Preparing for elections in the shadow of Covid-19

My name is Evan Horowitz and I'm the Executive Director of the Center for State Policy Analysis at Tisch College, Tufts University.

We launched in February with the goal of providing timely, non-partisan research on live legislative topics. In the last six weeks, we've released a series of reports estimating the likely shortfall in state tax revenues, identifying key steps for reopening the economy, and looking at how to hold elections in the shadow of Covid-19 — which is what I'm pleased to be discussing with you today.

Barring some dramatic turnaround there's likely to be a surge in demand for absentee voting this election season. To give a sense of the potential scale: in 2016, about 4% of registered voters received absentee ballots in MA. This election season could easily see a 10-20 fold increase.

The most straightforward first step — about which there seems to be a fairly strong consensus — is to circumvent the requirement that absentee voters need a valid excuse by asserting that Covid creates an excuse for everyone.

After that, the state faces some more complex choices and trade-offs, including on the contentious question of whether to automatically send ballots to all voters, or instead to send applications.

We worked with enough experts to know that there is no clear answer to this question. Sending ballots threatens to undermine perceptions about the integrity of the election process — opening the door for stories about ballots falling into the wrong hands or stacks of ballots being scooped up with nefarious purpose. However, sending applications creates a dangerous bottleneck for cities and towns, as they may lack the resources to handle vastly-increased demand (remember, this was a big problem in the Wisconsin primary.)

There are a number of less fraught approaches that could help ensure safer voting in September and November. I'll mention 7 in particular.

1) *Expand options for registration*. Election day registration is one of the few proven ways to increase turnout and may be especially useful in a year when traditional, face-to-face registration drives will be severely curtailed.

2) *Provide multiple options for collecting absentee ballots*. Even in states with 100% vote-by-mail, most people don't actually put their ballots in the mail. The majority are placed in drop boxes around town (not just in the clerk's office) and we can do the same.

3) *Simplify choices for voting from home*. The fact that we have two parallel systems — absentee voting and early-voting-by-mail — may be a hindrance to clear information for voters. To ensure maximal use of vote-at-home options, we may need to consolidate or merge these approaches.

4) *Facilitate the counting of absentee ballots*. If we really do jump from 4% to 70% vote-at-home, we'll need to start counting these ballots earlier and more efficiently than before. Allowing cities and town to pre-process absentee ballot envelopes would help, as might efforts to centrally count these ballots in clerk's offices rather than sending them to individual precincts.

5) *Experiment with curbside voting*. In this approach, voters drive up to a booth or tent in a parking log, pick up a ballot, fill it out in another area of the parking lot, then seal it and deposit in a drop-off box. This approach could be limited to early voting or reserved for voters at high risk.

6) *Leverage federal support*. Massachusetts has access to funds from the 2020 CARES Act and potentially as much as $40 million in unused money from the 2002 Help American Vote Act, some of which may be available for this year's election preparations.

7) *Devote meaningful resources to a coordinated communications campaign*. People need to be alerted to all these changes, and that takes careful planning and wide dissemination.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our findings. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Draft of prepared testimony for the Joint Committee on Election Laws, May 14 2020.