

# DeSantis must protect voter health, right to vote | Opinion

**Brad Ashwell and Leslie M. Beitsch** Your Turn

No one should have to choose between their right to vote and their safety. Governments have offered guidelines on how to keep shoppers safe as they purchase essentials amid the threat of COVID-19. It's time for Gov. Ron DeSantis to ensure Floridians are equally protected during elections as the pandemic continues.

In March, DeSantis went ahead with the Presidential Preference Primary, which revealed some of the problems we are likely to face this fall during the general election. Poll workers failed to show up for training because they feared contracting COVID-19, counties lacked hand sanitizers and other cleaning supplies, and there were last minute changes to voting locations in many counties, creating voter confusion.

Many seniors had nowhere to vote when facility administrators decided not to host polling places at the last minute. As a result, voter turnout was low, with roughly 30% of those eligible coming out to vote compared to 46% during the last presidential primary in 2016.

To date, the governor has still not responded to the April 7 recommendations by the nonpartisan Florida Supervisors of Elections Association to fix these issues. Supervisors of Elections are Constitutional officers elected in each of Florida's 67 counties to administer elections.

DeSantis' inaction creates a perfect storm for Florida's voters to be disenfranchised again this fall, when COVID-19 and an early flu season might wreak havoc on already struggling communities. That's also precisely when our state receives its annual influx of seniors, who are more likely to die from COVID-19 due to age and comorbidity factors. DeSantis needs to prepare now to ensure all Floridians can cast a ballot safely.

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The recent Wisconsin primary should serve as a wake-up call. Our democracy is so important to them that thousands of Wisconsin voters, many of them Black and brown,

were willing to risk exposure to the coronavirus by voting in person as state officials left them to fend for themselves.

We are inspired by the grit of those voters and alarmed by officials' inaction. These nightmarish scenes cannot happen again, and with the right preparation, can be avoided.

First, DeSantis must give county supervisors the funding and flexibility to make vote-by-mail more accessible to all voters like in Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah and Hawaii. In Florida, a registered voter can request a ballot be mailed to them without having to provide a reason. But officials should go further by mailing all eligible voters a vote-by-mail request form with paid return postage. Ballots should also be accepted if postmarked by Election Day.

At a minimum, Florida officials should mail all eligible voters, including those on the inactive list, applications to request a mail ballot by First Class forwardable mail. While this approach must be a key part of any election response plan, focusing exclusively on vote by mail could disenfranchise large swaths of voters who have historically faced barriers to the ballot.

State and county officials must strive to preserve safe options for people to cast a ballot in person. People without internet and mail access, those who need assistance voting in their primary language, individuals without permanent addresses and people with disabilities who rely on voting machines to cast a private and independent ballot may be disenfranchised if polling places are closed.

Local election officials should also expand early voting to provide the maximum allowable number of days, and hours per day. This will reduce long lines and help maintain social distancing — and they can do this without any executive action. DeSantis should also grant election supervisors the authority to expand early voting days and locations as they have requested.

State officials must also ensure that federal funding provided through the federal CARES Act is disbursed to Florida counties as quickly as possible to help cover the costs of expanded remote registration, voting by mail, and expanded early voting opportunities ahead of Election Day, as almost all other states have done.

As state and local election officials make these changes, they must do their part to ensure voters are informed and to counter any disinformation. They must meet voters where they are — on their cellphones, through calls, texts, digital ads, and public service

announcements. And they should relay the information in the varied languages voters speak, including Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Physicians take an oath to do no harm upon entering their profession. We wish our elected officials would take the same oath. Florida officials must conduct safe, secure, and accessible elections in August and November — but they can only do it if they prepare now.

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