prime minister recently warned that people with COVID-19 or self-isolating would not be able to vote in the general election in November, as they had to stay at home. Yet the right to vote in an election is an essential part of the democratic process. [International standards on elections](#) (see pages 33-5) and [democratic theorists](#) attest that everyone should be equal before the ballot box. Democracy should be the greater leveller, irrespective of voters' physical or mental health on polling day.

In practice, however, people often face inequalities in accessing elections, even in more normal circumstances. Citizens with disabilities might find barriers such as the [absence of ramps at polling stations](#) or being unable to travel on election day because of short- and long-term sickness. Measures to make [elections more accessible for citizens with disabilities](#) are therefore often prescribed in electoral law, such as remote voting, accessible polling stations, or the provision of braille ballot papers. Elections need [inclusive voting practices](#) in place to overcome these problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these questions sharply to the forefront and presented an unprecedented challenge in delivering accessibility at the ballot box. The virus has led to the severe illness of many people around the world on their election day, with 40 million confirmed cases worldwide, and numbers rising fast. Millions more have been caring for family or friends or have been quarantined within their households if they or a family member has been infected.

The propensity of the virus to fall unevenly on populations means that it can also fall unevenly on electoral participation. The virus does discriminate. It is thought to be more of a threat for citizens who have [underlying health conditions](#), such as lung or heart disease, diabetes or conditions that affect their immune system – as well as those over 60. These citizens and their family members may therefore think more than twice about visiting a polling station in person. Elections involve the movement of millions of people on election day – elections staff, candidates and voters – and therefore are an opportunity for the disease to spread.

Inaccessible elections and disenfranchisement

There is a real risk quarantined (or other risk groups) will be disenfranchised. In some states, people diagnosed with COVID-19 are not allowed to vote due to restrictions on their freedom of movement as part of the government's regulations and laws to reduce the spread of infection (see Table 1). Belize's PM insisted that people with COVID-19 or in isolation would not be allowed to vote during the general election on 11 November as it was against the law, and that extending proxy voting for COVID-19 patients would not be possible. "If you are COVID positive," [he said](#), "you are supposed to be in quarantine either at a government facility or at your own home."



People queue to vote early in Kenner, Louisiana, October 2020. Photo: [Infrogmation of New Orleans](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Belize is not the only country where citizens could be disenfranchised. In Singapore, citizens under a quarantine order, stay-home notices, or diagnosed with acute respiratory infection were not allowed to vote. Had they left their home they would have been in breach of Singapore's [Infectious Diseases Act](#). Similarly, in [Taiwan](#), people under isolation or quarantine at home were prohibited from going and casting their vote as this would go against the [Taiwan Communicable Disease Control Act](#). Meanwhile, in [Chile's](#) constitutional referendum on 25 October, people with COVID-19 will be [sanctioned](#) if they vote. Chile has reported 490,003 cases since March 2020. [As of 7 October](#), 14,000 voters over the age of 18 will be disenfranchised, as no special voting arrangements exist in the country.

The lack of special voting arrangements proved not only a danger to democracy, but unconstitutional in Croatia. The electoral management body was initially not planning to allow infected people to vote, saying that "more lenient measures would put citizens' health at risk". However, this decision was ultimately [overruled](#) by the Croatian Constitutional Court, which allowed COVID-19 positive voters to vote by proxy.

Enabling people with COVID-19 to vote

The good news for democracy is that many of the 74 countries and territories that have [held elections](#) since late February 2020 *have* adopted new health and safety measures for voters and polling officials in collaboration with national health authorities. Ways of enabling people with COVID-19 or who are quarantined to vote cluster into five main clusters (see Table 1). These methods typically centre around postal voting, proxy voting, home and institution-based voting, or arrangements within the polling station, depending on what voting channels exist in the electoral law.

Table 1: Special voting arrangements used to facilitate voting for people with COVID-19 or under quarantine, by country

Alternative voting methods	Countries
Postal voting	Australia (Northern Territory), India (Karnataka), Montenegro , USA , South Korea , Spain (Basque Country and Galicia)
Proxy voting	Croatia , Spain (Basque Country and Galicia)
Advance voting	Bermuda
Home and institution-based voting	Belarus , Czech Republic [*] , Lithuania , Italy , New Zealand , North Macedonia , Suriname [*] , Israel [*]

Alternative voting methods

Countries

Arrangements in polling stations	Belarus , Czech Republic* , Jamaica , Malaysia (Sabah)*, India (Odisha), Italy , Sri Lanka* , South Korea , USA (Idaho)
None of the above - people with COVID-19 are restricted from voting	Belize , Chile , Singapore , Taiwan (Kaohsiung)

*Note: Countries included more than once in the table offered more than one method. Countries that have a star * offered voting methods to people under quarantine only.*

Source: Authors, constructed using [International IDEA](#), media reports and EMB data

Postal voting is one obvious mechanism. This was made available for people diagnosed with COVID-19 during parliamentary elections in [South Korea](#) in April. Alternatively, in June, ahead of parliamentary elections in [North Macedonia](#), people with COVID-19 or under quarantine could cast their votes from home via [mobile voting teams](#) accompanied by a doctor wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). In Spain, during the regional election in Galicia and Basque, voters with COVID-19 who were required to isolate could either [postal vote or proxy vote](#), but were forbidden from voting in person. In New Zealand, voters in quarantine or isolation could vote by telephone ahead of the 18 October general elections.

Some countries adopted arrangements in polling stations to accommodate in-person voting for people with COVID-19 or under quarantine. Citizens with mild cases of COVID-19 in [South Korea](#) could cast their ballot at one of eight “special early voting polling stations” established at care centres for COVID-19 patients across the country. Meanwhile, in [Jamaica](#), citizens [with COVID-19](#) could vote during on election day between 4pm and 5pm at polling stations provided that they notified their health ministry and that they wore a mask, gloves, protective shield and gown. They also needed to be accompanied by a driver who was also required to wear PPE. Early in the pandemic, [Israel](#) established special medically-supported polling stations with full PPE and screens for quarantined voters.

In [Sri Lanka](#), people in quarantine were only allowed to vote at designated polling booths between 4 and 5 pm if they had received permission from health authorities and completed the [first 14 days of the quarantine](#). In the end, this disenfranchised about 500 people who had not met that requirement. This arrangement was implemented only after an unsuccessful attempt by the EMB to introduce [advanced voting](#) for people under quarantine as a new voting method. For the Senate election in the Czech Republic on 2-3 October 2020, voters with severe medical conditions and those ordered to quarantine or isolate had several [voting channels](#), which included drive-in voting (essentially, voters would vote from their car at specific polling stations), in-person voting at a special polling station or to vote from home by requesting a mobile polling team.

The ‘new normal’

COVID-19 is not going away soon. During the last month, several European countries have experienced a resurgence as the number of confirmed cases globally increases at a [rate](#) of 230,000-400,000 cases per day in the past month. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Head of the World Health Organisation, has said that he hopes that the pandemic [will be over in under two years](#). A leading manufacturer of one of the COVID-19 vaccines in development has [suggested](#) that global inoculation will take until the end of 2024.

So electoral commissions and administrators should take a long-term view of the pandemic and how it may affect access to vulnerable groups and those with COVID-19 or under quarantine. New voting methods typically need to be agreed and legislated for between [six months](#) and [one year](#) before elections occur to uphold the principle of electoral law stability. Modifications to existing voting methods and arrangements in polling stations that facilitate access may be able to be done more quickly, provided that they are deemed fair, safe and secure by all stakeholders.

This means introducing measures to stop the wider spread of the disease, not just for those infected with COVID-19. They could include social distancing, access to hand sanitizers, disinfection of surfaces and voting materials, regular ventilation of facilities and access to PPE. New arrangements in polling stations that some countries have implemented include temperature checks, one-way systems for entry and exit, extended voting hours, providing individual pencils or allowing voters to use their own, and limits to the number of people allowed to be inside the polling station. Temporary polling booths for voters identified with respiratory symptoms have been introduced in [Malaysia](#), [South Korea](#) and [Russia](#).

Many countries have scaled up special voting arrangements (SVA) and encouraged citizens to vote early, remotely or through postal votes to reduce crowds on election day and lower infection risk. Some states have modified SVA to make it easier for citizens to vote. Notable examples include [Russia](#), which extended advance voting and remote internet voting to around 1 million people during the constitutional referendum on 1 July 2020; [Germany](#), which introduced 100% postal voting during a local election in Bavaria; and [France](#), which simplified proxy voting ahead of local elections in June 2020.

Just as disabled citizens may need help to vote, the pandemic demands proactive steps to ensure accessibility and future-proof elections to make them accessible post-pandemic. EMBs should continue working closely with health authorities, and use this experience in order to encourage countries to make their elections more accessible under normal circumstances. For that to happen, political parties must play a part too.

Views expressed in this commentary are those of the authors, one of whom is a staff member of International IDEA, and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. This commentary is independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed do not necessarily represent the institutional position of International IDEA, its Board of Advisers or its Council of Member States.