April 15, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy,

As you know, the spread of COVID-19 presents an imposing threat to our citizens, our economy, and our way of life. As Congress takes further measures to address this threat, I urge you to continue to prioritize swift and strong action to prepare our electoral system for this pandemic, and to make sure that no future disaster threatens American citizens’ ability to go to the polls.

Fair and credible elections are the backbone of our democracy. In the past, Americans have overcome disastrous weather events and economic strife to make themselves heard at the polls. However, COVID-19 presents a new and unprecedented challenge to this process. In order to combat this crisis, we have asked our constituents to isolate themselves and to avoid large gatherings and social contact. Though these measures are essential to combat the spread of this virus, they are also at odds with the voting process for many Americans. While we hope for a quick end to this crisis, we must plan for the likelihood that COVID-19 will continue to impact Americans’ lives through the rest of the year.

As the November presidential election and other primary elections approach, we cannot ask the American people to choose between their physical well-being and their ability to vote. The CARES Act -- signed into law last month -- included $400 million to help adapt elections for the COVID-19 crisis. While this is an important first step, there is still much more work to be done. Fortunately, there are several policies that can be included in the forthcoming supplemental appropriations package to facilitate the continued functioning of our electoral process through both the current and future crises.

First, Congress should act to require that all states provide at least 15 days of early in-person voting, as well as no-excuse absentee voting by mail for federal elections in 2020. While many states have already adopted these measures, some have not, and early and absentee voting will be essential to make sure that Americans can continue to cast their ballots without risking their health. States should also offer applications for absentee ballots online to further facilitate compliance with distancing recommendations. Finally, states should be required to begin processing absentee ballots at least 14 days before Election Day. At a minimum, this processing should include the opening of envelopes and prepping of ballots to be tabulated on Election Day. This will help election officials manage the increase in absentee ballots without delaying results.
Second, Congress should provide additional, flexible funding to states to help them implement early and absentee voting, as well as other policies to administer elections throughout the COVID-19 crisis. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, the estimated cost of retooling our elections for the COVID-19 crisis is approximately $2 billion.\(^1\) While the $400 million of funding included in the CARES Act is a critical step forward, this funding requires a 20% match from states at a time when their budgets are stretched thin and when state legislatures are struggling to operate under strict social distancing requirements. Additional funding will be necessary to help states print additional ballots, purchase postage, and acquire additional equipment, technology, and software to support the printing and processing of ballots. Other allowable costs for such funding should include the recruitment or hiring of additional temporary staff, communication efforts to inform citizens of changes in the voting process, and the purchasing of protective equipment and cleaning supplies. Current capacity for these processes varies by state and locality. Thus, additional funding should be given under flexible terms, without a required match, to empower state and local election officials to use funds quickly and appropriately to improve their ability to administer elections.

Third, Congress should require that states create and publicize contingency plans to enable Americans to vote in the case of future crises. These plans should include details on emergency poll locations, measures to protect the health of poll workers, and plans for recruiting workers from populations that are resilient or unaffected by the crisis. They should also include plans for expanding the availability of vote by mail or early voting services to address future restrictions on regular voting processes. No crisis should ever threaten Americans’ confidence in our elections, and publicly available plans will help reassure citizens that their rights will not be jeopardized by future disasters.

As elected representatives of the American people, it is our responsibility to ensure that our constituents' voices are heard -- and that responsibility only grows in times of great crisis. For that reason, I urge you to act in bipartisan cooperation to prepare our electoral system to withstand the impacts of the COVID-19 and future crises.

Sincerely,

Elissa Slotkin
Member of Congress

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List of Cosigners

Stephen Lynch               Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
Ro Khanna                  Peter Welch
Jimmy Panetta              Joe Neguse
Frederica Wilson           Darren Soto
Judy Chu                   Carolyn B. Maloney
Jerry McNerney             Julia Brownley
Jim Cooper                 Wm. Lacy Clay
Dan Kildee                 Henry C. “Hank” Johnson, Jr.
Lauren Underwood           Katie Porter
Eleanor Holmes Norton      Marcy Kaptur
Seth Moulton               Gerald E. Connolly
Mary Gay Scanlon           Salud O. Carbajal
Josh Harder                Sylvia R. Garcia
Ann Kirkpatrick            Sean Casten
John Yarmuth               Ann McLane Kuster
Jamie Raskin               Jimmy Gomez
Dwight Evans               Cindy Axne
Steven Horsford            Ed Case
Lisa Blunt Rochester       Veronica Escobar
Conor Lamb                 Tom Malinowski
Barbara Lee                Madeleine Dean
David N. Cicilline         Ami Bera, M.D.
Anna G. Eshoo              Lizzie Fletcher
Alcee L. Hastings          Angie Craig
Joseph P. Kennedy, III     Dean Phillips
Jim Himes                  Haley M. Stevens
Bonnie Watson Coleman      Mikie Sherrill
Jahana Hayes               Donna Shalala
Joe Courtney               Diana DeGette
Grace F. Napolitano        James P. McGovern
Derek Kilmer               Harley Rouda
Jackie Speier              Andy Levin
Alan Lowenthal             Mark Takano
Jared Huffman              Lucy McBeth
Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.   