

Emergency Patient Voting Initiative in a Community Hospital During a Global Pandemic:

Lessons and a Call-to-Action for Expanded Voter Access

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Abstract

The 2020 United States general election remained extremely polarized despite occurring during the midst of a global coronavirus pandemic. Acutely hospitalized persons in the days to weeks leading up to the general election are exceptionally vulnerable to voter disenfranchisement and not among the population typically discussed during election seasons. As residents in the Christiana Care Family Medicine Residency Program in Wilmington, Delaware, we organized an emergency ballot registration and absentee voting project for hospitalized patients in our community hospital during the days to weeks leading up to the 2020 general election. We experienced multiple challenges to registering and aiding patients with ballot applications, including but not limited to communication with an overworked New Castle County elections office and coordination of receiving and returning completed ballots. However, we did notice a positive trend in the number of patients acutely hospitalized in the days-weeks leading up to Election Day who had already cast their vote through the expanded mail-in voting campaign in the setting of the COVID19 pandemic. As physicians, we have a unique position and opportunity to not only educate patients and potential voters on voter registration, but also assist these members of our community in the registration process first-hand. In addition to these physician responsibilities, we feel strongly that the state of Delaware should continue the expansion of mail-in/absentee voting for all residents in addition to new initiatives such as extended voter registration period and early in-person voting.

“Every Vote Counts,” “Get Out the Vote,” “Vote 2020.”

These are just a few of the slogans used throughout the 2020 United States election; an historic election with the highest recorded voter turnout since 1900, despite a global pandemic.¹ Perhaps more than in any prior election, the emphasis on individual voting rights and reducing voter suppression jointly accompanied election coverage. From outdated voter identification requirements, to exceedingly early registration deadlines, many Americans still face unnecessary barriers. Unfortunately, acutely hospitalized persons in the days to weeks leading up to the general election are exceptionally vulnerable to disenfranchisement and not among those typically discussed. In the year of a novel coronavirus pandemic, this population of hospitalized Americans is even more evident.

As family medicine physicians, we focus much of our medical career on patient advocacy. Perhaps one of the most basic ways we can advocate for patients is by aiding them in their fundamental right to vote. Because politics and legislation affect healthcare, healthcare cannot be apolitical. As residents in the Christiana Care Family Medicine Residency Program in Wilmington, Delaware, we organized an emergency ballot registration and absentee voting

project for hospitalized patients in our community hospital during the days to weeks leading up to the 2020 general election. This included:

- Surveying patients to determine voter registration status and eligibility,
- Aiding in registration, and
- Submitting emergency absentee ballots for the general election.

To respect patients' personal values, we created and used flyers from official and partisan websites including *PatientVoting.org* and official state voting websites only.

This project, set in the middle of a global pandemic, opened our eyes to how easily voters can be disenfranchised. Our community hospital serves patients predominantly from the State of Delaware, but also from neighboring states such as Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey. While we aim to treat all patients equally, many patients faced different obstacles to voting simply due to different state rules. Not only did deadlines for both voter registration and emergency absentee ballot requests differ, but the methods for requesting ballots varied between states as well. Focusing on Delaware specifically, the voter registration deadline was nearly one month prior to the general election.² In our experience, most patients expressed interest in the few weeks prior to the election, only to discover they were not registered appropriately. While emergency absentee ballots could be requested up until 12 pm on the day prior to the general election,² our local election officials appeared overworked and understaffed as we repeatedly tried to contact them inquiring about ballots yet to be received. After requesting and successfully receiving an absentee ballot, the ballot must then be returned, which we were able to do, but could prove another obstacle in different locations.

Perhaps one positive adaptation forced by the pandemic was the expansion of mail-in voting. While surveying patients in the hospital in the weeks prior to the general elections, we were surprised to discover that many patients had already voted by mail without the insight to know they would have been unexpectedly hospitalized prior to or on Election Day. Unfortunately, increasing voter access through expansion of mail-in-ballots was a polarizing debate in the nation preceding Election Day. Exaggerated claims of rampant voter fraud and the evidence against this accusation continue to flood the news media, despite previous study statistics showing cases of potential fraud ranging from only 0.0003-0.0025% of total ballots cast.^{3,4} Multiple studies analyzing claims and evidence of potential voter fraud confirm that the occurrence remains exceedingly rare.^{3,4}

While we call upon all physicians, especially primary care physicians, to advocate for patient voting rights, this is not enough. A mail-in voting option available to all Delaware residents needs to be available in subsequent elections, and this concept should be consistently enhanced. Regardless of a pandemic, acutely ill persons who are hospitalized or still recovering from a hospitalization, should not feel cornered to go into a public and crowded space to vote and stand in line for hours. We argue that the availability to vote by mail/absentee for all Delaware residents should be a continued practice for upcoming state and federal elections that promotes both protection of those most vulnerable in health and, arguably, voter disenfranchisement.

Delaware should also allow for same-day voter registration. While voter turnout in Delaware increased to 70% during this general election from 65% in the 2016 election, this was almost 10% less than states such as Minnesota, where same-day registration is available.^{5,6} Despite so much news coverage and focus on voter registration, from our experience, this was the biggest

barrier to persons hospitalized. As previously mentioned, the deadline to register to vote in Delaware was the 4th Saturday before Election Day. The average deadline to register to vote among the United States is between 15-30 days prior to Election Day, with the State of Delaware being at the upper end of this range.⁷ After surveying not only patients admitted to our inpatient Family Medicine teaching service, but also interested patients from other services, we unfortunately discovered many who were unable to vote because they were not registered by the Delaware deadline. Allowing for the availability of same-day voter registration would increase turnout and representation in our elections.

As physicians, we have a unique position and opportunity to not only educate patients and potential voters on voter registration, but also assist these members of our community in the registration process first-hand. Through our experience, even with education and assistance, many persons will be unable to vote if mail-in voting is not expanded and registration deadlines remain nearly one month preceding the actual Election Day.

References

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