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2020 General Election: Preparation is Key

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The elections landscaping is steadily changing, and often, with change comes confusion. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted several changes to state election laws and voting procedures, leaving many voters unsure about how, when, and where to cast their ballot for the 2020 General Election. While presidential elections are a national conversation, it is important to remember elections are administered at the local level with different laws in place for each state. Mississippians *must* stay vigilant when it comes to election information and prepare accordingly *before* hitting the polls.

Everyone expects the polling place environment to be a bit different on November 3rd. While this year's changes will not greatly affect many people, I would like to walk you through a few of the adjustments, so you can know what to expect. To start, the absentee voting exception for those with a temporary or permanent physical disability, which was already an eligible excuse for mail-in absentee voting, now includes, but is

not limited to, those who are under a physician-imposed quarantine, or those who are caring for a dependent who is under a physician-imposed quarantine, due to COVID-19. Mail-in absentee ballots may be received up to five business days after the election if the envelope is postmarked on or before Election Day. Additionally, absentee ballots will now be the final vote, which means those who vote absentee may not appear on Election Day and cast a regular ballot. Due to COVID-19, some polling places have been moved or consolidated according to social distancing guidelines, so please make sure to verify your polling place prior to voting on Election Day. An easy way to verify these changes is to access the polling place locator on our Y'all Vote website (www.yallvote.ms).

National and state social distancing guidelines have indeed forced most of us to spend more time online. With increased internet activity comes a heightened level of misinformation surrounding elections. The National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) recently launched #TrustedInfo2020 – an education effort to promote election officials as the trusted sources of election information. The goal is to combat misinformation by driving voters directly to election officials' websites and social media pages. Whether you are looking for information regarding your voting precinct or your voter registration status, the Secretary of State's Office and county election officials will always be the most reliable resources.

As Mississippi's Chief Election Officer, one of my top priorities is making sure the information we push out is easy to understand and easily accessible. We updated our website to include a list of recent changes to state election laws, [step-by-step guides for each voting process](#), and answers to [frequently asked questions](#) regarding [COVID-19 safety at the polls](#). We have also started a series of "Election Check-In" [videos](#) on our social media pages, which remind voters about upcoming deadlines and other useful information relative to our state's election process. While I am proud of the fantastic work from our office, a successful election requires more than just strategic communication; it requires a team effort.

With the invaluable help of the Mississippi National Guard, Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, and the Department of Agriculture, [our office distributed 117 pallets of COVID-19 safety supplies](#) to all 82 counties for Election Day. On November 3rd, every precinct in the state will be equipped with hand sanitizer, pens or styluses, germicide spray, and masks for those who need them. Because Mississippi is a bottom-up state and the counties are responsible for conducting elections, each county has taken charge of its own social distancing efforts. Voters will have the option to wear a mask while voting on Election Day, but our [newly-adopted administrative rules](#) require all poll managers to wear personal protective equipment (PPE). Our

administrative rules also allow any voter who states he/she has had significant exposure to COVID-19, or is exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 (including, but not limited to coughing, vomiting, headaches, fever, sore throat, congestion, or loss of taste and/or smell), to have a curbside voting option. Under the new rules, poll managers may direct the voter to an open-air voting option outside the physical structure of the polling place and away from other voters entering or exiting the polling place. They may also direct the voter to curbside vote from their motor vehicle.

While COVID-19 safety guidelines are of the utmost importance, preparation should not stop there. I strongly encourage you to study the sample ballot on our website and familiarize yourself with the candidates and ballot measures listed. Far too often, we as voters let the top of the ballot, such as candidates for President and United States Senate, dominate the headlines and drive us to the polls. While these are important, there are important races at stake down the ballot. For example, depending on the district in which you reside, races such as United States Representative, State Supreme Court, and local special elections need your attention as well. This year, alongside several down-ballot races, Mississippians can expect to find three ballot measures. Initiative measures [65](#) and [65A](#) address implementing a medical marijuana program to allow the use of marijuana for qualifying persons with debilitating medical conditions. The second ballot measure, House Concurrent Resolution 47, addresses amending the process for the election of statewide officeholders. The amendment proposes removing the current requirement for a candidate to receive a majority of votes statewide and a majority of the 122 house districts and instead requires candidates to simply win a majority of votes statewide. By chance there was a tie, it would move to a runoff election. The third and final ballot measure, House Bill 1796, addresses the state flag referendum--a color copy of the newly-proposed flag design will be provided.

None of us could have ever predicted we would be voting for these measures during a global pandemic, but each of us has the opportunity to ensure this election is not used as an open door for fraud or political chaos. While state and county election officials continue to work together to uphold the integrity of our election process, I encourage all voters to develop a voting plan that aligns with your health and safety needs, as well as state laws. Use this time to get to know your trusted sources, verify your voter registration status, evaluate your voting options, double-check your precinct location, and study your county-specific ballot. The voting process will undoubtedly look and feel different for each of us this year, but all of us can prepare accordingly and do our part to contribute toward a safe and fair general election.

Michael Watson

MICHAEL WATSON
Secretary of State
State of Mississippi

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