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POLITICS

D.C. Lets Voters Submit Ballots by Email After Mail Problems

Some states that are preparing for voting by mail to be more popular in the November election than in past years had hiccups on Tuesday

By *Alexa Corse* Follow

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Voters waited on long lines Tuesday in Washington, D.C., to vote in the district's primary election.
PHOTO: ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

The Washington, D.C., Board of Elections, inundated with complaints from voters who said they didn't receive absentee ballots in the mail, created an unusual workaround for Tuesday's primary: allowing voters to submit ballots by email.

That conflicts with security recommendations typically given by experts, but one local official said she thought it was worth the risk given the unusual circumstances. "I guess there are Russian hackers that can do anything, but I doubt they're really concerned with the Ward 2 D.C. election," said Councilmember Elissa Silverman.

Washington, D.C., and seven states holding presidential primaries on Tuesday had promoted voting by mail because of concerns about in-person voting during the coronavirus pandemic. Ms. Silverman, who wasn't on the ballot, said hundreds of voters asked her office for help after they didn't receive absentee ballots they requested, and she called for an investigation into what happened.

Rachel Coll, a spokeswoman for the elections board, said late Tuesday that it wasn't clear why some absentee ballots weren't received and how many voters were affected. She called the decision to allow ballots to be submitted over email a "last resort" available to those who tried unsuccessfully to get absentee ballots.

The elections board said Wednesday that it had received and counted approximately 50,000 absentee ballots, out of around 91,000 that district voters had requested. The board said it would count absentee ballots through June 12 as long as they were postmarked by June 2. In-person voters totaled 33,194, including the early voting period and on Election Day.

States are preparing for voting by mail to be more popular in the November election than in past years, particularly if the pandemic persists into the fall. The outcome of Tuesday's presidential primaries wasn't in question—President Trump and Joe Biden are expected to receive the Republican and Democratic nominations, respectively—but state and local races were on some ballots, and it was the biggest test of mail voting since the pandemic began. The district reported having more than 495,000 registered voters as of April.

States that encouraged voting by mail in Tuesday's primaries also saw hiccups, though not on the scale of the drama in Wisconsin's April election, when legal challenges went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and local officials and the postal system struggled to keep up with absentee-ballot requests and processing.

In Baltimore, officials said on Wednesday that some ballots couldn't be counted properly due to a formatting error and that officials were working to address the apparent inconsistencies. Some voters in several states reported snafus including mailing delays and confusion over voting location changes.

A voter cast his ballot on Tuesday at a polling location in Washington, D.C. PHOTO: ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Eric Warshaw, 69, in Delaware County, Pa., said he never received a ballot despite requesting one, so he voted in person on Tuesday. "It is totally screwed up," he said. "Why would I want to go and expose myself to this disease?"

"It points to trouble for November, if we don't take immediate steps now to bolster our election infrastructure," said Wendy Weiser, director of the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice, "both to handle the mail ballots that are going to be coming and to be able to ensure an adequate supply of safe and healthy polling places."

In Washington, D.C., some voters who said they hadn't received their absentee ballots went to vote in person—and encountered hourslong lines at 20 voting sites, fewer than the usual more than 100, which had been consolidated because of coronavirus concerns.

A Maryland election judge took ballots from voters in their car on Tuesday to place them in a curbside ballot drop box to try to prevent the spread of coronavirus. PHOTO: JIM BOURG/REUTERS

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser told reporters on Wednesday that she would press the Board of Elections for more information. "I could not tolerate continued failed leadership or execution, so I need to know more," she said.

Vote centers stayed open well past the city's 7 p.m. curfew, imposed in response to instances of violence that had followed mostly peaceful protests sparked by the recent killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis. The mayor had said that those out to vote would be exempt from the curfew.

D.C. resident Josh Lasky, 35, said voting by email, the last-minute option given to district voters, involved entering his voter information into a website, marking the ballot electronically, saving it as a PDF, and emailing it along with an affidavit. "It was very convenient," he said, adding that he'd like to have the option in future elections.

No U.S. state currently allows all its voters to submit ballots using the internet, but some have exceptions, typically for overseas or military voters and disabled voters. Ms. Coll, the D.C. Board of Elections spokeswoman, said voters "waive their secrecy in order to vote this way."

Federal agencies in May warned that using email to send ballots is vulnerable to being tampered with or could be used to launch a broader attack by sending malicious messages to infect computers.

Dan Wallach, a computer-science professor at Rice University, said the security risk would increase based on how many voters used the email option. "Under normal circumstances, this would be considered an epic failure," he said. "These are not normal circumstances, so I have to cut them some slack."

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