EXPANDED EARLY VOTING:
A Commonsense Solution for Voters and Clerks

The Michigan Legislature must provide additional voting options before Election Day to support equitable access to the ballot and alleviate stress on local clerks.

BACKGROUND

Michigan voters overwhelmingly approved Proposal 3 in 2018 with 67% of the vote, allowing no-excuse absentee voting.

In 2016, only 26% of Michigan voters voted absentee. By the 2020 election, absentee voting had increased to 60%.1 Casting a ballot before Election Day is now both familiar to voters and the most popular way of voting. Given the high level of absentee voting, it is unlikely that absentee voting levels will decrease substantially in the near future.

While the growth of absentee voting has been a needed boon for voters, it has created costs for local clerks. Clerks across Michigan have reported staffing shortages and increased costs in postage.

The Michigan Legislature and local governments have not adequately increased their budgets to meet the growing staffing and budgetary demands brought on by the high levels of absentee voting.

However, an administratively effective and commonsense solution exists to provide voters with access before Election Day, comply with the Michigan State Constitution, and reduce the burden on clerks and voters: give voters at least a two-week early voting period to cast a ballot directly into a tabulator.

1 Michigan Department of State Email, November 13, 2020
PROPOSAL
State lawmakers should pass legislation that creates at least a two-week early voting period that includes weekends and evenings, and gives voters the opportunity to see their ballot go directly into a tabulator.

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT AT LEAST TWO WEEKS OF EARLY VOTING:

- Leads to shorter lines
- Reduces stress on the voting system on election day
- Improves poll worker performance
- Identifies and corrects registration errors and voting system glitches earlier
- Leads to greater access to voting and increased voter satisfaction

This model has worked well in 19 states and the District of Columbia, North Carolina and Texas offer examples which show that when early voting is available, voters, regardless of party affiliation, will use it and prefer it to absentee voting. In Texas, 77% of the electorate voted early in-person in the 2020 general election. In North Carolina 65% of voters used early voting. These numbers reflect a higher popularity and comfort, across party lines, with early voting.

This version of early voting would help reduce the amount of time required to process absentee ballots. According to the Brennan Center, a well functioning early voting system with sizeable turnout “means administrators have more opportunity to reduce the burdens and stresses caused by having all poll site management challenges (from checking in voters to fixing machines) converge on a single day.”
Most importantly, Michigan voters want the peace of mind voting early affords, and clerks want the benefits it brings to election administration:

“We had about 600 people per day who waited in line to get a ballot just to find out they were technically voting absentee and putting the ballot into an envelope. This led to many, many questions and concerns. Many voters decided to leave and commit to voting on Election Day because they wanted to put their ballot into a tabulator.”
Melanie Ryska, Sterling Heights City Clerk

**MICHIGAN MUST MEET THE NEEDS OF VOTERS AND CLERKS**

Unfortunately, legislation currently in the state capitol doesn’t reckon with the reality of early voting or the needs of clerks who run elections. Current proposals limit access for voters and make clerks’ jobs harder. SB 300, introduced in the state senate this year, seeks to provide only a single day of early voting. This would limit voters, deny clerks the benefit of using a full two weeks to correct errors, and still lead to high pressure election days.
TWO WEEKS OF BALLOT PREPROCESSING:
A Small Change that Brings a Huge Benefit to Voters and Clerks

The Michigan Legislature must extend the ballot counting and processing period to at least 14 days before Election Day.

BACKGROUND

Michigan voters deserve quicker absentee ballot counting and processing. Three days after the 2020 presidential election, as Michigan voters still awaited results, a software update issue in Antrim County set off a wildfire of misinformation. Human error by Antrim’s county clerk, who had worked long hours since the election tabulating absentee ballots, caused erroneous reporting of unofficial results.

This report was then used to fuel false claims while the official results of the election were still being compiled. It did not have to be this way. Current infrastructure did not allow ballots to be counted quickly in 2020, causing:

- Unnecessary challenges for clerks
- Longer wait times for results
- Disinformation

A long counting period, stemming from the tabulation of absentee ballots, which in many cases arrived long before Election Day, risks avoidable fatigue and mistakes.
PROPOSAL

Legislators must allow local clerks to process and count absentee ballots for at least two weeks before Election Day, rather than forcing them to wait until Election Day is almost upon them.

Michigan currently lags behind the seven-day minimum suggested period that nonpartisan experts like the Bipartisan Policy Center recommend, allowing preprocessing only 10 hours before Election Day. This is not an adequate amount of time for the clerks, especially when they are busy preparing for Election Day itself during this time period. The Michigan Legislature has the power to make a small tweak to our election system that pays big dividends and changes the conditions that led to a tortured tabulation process in 2020.

Michigan can learn from states that preprocessed absentee ballots and delivered speedy elections results last year. Florida, which allows up to 22 days of preprocessing before Election Day, was able to quickly deliver results in 2020. Florida elections officials can process and check ballots for errors, before running the ballot through a tabulator which counts the vote. Results are sensibly not released prior to Election Day.
Michigan can do better and provide faster results for voters, with one simple change that eases restrictions.

Legislators put the local clerks who run elections in a no win situation:

“(W)e weren’t ready for the onslaught of early and mail-in votes. And there were big bonuses of absentee ballots that couldn’t be processed in time because I wouldn’t allow them to process them early.”

Michigan Senate Majority Leader, Mike Shirkey

Michigan clerks and voters deserve a similar system. Before the 2020 election, a group of 17 clerks from communities across Michigan sent a letter asking the legislature to allow ballot preprocessing, and warning of pending disaster under the current restrictions. The letter detailed that:

“While even one day of preprocessing before Election Day would provide some help, many clerks are busy preparing for the logistics of the next day’s in-person voting. We believe that allowing clerks to have seven days of preprocessing before Election Day is the wisest policy and would give overwhelmed jurisdictions the ability to conduct the election in the most safe and secure manner possible.”

Asking for seven days of preprocessing was reasonable to try and avert a disaster before the election. Lawmakers can act now to make lasting change to the system. At least two weeks of preprocessing would properly allow clerks to balance all of their duties while effectively serving voters.

**THE LEGISLATURE CAN’T REPEAT THE SAME MISTAKES OF THE LAST ELECTION**

Voters and clerks deserve a well run election administration system free from needless restrictions. But currently, the legislature isn’t advancing serious proposals to fix this flaw and allow two weeks of preprocessing. SB 283, for example, would simply extend the same flawed process Michigan used last election, and not allow clerks to actually tabulate results.
TRANSPARENT AND FAIR:

Funding Standards are Needed to Run our Elections

The Michigan Legislature must provide funding to local clerks through consistent standards to effectively serve voters.

BACKGROUND

Public funding for elections is scarce, and doesn’t meet voters’ basic requirements. Private money is filling the gap. The 2020 election came with record absentee voting, historic statewide voter turnout, and unique challenges. What it didn’t come with was a proportionate increase in state funding to offset necessary costs. Instead, many states and communities relied heavily on private funding to cover basic needs, including pay for poll workers and sorting machine costs. In Michigan, millions of dollars were directed to 474 local clerks’ offices to help them operate elections. Many Michigan municipalities received more funding from private sources than from the government. But backfilling shortfalls with private dollars to meet public needs is not an efficient or sustainable way to run elections.

Michigan’s election funding has not been updated since Proposal 3 became law, which guaranteed voters the right to no-excuse absentee voting. Yet, state funding has lagged behind clerks’ modern responsibilities. Elections should be run by the government, and local officials should not have to rely on private sources simply to comply with requirements of the state constitution or basic public health.
**PROPOSAL**

Michigan clerks and voters need a consistent and fair level of funding from the state legislature to fund election administration activities. Such funding should ensure that our elections are effectively run and that there is equitable access to the ballot.

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**WE RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING BASIC EQUIPMENT AND NEEDS RECEIVE FUNDING FROM THE STATE:**

- **BALLOT DROP BOXES**
- **HIGH SPEED SCANNERS**
- **TESTING FOR VOTING EQUIPMENT**
- **PREPAID RETURN POSTAGE FOR ABSENTEE BALLOT APPLICATIONS AND BALLOTS**
  (Supplies associated with increased voting by mail, including: envelopes, automatic letter openers, folders, pre-folded ballots, and mail related fees)
- **AT LEAST THREE POLL WORKERS PER PRECINCT**
  (Election overtime or extra compensation to election officials and employees for canvass and audit operations)
Municipal clerks simply cannot adequately prepare for expected levels of absentee voting and early voting moving forward at current funding levels:

“I don’t know how we would have done [it] if it wasn’t for the [Center for Tech and Civic Life] grant.”

Chris Swope, Lansing City Clerk

Increased voter turnout, increased absentee voting, and increased voting options are necessary and require investment. Without the additional funding from private sources during the 2020 election cycle, the City of Lansing, for example, would have had fewer satellite polling locations, fewer drop boxes, less staff, and less technology, which would have led to significant obstacles for voters and the clerk alike.

**PREVENTING PRIVATE FUNDING WITHOUT PROVIDING PUBLIC FUNDING IS AN ATTACK ON OUR ELECTIONS**

While we recommend that the need for private funding be made obsolete through proper state support, the Michigan legislature must recognize that banning private funding for clerks without responsibly budgeting for election administration is an irresponsible attack on our elections. The proposal in SB 284 to ban private funding would compound problems with our elections, and pass them onto local officials without providing a life raft.

Ultimately, voters and communities will pay the price for elections not funded by the state.
BETTER RECRUITMENT TOOLS:
Michigan Needs More Poll Workers to Ensure Elections Run Smoothly

The Michigan Legislature must support poll worker recruitment by providing additional tools for local clerks.

BACKGROUND
Poll workers are in increasingly short supply. During the 2020 election, many clerks had trouble staffing the legal minimum of three poll workers per precinct. A 2018 report from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission found that just 10% of poll workers in Michigan were between the ages of 18 and 40. While a flood of attention and the Democracy MVP program helped avert disaster in 2020, holding an election during a coronavirus pandemic highlighted the long term need for a more robust base of poll workers.

Clerks are being asked to do more during an election, especially with the growth of absentee voting. This in turn creates more tasks for poll workers, but gives clerks less time to recruit them.

Shortages of staff at polling places can reduce access for voters with disabilities who rely on the assistance of poll workers to vote.

Numerous clerks have had problems recruiting a sufficient number of poll workers to ensure there is partisan parity at each polling location, heightening political suspicion and fueling disinformation about the fairness of our elections.

1 Data are derived from the 2018 EAVS Survey and the 2017 5-yr American Community Survey.
**PROPOSAL**

Michigan lawmakers should bolster and compliment existing poll worker recruitment efforts before the 2022 midterm elections.

We recommend that the Michigan Legislature mandates:

- **The secretary of state and clerks must maintain a database of eligible poll workers**, leading to easy recurring recruitment and the ability to identify gaps in poll worker recruitment before elections;

- **An option for absentee voters to indicate their interest in becoming a poll worker** by including a check box on the absentee voter application, paving the way for the data to be stored in the state’s Qualified Voter File. This would lead to easier recruitment by clerks and the secretary of state, with only a minor addition to an absentee ballot application;

- **Making permanent the Democracy MVP poll worker recruitment program** to ensure it lasts beyond the tenure of the current secretary of state, and that clerks do not have to spend inordinate amounts of time recruiting poll workers;

- **Major political parties recruit 10% of needed poll workers** during each federal election cycle. These poll workers can be used to ensure the required partisan balance, and harnessing political parties lets them help fix a problem rather than sit on the sidelines. Additionally, each party would also have poll workers they could easily communicate with to understand what exactly happened in each election cycle, decreasing partisan suspicions. The Michigan certification process by law is a bipartisan process, and obtaining assistance from each party ensures that each party is invested in a fair outcome.

These fixes harness existing statewide processes and parties to help alleviate the burden on local clerks.
LEGISLATION NEEDS TO FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS TO FIND MORE POLL WORKERS

Unfortunately, proposed solutions to Michigan’s shortage of poll workers are easy to find, except in the state capitol. There, bad bills like SB 294, which mandates that municipalities that don’t have partisan parity, report back to legislators, don’t attempt to actually solve the problem: the lack of poll workers.

Efforts such as these continue to leave local clerks in a lurch and make our elections difficult to administer, while politicians get to score political points by playing the blame game. The Michigan Legislature needs to get serious about working on real solutions to engage eager Michigan voters as civically minded poll workers.

Solutions to Michigan’s shortage of poll workers are easy to find.
BALLOT DROP BOX STANDARDS:
Solutions to Protect a Popular Tool for Voters

The Michigan Legislature must protect and expand ballot drop box accessibility, and set uniform standards for their use.

BACKGROUND

In locations throughout the U.S. where voters have access to vote-by-mail, as many as 80% of voters use a drop box to return their ballot. Prior to last year’s election, 74% of registered voters polled across the country wanted access to a drop box. With this clear voter demand for ballot drop boxes, many Michigan communities justifiably responded by installing them during the 2020 election cycle.

However, not every community providing drop boxes did so equally or evenly throughout Michigan. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission recommends one drop box for every 15,000 to 20,000 voters. Some communities met this standard, others did not:

1. Livonia had just one drop box for over 81,000 registered voters.
2. Novi, with over 45,000 registered voters, installed an adequate four drop boxes to meet the needs of their voters. However, all of their drop boxes were installed at one location.

Beyond the numbers of drop boxes and their distribution, some voters were confused. The hours of availability for drop boxes were not uniform across the state, nor was the look or branding of drop boxes.
PROPOSAL
Michigan lawmakers need to set drop box standards before the next election.

DROP BOX STANDARDS SHOULD INCLUDE:

- A minimum of one drop box per every 15,000–20,000 voters in a jurisdiction
- Equal and convenient distribution so drop boxes are close to where voters live
- Uniform branding and security standards for easily recognizable drop boxes
- Best practices for collecting and handling ballots placed in drop boxes

These recommendations would help avoid confusion and ensure that every voter has an equal opportunity to use drop boxes.
The standardization of ballot drop boxes capitalizes on their popularity while making sure that all communities benefit.

LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD AND CAPITALIZE ON THE ADVANTAGES OF DROP BOXES

The standardization of ballot drop boxes capitalizes on their popularity while making sure that all communities benefit. Voters sometimes make mistakes with their signature, but ballots submitted via a drop box allow for clerks to receive ballots faster and contact voters while there is still an opportunity to cure mistakes. Every community in Michigan must give voters and clerks this advantage uniformly.

In the short time of their use in Michigan, drop boxes have proven to be a popular option. In Sterling Heights alone, approximately 83% of absentee ballots were returned via a drop box. It would be a waste of valuable resources to abandon drop boxes moving forward, when the state could simply set standards to adopt them in a way that’s equal for every community.

Lastly, drop boxes are a convenient option to return ballots without relying on the postal system. In the fourth quarter of 2020, only 56% of all standard USPS mail in the Metro Detroit area was considered to have been delivered on time. With further plans to slow mail rates in the future, drop boxes would be a wise investment to alleviate dependency on the USPS.

Unfortunately, many legislative proposals in the statehouse miss the big picture of how drop boxes should work in Michigan. SB 286 would ban the use of drop boxes in the final hours of an election, unnecessarily punishing voters. SB 273 would require the joint approval of the secretary of state and canvassing board to install drop boxes, taking power away from local officials and potentially limiting who has access to drop boxes. Giving local officials guidelines, so they can install drop boxes fairly, is the better option.

1 Sterling Heights City Clerk’s Office Email, April 14, 2021