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THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. DIONNE: I'm E.J. Dionne. I'm a senior fellow here at the Brookings Institution. I want to welcome you all to our seminar on protecting elections. And I want to say how grateful I am that so many people have joined this conversation. I think it shows that a lot of Americans care about protecting our physical health, but they also care about protecting the health of our democracy.

This is an exciting topic and we have two great folks here to discuss it with us. Elaine Kamarck is a senior fellow in the Governance Studies program. She is the founding director for our center for effective public management. We could use some of that these days. And she is also the author most recently -- she's the author of many books -- but most recently "Presidential Politics: Everything You Need to Know About How America Nominates its President."

And then we have Tom Wheeler, also with us. He is a fellow in the Brookings Governance Studies Center for Technology Innovation. You'll see I'm looking at my notes so I don't get anybody's titles wrong. He was the chairman of the FCC. His most recent book has a wonderful title. It's a good book too, "From Gutenberg to Google: The History of Our Future." And I should say that for today's purposes, Tom has also become our resident historian on past crises in which we had to run elections.

But I want to start our conversation -- oh, I also want to say that if you want to tweet about this, #ProtectElections. And I'm just going to start with Elaine because Elaine just posted this morning an excellent piece with a program for how to protect the 2020 election. My favorite line in the piece is the very last line. It's "just do it." Elaine, tell us what it is we should "just do".

MS. KAMARCK: Well, thank you, E.J., and thank you everybody for joining us because this is one of the many, many issue we are confronting during this pandemic. And it is actually, compared to some of the other crises, it's actually one of the more straight forward to solve.

First of all, we should note that in the last national election, fully 38 percent of the voters voted either remotely or by an absentee paper ballot. That's an astonishing trend which has been

growing since the turn of the century. In other words, the number of people actually going to polls to vote has been dropping fairly dramatically.

So we already have a lot of experience with voting remotely and I think that when I said "just do it," here's some of the things that states should just do. Some states can look at all mail ballots. Only five states have completely mail ballots right now, but I know a lot of other states are moving in that direction. And that's when the government sends every registered voter a ballot. That's what that system is. So we may get some more of those.

The second direction that states have been moving in, and which I'm encouraging more states to move, is adopt no excuse absentee ballots. In other words, this is not grade school. You don't need a note from your doctor to explain why you're not going to the voting polling place, right. Just get rid of those laws. Some places --

MR. DIONNE: Everybody has a note from Dr. Fauci. (Laughter)

MS. KAMARCK: Right, exactly, exactly.

So no excuse absentee ballots, which are already used in many states, needs to be expanded.

Third, establish early voting locations. And many states have done this in the past, and I suspect many more will. Now, that's important because early voting locations means you reduce the number of people going to the polls on Election Day.

Fourth is kind of let's set a national goal, let's set a national goal to have 50 percent of our population able to vote remotely in November. I don't think that's unrealistic. We're already at 38 percent. I think we can do that.

Fifth -- and this is maybe the biggest one -- is why don't we just bite the bullet and make election days a holiday? The reason we have to worry about social distance and contagion on election days is they're work days and people crowd into the polls before work and they crowd into the polls after work, and, of course, making social distancing very difficult and also creating long lines and waits. If we had Election Day as a holiday, the traffic at the polls will be spread over the day.

Finally, we're learning an awful lot as we go through this about how to manage people going into places. Everybody has seen the tape on the floors of their grocery stores keeping us six feet apart, we're wearing masks, the grocery store clerks have plexiglass barriers in front of them. With a little bit of preparation ahead of time, and, frankly, not all that much money, states can get their polling places ready for November elections.

South Korea, which has been ahead of the curve on this pandemic -- South Korea had elections just this week. There were photographs online of it and they had all of these things plus they had somebody taking people's temperature on their forehead as they came into the polling places to further reduce the chances that you could get infected at the polling place.

Now, these are six things to do. By the way, we don't have to have a national holiday for Election Day. Governors can go ahead and declare a state holiday so that the voting spreads out across the day. This is pretty straight forward stuff. And what I urge in this piece -- which I hope everyone will go to the Brookings site and have a look at -- is to urge your governors and elected officials to just get on it, just do it, okay. Compared to finding a vaccine, compared to finding medicines, compared to building ventilators, all the things that we're grappling with, this is really not rocket science.

MR. DIONNE: Just before I forget, people who want to submit questions, three ways you can do it. One is Events@Brookings.edu, you can send us an email, or two places on Twitter @Brookingsgov, or #ProtectElections.

Just two quick follow ups, Elaine. This election is going to require an awful lot of state and local election officials because we know there are going to be many more requests for absentee ballots. And, by the way, the already is no excuse voting in all of the key swing states in the Presidential election. But that could cost a lot of money. Our systems aren't set up for the kinds of demands that are going to be made for mail votes, even if we didn't have nationwide mail voting.

How important is it that Congress enacts the rest of the money that Congress has put in - - \$400 million -- in this? As best I could tell, it would probably cost at least \$2 billion to do this right.

And just an add on point, just to put it all in one question, while this seems to be a partisan question because of some of the things President Trump has said, I just started collecting the number of Republican Secretaries of State who actually support mail voting, want the financing, because they care about running a good election because that's their job.

MS. KAMARCK: Yes, exactly right, E.J. I mean the President attempted to make this into a partisan matter two weeks ago in an interview on Fox. Frankly, most of the Republican officials in these states are ignoring him. They're going ahead, they're getting ready for mail in voting, to expand absentee voting, et cetera. And I think there will just be enormous pressure on the officials in all the states, whether they're red or blue, to do this right. And, of course, who's going to take the blame if it's not done right? It's going to be those governors, it's going to be those secretaries of state, et cetera.

Obviously, this will cost money. But, again, I want you to put this into perspective, right. Even if it costs \$2 billion, we just passed a \$2 trillion, you know, measure. So this in the scheme of things, is not an enormous amount of money. There is \$400 million for states in the \$2 trillion bill. Obviously they can increase that.

But, finally, let me make a final point. You know, we just yesterday learned the results of the Wisconsin primary, right. We're a short attention span nation, we want things instantly. If nothing else is happening, this pandemic is teaching us to have some patience. And, frankly, we may have to have some patience on Election Day in November. It's going to take a long time for these votes to be counted. States are going to need extra scanners, they're going to need extra personnel, et cetera. We may not know at eleven o'clock election night who the winner is, but you know what, to run a safe and an honest and good election we could wait a couple of days.

So I think the voting is going to change in a whole lot of ways.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you for that, and thanks for bringing up Wisconsin. If we can't spend \$2 billion to fix democracy, that's the ultimate in knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

MS. KAMARCK: Right.

MR. DIONNE: At least to me anyway. Tom, you've done some great historical work. I want you to begin with your story about Al Smith in 2018. For our younger viewers, Al Smith was a prominent New York Democrat, ran for president in 1928 as the Democratic nominee. The first Catholic to be nominated for president. Tom and I actually worked on his campaign. Elaine was too young.

MS. KAMARCK: Thank you.

MR. DIONNE: Tom, go ahead, tell us about Al Smith and the 1918 epidemic.

MR. WHEELER: Well, as you know, E.J. -- and thank you for hosting this. It's great to be here with Elaine and thanks for everybody who is tuning in. Do you use that term -- tuning in? Whatever.

MS. KAMARCK: Clicking in?

MR. WHEELER: Clicking in -- whatever you do. But in 1918 the solution to the flu pandemic at that point in time was quarantining. And the decisions about quarantining were made by local public health officials. And at that point in time, before we had had some of the progressive reforms, those were political patronage jobs. And so often during the campaign there was a situation where you weren't allowed to gather in areas where you might -- that congregation might hear an opposing candidate's point of view. And Al Smith, who was then running for -- against the Republican incumbent governor of New York -- had this great expression, he complained that there were Republican quarantines against Democratic campaign speeches. And, you know, the point of the matter is this does end up, as Elaine was saying, being a local issue. And all politics is local, right?

MR. DIONNE: So tell us about -- you know, the first sort of experience of voting from afar was in the Civil War. At least as I know the history, unless I'm missing something before then. Certainly the best known is during the Civil War. Talk to us about voting during the Civil War, and also voting during World War II, where again there were party politics involved in the decisions made to broaden participation. Tell us about both of those experiences, Tom.

MR. WHEELER: So, you know, E.J., it's interesting. Elaine's excellent set of half a dozen solutions are part of an arc of history that really does, as you suggest, begin with Lincoln.

MR. DIONNE: Aren't you glad to know you're in the arc of history, Elaine?

MR. WHEELER: There you go.

MS. KAMARCK: Absolutely.

MR. WHEELER: But Abraham Lincoln, amazingly, in the campaign of 1864, his reelection campaign, could not vote for his own reelection because the State of Illinois, his home state, required you to be physically present to vote.

MR. DIONNE: And the Democratic legislature, as you informed us, would not allow soldiers to vote either because Democrats did not want soldiers to be able to vote in that election.

MR. WHEELER: Exactly right. And there were fortunately 17 states that did pass soldier vote legislation and it worked in multiple ways -- mail in, like we're talking about today, or a group collection, if you will, or some states actually sent people into the field to the encampment of the troops, local officials, where they took the votes. And remember, at that point in time that was a lot easier because you were organized into local groups, the 23rd Ohio for Franklin County, for instance.

And so what we found throughout history though is that this extension of the franchise, this protection of the franchise has always been tied to national emergencies, and extending that protection goes to national emergencies, whether it be the Civil War or, as you point out, World War II. And the 1942 Soldier Vote Act took care of both 1942 off election as well as the 1944 presidential election when you had a couple of million men overseas. And the interesting thing is it ran into the problems that Elaine was enumerating earlier, that these are still basically a local, a state decision. And what the Solider Act of '42 did was to say that there would be a Federal ballot that was recommended to the states, but could not be imposed upon them.

And then the most interesting thing of all is the Federal Government agreed to pay the poll tax of those soldiers who were voting in states where there was a poll tax to get rid of that as a burden.

But this has always been, as you both indicated, a partisan issue. E.J., as you suggested, Indiana, Illinois, New Jersey, all Democratic legislatures during the Civil War, refused to pass

Soldier votes. And the debate around this is very similar to what we're hearing today, because people would seize on an idea and flog it to death, whether or not it was truthful. And, you know, so for instance, Lincoln expected to be defeated. You know, Thurlow Weed, one of the New York kingpins of the Republican Party, told him that "people are crazy for peach" and that there was no hope he would be reelected, while at the same point in time, the Democrats, who had nominated George McClellan, the former general of the Union Army, were betting that they would get the majority of the soldier vote because it was a vote for their old commander and a vote to get out of the field and get home. And everybody argued on those bases and both of them ended up being wrong.

And I guess the last lesson that we can learn from what happened in the Civil War is that organizing counts and it's get out the vote, whether it's like you and I were doing back in 1918, E.J. (laughter), or what Lincoln was doing in 1864 when he actually went so far as to send a Navy ship up and down the Mississippi River to collect votes of Union gun boats that couldn't dock so the sailors could vote.

But, you know, there's a handful of historical messages that come out of this in that first, and probably foremost, national emergency has never stopped a vote, and it shouldn't now either. The debate has always been partisan and those that organize win.

MR. DIONNE: And if I can just add, I think as the time of the War turned, it became clearer and clearer that the soldier vote was essential to reelecting Lincoln. And that's why those Democratic legislatures were not happy and did not want to pass the soldier vote. That by the fall things had turned.

MR. WHEELER: Yeah, one clarifying thing, there was only one state where the soldier vote would have made a difference and that was Pennsylvania. So Lincoln carried 22 states, he would have had 21 states.

MR. DIONNE: Yeah, thank you. We have a couple of -- let me go immediately to our questioners who -- we've got some good questions up here. Let me throw out two and each of you can answer one of them.



One from Alice, is it possible that the U.S. Post Office would not be funded by the U.S. government to work through the November election? If so, what happens?

From Katie, how much election fraud actually occurs in a typical election? Very good question, Katie, if I may. And how much can we reasonably expect that to increase if every state provides mail in ballot to voters? How can we secure voting by mail if expanded?

Go ahead. You want to start, Elaine?

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, let me take that.

First of all, I was smiling when you asked the -- I guess it was Alice asked the Post Office question. The reason I'm sort of smiling about that is that the U.S. Post Office has been going broke for more than a decade. I mean it is way, way, way in the red -- it has been for many years. It has not paid the government what it owes to shore up its pension and its health plans. So we have -- and Congress is kind of everybody is going like this with the problem with the Post Office. So I can't imagine that it won't be operating in the fall. We've kept it operating for many years as it's been in the red and I expect that to continue in the fall, although the situation is getting worse.

Secondly, as to the fraud, there are five states that use all mail ballots. And there has been no reports of increased fraud in any one of those states and they've been using them for quite some time now. Secondly, even before this happened, Darrell West, another Brookings scholar, and I wrote a book called "Dirty Tricks: Politics in the Cyber Age," and in it one of the things we discovered states were doing to prevent other people, Russians, Chinese, whoever, messing around in elections, was in fact instituting back up paper ballots. Paper ballots have ironically become the safety for internet -- fooling around on the internet and somebody trying to hijack our elections. And most states have been moving to a system where there is a back up paper ballot.

Paper ballots turn out to be very useful because you can do a recount with a paper ballot. And that's why in this internet age one of the ironies is -- even before the pandemic hit, one of the ironies was that states were moving in the direction of adding paper ballots to the voting apparatus.

MR. DIONNE: Let me just say there is a bill before Congress. Bipartisan, Senator Klobuchar, Senator Lankford to require everybody to use paper ballots, which is the best way to get in the way of hacking. They can still be counted by a computer.

MS. KAMARCK: Right.

MR. DIONNE: But if something goes wrong, you have a record --

MS. KAMARCK: Absolutely.

MR. DIONNE: -- of every vote. And fortunately there is a move in that direction. It's taking a little time in some places.

On the Post Office, we should always remember it's the only Federal Agency in the Constitution -- Article 1, Section 8, clause 7, that it requires Congress "to establish Post Offices and post roads" because postal service was seen as intimately connected with democracy and public debate around the country. And so I am very much --

MR. WHEELER: And the other thing, E.J., is if we're talking about an economic recovery, the USPS has 600,000 employees.

MR. DIONNE: Yes, amen.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. Right. Nobody is going to lay them off in the middle of a recession. I mean we're going to keep delivering the mail, no matter what it cost.

MR. DIONNE: Just anything on the fraud question or I can move on?

The amount of fraud in elections is in the range of 0.0-something percent. I mean it's very, very small. We have had -- you know, there was a recent indictment of a guy who was collecting absentee ballots for a Republican candidate down in North Carolina. We had to rerun one congressional race. So I'm not saying it never happens. My favorite comments on voter fraud is from Chicago where in Illinois people famously accuse the Democratic machine of voting corpses for the Democratic Party. Democrats in Chicago would also note there was fraud in downstate Republican farming areas and they would say that for every corpse that votes in Chicago a cow or a pig votes downstate.

But, Tom, on fraud?

MR. WHEELER: So appropriately, yes, it's a very low instance. And of that, the mail -- the allegations of mail fraud are an even smaller fraction. So I mean I think Elaine makes the right point. You know, let's look at the states where this is now going on for everybody, and while we're at it, let's use those states to kind of puncture the myth that the President has been trying to throw out, that Republicans will never get elected again.

So Colorado is one of those states. Senator Mark Udall, who lost to Corey Gardner, the Republican challenger, in a state where everybody voted by write-in. You look at Utah --

MR. DIONNE: By mail.

MR. WHEELER: -- two Republican senators. You know, this is back to the point about everybody comes up with a specious argument that they hang onto, you know, by their fingertips, but it just isn't factual.

MS. KAMARCK: You know, can I add one thing to that? In this question of sort of systems, right, each party clings to myths, right. And the myths, neither one makes sense. So the Democrats always think that any time you expand the electorate, make it easier to vote, it's going to help them. Republicans always think that any expansion of the electorate is going to hurt them.

In the article I wrote today, I did a quick look at some of the political science on this question of, you know, voting my mail, voting remotely, and guess what? It's a mixed bag. Sometimes they find no bias at all, sometimes a scholar will find that, oh, in this state it helped the Democrats, sometimes they'll find it helped the Republicans. Really frankly, it probably doesn't really help anybody. There's other factors that go into who wins and who loses other than the structure of the vote.

MR. DIONNE: I think it's fair to say that different constituencies are helped by mail ballots, and they are a mixed bag. Older voters, who are these days more Republican, younger votes are more Democratic. And there is a good question on this. We're getting a lot of great questions, by the way. Thank you all. I'm trying to get as many in as I can, so I'm going to ask two at the same time.

The first, clearly for Tom I think because of his "Gutenberg to Google", as internet voting is likely too risky for a large scale use in the fall, what do you think is the role of technology to reduce voter vulnerability to potential COVID infections in November?

And from Elizabeth, how do you ensure equal access for voting in marginalized communities during a time of social isolation? Elizabeth is particularly concerned with minority and disabled communities.

So the internet to Tom, if I could, and expanding -- you know, ensuring equal access to Elaine, although obviously both of you will probably comment on both. But I just start it that way.

MR. WHEELER: So on the internet question, there's probably a two word answer -- Iowa Caucus. (Laughter) And I mean that obviously facetiously. But there are two parts of this, one of which was illustrated by the Iowa Caucus, and that is that technology is still a work in progress, the digital technology is still a work in progress. But the really substantive issue is the security. And, you know, we know that our devices, our consumer devices are inherently insecure. We have recommendations from the Federal Government to the states saying that all their voting machines should not be connected to an outside network.

And here we're going to talk about connecting an inherently insecure device on a network that has now been said is itself insecure, and we're going to count on that. No. It makes all the sense in the world, back to Elaine's point about counting on paper ballots as a way of doing it. I am as big a supporter of the digital future as you can find, but I think one of the ways that we get to that digital future is to also understand its shortcomings.

MR. DIONNE: Just to go to the last half of that question and then to Elaine, the question ends the role of technology to reduce voter vulnerability to Covid infections in November.

If we get to testing, if there is a possibility of testing of polling places, boy, that would give us a lot of data too. But there's one old fashioned thing, and Elaine and I have talked about this, I am very concerned with those places, particularly in cities, where there aren't enough voting machines and the lines get very, very long and people have to wait for a long time.

Elaine has told me that we'll be lucky to have as many polling places as we have now -- as we had in the last election. I'm wondering if there is any way that voting machines and the like would at least be redistributed to polling places that have experienced lines in the past.

And also Elizabeth Warren proposed that we really need 30 days of early voting this time in order to have more opportunities for people to space out. And you can argue about 30 days of early voting in other elections, but if ever it made sense, it was this one.

So I'll throw that at Elaine and then also the question of how to ensure equal access in marginalized communities.

MS. KAMARCK: Well, let me take that one first because I actually think that the all mail ballots actually help particularly the disabled community enormously. I mean because let's face it, you don't need to send vans. In your typical GOTV operation you send vans that are equipped to take the disabled people to the polls. Obviously you don't have to do that if you can just make sure that they're getting their ballots at home, or wherever they live, in the mail. So certainly for the disabled community, this should be a help to voting.

For the low-income and marginalized communities, there is the problem of making sure that they get the ballots and return the ballots. And that, of course, is your basic GOTV operation, which I think you will find a lot of people spending a lot of time getting out that vote. I'm not sure that it is more difficult than getting out that vote in a normal election. And, in fact, might actually even be easier. As long as you don't have the fraud that happened in North Carolina -- and I'm glad you brought that up, E.J. -- which is they had a Republican operative going out and collecting absentee ballots in an African American neighborhood and then not returning the absentee ballots where they belong. So you've got to watch out for that, but I think people are well alerted to that one.

MR. WHEELER: But, you know, if I can pile onto that for a second, Elaine. GOTV, the Florida Republican party counts on absentee ballots. More Republicans voted by the absentee ballot in the last two elections in Florida than Democrats do. And they've got a massive GOTV for the mail in ballot program there.

And so I'm just reinforcing your point about it's all about GOTV, whether that GOTV is at the door, driving people to the polls, or making sure that they --

MS. KAMARCK: Making sure they -- yeah, making sure they return their ballots.

MR. DIONNE: One of those Republican voters who cast an absentee ballot --

MR. WHEELER: Was?

MR. DIONNE: -- in Florida was President Trump in 2008.

MS. KAMARCK: (Laughing) That's right.

MR. DIONNE: It's worth noting. He seemed to be saying it's okay if I do it.

MR. WHEELER: And he did last month too. Last month.

MR. DIONNE: I'm sorry?

MR. WHEELER: He did last month I think.

MS. KAMARCK: Just last month, sure.

MR. DIONNE: Let me just stay with that for a moment and then I want to go -- the question is from Min -- I can't tell -- it's a really civic minded question, so I can't tell whether your name is Min or if you're from Minnesota, a very civic minded place. But I'll get to you in a moment.

Wisconsin's outcome yesterday was fascinating because Republicans, just to -- the primary went two to one for Joe Biden. That wasn't surprising. But the key election was for a judge on the seven member Supreme Court, an incumbent conservative that was theoretically nonpartisan, but it was very partisan. An incumbent conservative against a liberal. And it was felt the Republicans just wanted to barrel ahead with the selection because they thought they could win, and especially if turnout was low in urban areas that were Democratic, they'd have a better chance. Lo and behold, the liberal won that race by 100,000 votes yesterday. And one of the interesting things about that is that there were so many early absentee ballots cast and Democrats apparently did a really good job of gathering them. Now, maybe the Democrats had a leg up because there was an opposed Democratic primary for -- a contested Democratic primary for president -- nonetheless, the turnout in the urban areas, thanks to early voting, was very high even though there are only five open polling places in Milwaukee.

What do we learn from all of that? I mean putting aside your partisan preference, it was very heartening to know that voters were ready to take advantage of early voting to the extent that they did in Wisconsin.

Elaine, do you have a thought on what we might --

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, I mean, look, I think that it was amazing to me the outcome. I think there was bias because there was a Democratic primary on the ballot. But I think that people did get out and vote. You did see them stand -- one of the reasons the lines were so long is people were standing six feet apart and they were practicing social distancing. So, again, it goes back to this idea of make Election Day a holiday. If you make Election Day a holiday you can spread out the voting all day long. You don't have to have long lines, you don't have to have, you know, crowds in the polling places.

The other thing that we will need to do is -- and I hope states do this because they've been talking about it for some time -- is we need to recruit a new generation of poll workers. Most of the people who work at the polls are retired people, men and women, who have the time to sit there all day. Well, first of all, we won't have a vaccine by November, so this is the age group that is still the most vulnerable age group. So a lot of poll workers in Florida, Wisconsin, and other places just didn't show up. Illinois was particularly bad. They just didn't show up for their jobs.

So right now we need to start recruiting, say graduate students, graduate students getting Federal loans. Come on, you owe the government something, right. They're the right age --

MR. DIONNE: They get paid a nominal amount usually in most --

MS. KAMARCK: Right, you do get paid a nominal amount. But we need to be recruiting and training grad students, people in their 20s, healthy, no underlying conditions, to take over this job from an older generation. We originally started talking about that just because of the technology needs that are going on at polling places, but I think we've got an even bigger reason right now.

Let me --

MR. DIONNE: But could I just add one idea to that? Which is, as you know, Elaine, I'm a big fan of the AmeriCorps program and every AmeriCorps volunteers should be given the day off on Election Day.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, that's another way to do it.

MR. DIONNE: (Inaudible) not for profit or church or charitable endeavor they're in and permit AmeriCorps volunteers help staff our elections. It would go well with the name of the program.

MS. KAMARCK: That's a wonderful idea.

The other thing I was going to say to Min, who I think is -- that's her name, E.J., is Min.

MR. DIONNE: Yes, well, let me -- people know her question. We're cheating here because you're (inaudible).

MS. KAMARCK: (Laughing) Yes. Okay. The other thing I say to --

MR. DIONNE: Let me tell everybody what -- and then, Tom, you can come back in.

Min asked what role does the nonprofit community have in helping ease the tension between the Federal Government and Federal and state response to election administration if the crisis extends to November. And, by the way, I think we're assuming that in one form or another, this crisis will extend to November.

Yeah, go ahead.

MS. KAMARCK: I think Min --

MR. DIONNE: I promised Tom.

MS. KAMARCK: I assume Min is a she. I may be wrong on that. But I think that the nonprofit community, look, is very important in getting out the vote in any election. And I think in this election one of the most important things the nonprofit community can do is educate people, particularly in marginalized communities, about requesting the absentee ballot, how to fill it out correctly, when to send it back by, et cetera. Just for a community that isn't as familiar with this as, say, the other communities, I think that the nonprofit groups can really step in. You can see AARP taking this on as something that people should be doing.



Muriel Bowser, the mayor here in the District of Columbia, said a couple of weeks ago, she's told all the residents, she said apply for your absentee ballot now. The primary isn't until June, but she was already telling people to apply for their absentee ballots. Now, one thing to just reiterate, Tom mentioned it a little bit, on Election Day in November, it's not just the presidential election, it's not just about Donald Trump and Joe Biden, there are tens of other people on the ballot, there are governors on the ballot, all of Congress is on the ballot. So you're going to have a lot of people interested in getting the vote out in November and that will help.

MR. DIONNE: State legislatures.

By the way, bless you, Min, you have told us with a smile that your name is Min. So thank you. And, Tom, you've been raring to go on a number of points.

MR. WHEELER: No, I just think that one of the things we have to bear in mind -- so I think you put these two questions together. Is there a role for NGOs in this? Obviously, as Elaine points out, in helping to educate America. There's also the need, back to the polling workers. But there's also a need -- you need to understand -- so go back to Wisconsin and what we really haven't talked about here is the flood of mail ballots that will be coming in the states that have no excuse voting. Five times as many mail ballots were received in Wisconsin as in the 2016 election. And there needs to be a structure in place for that. I can see community organizations stepping up to volunteer to do these kind of things, under local supervision of course.

But I just think there is a need for all kinds of expansive thinking. You know, doing things the way we've always done them in this case is just an excuse for not thinking.

MR. DIONNE: Could I just say, because it's an opportunity to say this to people who care about voting. It's not going to happen between now and November, but this entire conversation to me points to the urgency in the next Congress of finally taking up the question of restoring the Voting Rights Act, which got gutted by a Supreme Court decision. We're going to need -- we need it now. But we're not going to get it through this Congress right now, but it's got to be a priority going forward.

This question has come up from a number of people, the version on my screen is from Tora (phonetic). Can the President decide to cancel/postpone the November election?

Both of you.

MS. KAMARCK: Answer is no. Congress sets the date -- the presidential election is in the Constitution -- Congress sets the date of the presidential election in statute. I cannot imagine that Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic Congress would vote to change that statute. And I think, as Tom pointed out early on, through other national crises, wars with lots of people deployed, we have held presidential elections on time. And I can't imagine that -- even if Donald Trump wants to cancel or postpone the election, I can't imagine that that would happen.

MR. WHEELER: I totally agree with Elaine. Other than to observe the 2 hours and 24 minutes yesterday, the President announced how he was going to assume State Police powers. Now, it doesn't mean he can or he can get away with it or anything like that, but I've got to tell you, I listened to that, I listened to him stepping in and saying that he was contravening the 10th Amendment to the Constitution. I said to myself, what is that mean about voting.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. Well, as we know from having watched Donald Trump all this time -- as we know from having watched Donald Trump for three years now, he frequently assumes powers that he does not have and that I cannot imagine him getting.

MR. WHEELER: And that the week before he didn't want.

MS. KAMARCK: Yes, that's right. And the week before he didn't even want, right.

MR. DIONNE: So just very briefly, we are at the end of our time. I could talk about this subject forever.

Why don't I ask -- I guess Elaine went first at the beginning, so I'll let Tom close. So, Elaine and Tom, just some closing thoughts on can we, will we protect our election in November?

Elaine?

MR. WHEELER: Well, we must. You cannot escape responsibility for tomorrow by ignoring it today. And we've got to be preparing now for what's going to happen six or seven months from now.

MR. DIONNE: Elaine?

MS. KAMARCK: I agree. Look, we've got six months. This is not -- it's not a surprise that there's an election coming. We've got six months, we have a lot of experience with how to handle this pandemic, and hopefully by November we may not be totally out of the woods, but hopefully by November there might be a treatment, there will certainly be people who have already had the disease and recovered and have antibodies. So hopefully by November, if we do plan it now, do the right things now, we should have a smooth election in November.

MR. DIONNE: And so I want to close where I started. First of all, I want to thank everybody who joined this conversation and may you all get engaged in the work of making sure that our election happens and can include everyone.

Secondly, Elaine's last line stays with me, just do it. This is not that hard if we put our minds to it. It may not be hard, but it could get all mired in politics. That would be unfortunate. Or we could show that we're the kind of country we like to think of ourselves as, who can conduct the best election under these circumstances that anyone has ever tried to conduct. And that's what we ought to be trying to do.

Thanks to Tom Wheeler and thanks to Elaine Kamarck. And Tom and I will reminisce about 2018 after this is -- 1918.

MR. WHEELER: 1918.

MS. KAMARCK: 1918.

MR. DIONNE: After this is over. Bless you all. Take care.

MS. KAMARCK: Thank you. Bye, bye now.

\* \* \* \* \*

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