

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3203

October 8, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St., NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We write to reiterate the importance of the Department of State taking action to ensure that Americans living overseas can safely vote during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The pandemic continues to restrict travel and mail service in many countries around the world. This could jeopardize the ability for Americans overseas, including U.S. service members and diplomats, to vote in the November election.

More than three million U.S. citizens living abroad are eligible to vote. Voting for these Americans can be difficult, and in every election, postal delivery issues and strict state deadlines mean that ballots from some voters living abroad go uncounted. Obstacles to voting, coupled with concerns that their ballots will not count, mean that many Americans living overseas will decide not to vote at all. In 2016, only about seven percent of all eligible overseas voters returned a valid ballot. A deep concern remains that delays and confusion resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic will make matters worse. The United States Postal Service (USPS) has warned election officials across the U.S. that the delivery of election mail may be delayed, and the situation may be even worse for many voters living overseas.

Given these serious challenges and the fundamental importance of ensuring that eligible Americans are able to cast a ballot in the upcoming election, we are disturbed that it took over eleven weeks for you to respond to our letter on July 2, 2020, requesting information on the State Department plans to ensure that Americans overseas are able to vote in elections this year. Your response also failed to address many of the concerns raised in our letter. While awaiting your response, we subsequently wrote directly to 30 embassies around the world in countries with large numbers of American citizens living abroad. Their responses indicate that individual embassies are taking initiative to safeguard American's right to vote during the pandemic. Actions taken by embassies include:

Social Media and Online Information Campaigns

Embassies outlined efforts to amplify information regarding state ballot return options through social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Several embassies have established targeted social media campaigns to promote voting in the United States. These efforts include hosting virtual informational meetings over Facebook Live and Zoom to discuss voting with U.S. citizens in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassies have also reported using other online tools to disseminate voting information. Several embassies discussed using systems designed to reach out to overseas Americans

like MASCOT (Messaging Alert System for Citizens Overseas Tool) and STEP (State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) to share information regarding absentee ballots and encourage them to plan ahead with their vote.

Expanding Voter Assistance Consular Services

Despite COVID-19 restrictions requiring embassies to make significant changes to their operational procedures, the Department of State has instructed all posts to prioritize voting assistance. Several embassies allow voters to safely visit for voting questions, assistance, or ballot drop - including designating one employee to specifically oversee voting assistance efforts.

Many embassies are proactively reaching out to schools and organizations that serve the U.S. expat community to share deadlines and voting information. One embassy began integrating voting information in its orientation program for U.S. Fulbright scholars and another utilized its Public Affairs Section to repeatedly publish useful information in widely circulated English-language newspapers and an expat magazine.

Ballot Collection Initiatives and Recommended Deadlines

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, all embassies that responded have provided voters the option to drop their ballots off in designated ballot drop boxes at the embassy or consulate. To protect those with the greatest health risks, some embassies are allowing voters to give their ballot to someone else to drop off on their behalf. Once collected, embassies are using diplomatic pouches to mail ballots to the United States.

Several embassies have established recommended deadlines for voters to mail their completed ballots that follow United States Postal Service (USPS) guidelines to ensure that they are counted in time. Several embassies are encouraging U.S. citizens to abide by these recommended deadlines in their communications. Each embassy is monitoring developments with the USPS to ensure that citizens are well informed about any changes to postal service that could delay the delivery of ballots.

These efforts demonstrate the commitment of many of our diplomats to ensuring that American citizens living abroad can fully participate in our democracy during the pandemic. We urge you to show similar leadership and implement these best practices across the State Department.

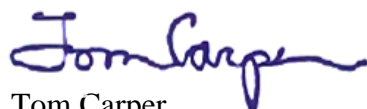
Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Tom Carper
United States Senator