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Senate Relief Bill Contains Less for Elections

A pandemic relief bill being considered by the Senate today would provide \$400 million to help states and localities run secure elections in November, but at least three senators said more funding would be needed to ensure that voters can safely cast ballots.

The election administration grant money provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (S 3548) would help state and local election officials prepare for a federal election complicated by the coronavirus pandemic, according to a summary provided by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

“Coronavirus is already resulting in the postponement of some primaries and this funding can help states make voting safer for individuals. Funding can be used, for example, to increase the ability to vote by mail, expand early voting and online registration, and increase the safety of voting in-person by providing additional voting facilities and more poll-workers,” the summary said.

By contrast, a House pandemic relief bill introduced this week would offer \$4 billion for election administration grants and would mandate online voter registration and relaxed rules for absentee voters to vote by mail (TR Daily, March 24).

“In times of crisis, the American people cannot be forced to choose between their health and exercising their right to vote,” said Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D., Minn.), ranking member of the Senate Rules and Administration Committee with jurisdiction over federal elections, and Ron Wyden (D., Ore.), ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee.

“While this funding is a step in the right direction, we must enact election reforms across the country as well as secure more resources to guarantee safe and secure elections. We will continue to fight to pass the Natural Disaster and Emergency Ballot Act of 2020 to ensure every eligible American can safely and lawfully cast their ballot,” they said.

The Natural Disaster and Emergency Ballot Act, introduced last week by Sens. Klobuchar, Wyden, and Chris Coons (D., Del.), ranking member of the Appropriations subcommittee responsible for the Election Assistance Commission, would expand no-excuse absentee vote-by-mail to all states, extend early in-person voting in every state to at least 20 days, and reimburse states for additional costs in administering elections during the pandemic.

“It’s very possible that COVID-19 will continue to disrupt American lives through November, and we need to prepare the country to vote if that’s the case,” Sen. Coons said.

“The election funding included in the final stimulus package provides important assistance to states to expand access to the polls, but it’s not enough to guarantee full implementation of these critical election reforms,” Sen. Coons said. “It’s on the federal government to safeguard our constitutional rights and make sure that, even while our country faces this pandemic, we still protect our democracy.” —Tom Leithauser, tom.leithauser@wolterskluwer.com

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