

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## Secretary of State Frank LaRose outlines changes needed for general election

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Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose is all-in for in-person voting in November's presidential election, but he is offering some "tweaks" that he believes will make the general election run smoother than the coronavirus-extended primary.

The state needs to allow online requests for absentee ballots, provide postage-paid envelopes for both absentee ballots and requests, and set an earlier deadline for requesting absentee ballots to prepare for a potential increase in voters casting ballots by mail, he said.

But Ohio also needs to encourage boards of elections to consolidate polling places and step up recruitment of poll workers for in-person voting, even as the state encourages voting by mail to stop the spread of COVID-19, he said.

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"In a usual year, I would not want to make large changes this late in the game, but this is not a usual year. These are unusual times. We have to respond to the unique situation we find ourselves in with these changes," LaRose told The Dispatch on Tuesday.

LaRose is introducing the changes after most Ohioans had to vote by mail in an extended primary election, after Gov. Mike DeWine's administration closed the polls hours before they were to open March 17 to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

He'll need the support of an Ohio General Assembly that set aside LaRose's proposal for handling the primary and instead adopted its own plan.

State lawmakers chose to extend the primary until April 28 and allow only limited in-person voting on Election Day for the disabled and the homeless. Other voters were supposed to mail absentee ballot requests to their local board of elections, wait for a ballot to arrive and then either mail it back or drop it off at the board. Those who asked for a ballot but didn't get one also could vote in-person.

Last week, Ohio Democratic Chairman David Pepper said the state shouldn't bother with absentee ballot requests and instead send general election ballots directly to registered voters. He also lobbied for an expansion of the in-person early voting window and to allow boards of elections to offer in-person early voting at more than one location.

LaRose said he believes the state's monthlong window for early voting is "adequate," but he supports the idea of allowing boards of elections to offer it in more than one location. He said he prefers to give voters the choice of requesting an absentee ballot.

The General Assembly would have to sign off on allowing online absentee ballot requests. LaRose said the current paper system is "slow and cumbersome" and "doesn't meet expectations."

Though LaRose is advocating for making vote-by-mail easier, he said he doesn't want it to be compulsory. He wants the state to offer in-person voting for the general election, but he also is encouraging boards of elections to consider consolidating polling locations.

Some traditional polling locations, including churches and schools, already have told boards that their facilities cannot be used for the 2020 election, he said. LaRose said he also would support a legislative change that makes it possible for voters to cast ballots at any polling location in their county.

"Consolidation of polling locations could be OK if we have done everything we can to incentivize voting by mail and those polling locations are fairly distributed to serve diverse populations throughout a county," said Jen Miller, executive director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio.

The Ohio Voter Rights Coalition supports much of what LaRose has proposed, she said, but wants absentee ballots to be sent directly to voters without a request.

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