



Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Blunt, Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. I'm Michael Adams, Kentucky's Secretary of State and chief election official. I was elected in 2019, but I got my start in election policy at a little intern desk in your hearing room 22 years ago. It's an honor to be back here, albeit virtually.

Today we discuss an unpleasant topic, but the news is not all bad. In Kentucky, voting has never been as accessible, nor as secure, as it is has been in the 21 months of my term. Last year, 3 months after being sworn in, I asked our legislature to grant me, a Republican, and our Democratic governor, joint emergency powers to alter election procedures, as necessary, to ensure public safety in the pandemic, without sacrificing voter access or ballot integrity. We made absentee balloting more available and extended in-person voting well beyond the 1 election day Kentucky had from 1891 through 2019.

The result was a primary election and a general election that each set records for turnout, yet no spike in Covid-19 cases deriving from the in-person voting. This approach proved so successful and so popular that our Republican-controlled legislature voted nearly unanimously to make most of these temporary changes permanent – early voting, an absentee ballot request portal, dropboxes, and more.

All this good news, ironically, lends itself to a higher level of frustration, by me, by our other election officials, by our legislators, about the unwillingness of certain quarters, on both sides of the aisle, to accept the reality that our election process is accessible and secure. In our current populist, anti-establishment political culture, part of this is organic, a reflexive refusal to believe anything somebody in the government says. This is not unique to elections, as we've seen with lagging vaccination rates. However, part of this is not organic, but rather is driven, by political actors who perceive some benefit in misinforming voters.

Addressing this should not be a partisan issue, because misinformation is not limited to one side. In Kentucky, we election officials were subject to a misinformation campaign that resulted in numerous threats of violence and other verbal abuse. The so-called All Eyes on Kentucky effort directed against us did not come from conservatives concerned about voter fraud; it came from progressives duped into believing that we were engaged in voter suppression. Worse, this misinformation effort was given oxygen by senior figures within the national Democratic Party. I remain grateful to our Democratic governor for defending our state and calling out these lies.

I'm not here to take political shots, to engage in moral relativism, or to diminish the experiences of Secretary Hobbs or any other election official; to the contrary, I'm here to show that the problem is even wider. The first step in ensuring the safety of our election officials is to do no harm yourselves. Please, keep your rhetoric factual and responsible.

Misinformation is the most serious threat our election system faces, because it is upstream of so many other problems we face: safety of election officials; willingness of election officials, including volunteer poll workers, to serve; voter turnout; polarization; and ultimately, the accepted legitimacy of our democratic system.

Election officials are at risk, but we are not unique in this: public officials are at risk. Those of you serving our nation in the U.S. Capitol certainly don't need me to inform you of this. In Kentucky, our Democratic governor has received threats from some on the far right: our Republican attorney general has received threats from some on the far left. Even public health officials in our state have received threats, and my fear is that school board members will be next, if they aren't already. This shows the problem is worse than we might think, yet also less susceptible to a simple solution in the form of yet another federal law.

At its best, Congress plays a constructive role in election administration by providing funding – reliable, predictable funding – to our states, chipping in a share of election costs alongside state and local election funding. These efforts have been bipartisan, and for that reason, accepted across the political spectrum. I have no wish that you pass any particular election laws going forward, but if you do, I hope you will do so in a non-ideological, bipartisan fashion, rather than furthering the polarization that plagues our politics. Thank you.



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CORONAVIRUS

For Election Administrators, Death Threats Have Become Part of the Job

In a polarized society, the bureaucrats who operate the machinery of democracy are taking flak from all sides. More than 20 have resigned or retired since March 1, thinning their ranks at a time when they are most needed.

by Jessica Huseman, Aug. 21, 2020, 6 a.m. EDT

ProPublica is a nonprofit newsroom that investigates abuses of power. Sign up to receive our biggest stories as soon as they're published.

Jared Dearing, the director of Kentucky's Board of Elections, had little to do with Louisville, the state's largest city, having only one polling place for the June 28 primary. It was a county decision, and it made sense. In-person turnout was expected to be low during the pandemic. The polling place, a convention center, offered multiple locations to cast ballots, and

transportation by bus there was free.

Nevertheless, as luminaries from LeBron James to U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., tweeted in outrage about the supposed disenfranchisement of Louisville voters, threats poured into Dearing's office. "You're too scared to answer your phone," one man said in a voicemail message from a blocked number. "Go find a gun and kill yourself. Every person that didn't get to vote because of you should get to beat the shit out of you." The man, who identified himself as a Washington, D.C., resident, expressed hope that Dearing, a "bigoted whore," would be mangled in a flaming car crash.

In another voicemail, the same caller predicted that every member of Dearing's staff, whom he called "evil fucks," would be damned for eternity. "Y'all are going to hell. God sees you. He sees you committing voter suppression, and that is a mortal sin."

Such abuse isn't limited to Kentucky. Across the country, election administrators and their staffs are facing unprecedented attacks, much of it from outside their jurisdictions, from both left- and right-wing voters and activists. The polarization of American politics has reached such a fever pitch that the bureaucrats who operate the machinery of democracy — and largely lack the authority to change it — are harassed and threatened in language that would be out of place even if they were candidates espousing extremist views. This pressure, along with health concerns, is prompting an unusually large number of election officials to step down, thinning the ranks of experienced administrators at a turbulent time when they are dealing with record numbers of absentee ballot applications, which in most places must be processed by hand.

Dearing, a Democrat who supports voting by mail during the pandemic, stayed on the job, but he was rattled. "It was disturbing," he said of the threats. "Elections are always tense, but this year was something different. There is a new and increasing level of acrimony, specifically directed at administrators."

In Washoe County, Nevada, a mailed-in ballot for the state's May primary had "SEALED WITH COVID SPIT" written on the outside of the envelope.



This article is part of Electionland, ProPublica's collaborative reporting project covering problems that prevent eligible voters from casting their ballots during the 2020 elections. [Learn more](#)

“We took that as a threat,” said Deanna Spikula, the county’s registrar of voters. The ballot was not counted, and the envelope was turned over to police. There was insufficient evidence to bring charges against the sender, said Michelle Bays, chief investigator for the Washoe County district attorney’s office.

In Evansville, Indiana, after an activist named Janet Reed sent out hundreds of absentee ballot applications in May that allegedly sought to deceive voters into registering as Democrats, recipients who assumed that she worked for the elections office began to flood its phone lines with furious accusations of malfeasance.

“We have received many calls at the election office irate with our staff, and [they] think it’s our fault that this is happening,” County Clerk Carla Hayden told the Election Board in a May meeting. “They’ve been cursed at. They’ve been hung up on — all kinds of things, which is really unfortunate because they’re working very, very hard and helping extra hours. And some of it has to do with trying to fix this error that someone else made.” Reed, who did not respond to a request for comment, has been charged with felony election fraud.

Oregon’s state election director, Steve Trout, said he has been harassed on the phone and social media by people wrongly accusing him of, among other things, changing voters’ party affiliations without consent. A conspiracy theory website, Gateway Pundit, spread the allegations, which originated with a group called My Party Was Changed Oregon. In fact, the voters had changed their registration years before or they were automatically registered through the state’s relatively new system, which doesn’t require them to specify a party.

“The threatening calls and emails are an annoyance that take time away from our important election duties and do not help improve elections in any way,” Trout said in an email. “They also reduce our ability to assist voters with real questions and issues.”

Elections administrators say that morale is the lowest they have ever seen. In early July, Amy Cohen, the director of the National Association of State Election Directors, acknowledged the pressure in a tweet from NASED’s account, saying, “We knew 2020 would be hard for election officials, but it’s been more challenging than ever imagined.”

More than 20 local election administrators have resigned or retired since March 1, citing burnout, stress or health concerns, according to a ProPublica

survey. In Alabama, which pays state employees an extra \$165 or more a day to manage absentee ballot applications and mailings, Lee County Circuit Court Clerk Mary Roberson recently gave up this side job. Roberson cited the stress of a lawsuit filed against the state and county by the League of Women Voters to expand vote-by-mail options, according to Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill. A federal judge dismissed the case this month.

After the lawsuit ended, Roberson told Merrill, “I think I’ve had about as much fun as I can stand,” he said. Roberson did not respond to a request for comment.

The elections director in Harris County, Texas — the state’s most populous county — resigned in May, less than halfway through her first term, as she tried to navigate a massive increase in voting by mail while beset with complaints from Republican activists. Her resignation letter cited personal health concerns. The longtime clerk of Payette County, Idaho, resigned effective June 1, the day before ballots for the state’s primary began to be counted, pointing to health concerns and frustration with new software the state had rolled out. “It’s just been a very trying primary,” she told local media. Multiple election officials in Milwaukee quit after a chaotic Wisconsin primary in April.

The coronavirus has also taken a toll. The clerk of Jackson County, Kansas, was infected with COVID-19 and was quarantined during the state’s August primary along with several other members of the staff. The county treasurer stepped in to run the office.

After serving for 39 years, the clerk of Marion County, West Virginia, resigned on July 1. “The COVID situation and her health and the disappointment in not being able to be more instrumental in probably the most difficult election in 100 years weighed on her,” her deputy told local media. And in Montgomery County, Tennessee, the clerk resigned in June, two years into her four-year term, after her mother died from complications of COVID-19. “The time has come for me to concentrate on my health and family priorities,” she wrote.

Neal Kelley, the election director of Orange County, California, was diagnosed with COVID-19 in mid-June and hospitalized. “I had a very high fever and night sweats for three or four days, and then it became breathing issues, and then what caused me to seek out medical help was when I started getting these muscle aches and joint pains that almost paralyzed my body,” he said. It took him three weeks to fight off the virus.

Still, he only took a few days off work. “In my job, we have to work all the time. So once I got past the fevers, I was able to start working from home,” he said. “I was literally in bed with my laptop, plugging away. I was virtually in the office everyday.” As he was recovering, he oversaw the building of a full-scale model of a voting center, so that his staff could test social distancing scenarios and run drills for poll workers.

The near-daily false assertions by President Donald Trump and members of his administration about widespread vote-by-mail fraud have spurred much of the backlash against state and local election administrators. “It’s a total set up to cheat!! Democrats are a disgrace!! How is everyone receiving mail in ballots being allowed??” one voter said on Facebook in response to Connecticut’s secretary of state encouraging voting by mail.

Dwight Shellman, who manages county services for the secretary of state’s office in Colorado, wrote on Twitter on July 30, “It is tedious & exhausting to work your ass off to ensure, in your own, small way, that US citizens can safely vote & exercise their franchise in whatever environment the future holds, only to be undermined daily by lies & disinformation from your own President. Argh.”

A county election administrator, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said, “I go into work every single day wondering what I’m going to see

Especially frustrating to election administrations is that many of these angry calls come from outsiders who vote in other jurisdictions. On Georgia’s primary day, June 9, a state election call center received more than 1,000 calls by noon. About one-fourth were not from Georgia numbers, and these calls lasted several seconds longer on average than those from in-state numbers.

An analysis of calls to Kentucky’s elections board ahead of the primary shows the same pattern. Nearly one-third came from out-of-state numbers, and those took an average of about three minutes, almost 20 seconds longer than in-state calls. Plus, residents of other states, including Oregon, Colorado and California, emailed dozens of complaints to the board about what they viewed as voter suppression tactics.

“We will sue,” a California resident emailed Dearing. “My father is a

Kentucky Lawyer. And this is gross. You should know how you are being seen by the rest of Kentucky, the rest of the world, and probably, by God.”

One caller also evoked the Lord. “Whoever caused this should be hung from a tree. That’s right, lynched,” the man told Dearing in a voicemail. “Jesus thinks you’re a piece of shit.” That voicemail came from a blocked number.

Other callers insulted Dearing’s staff members, subjecting them to long, curse-filled tirades, he said. Unaware that a receptionist was Black, one caller labeled her a racist.

As it turned out, the Louisville convention center largely handled the voting without problems, and there were no lines for most of primary day. Afterward, some of the critics offered belated praise. The state Democratic Party — which had stoked fear over Louisville on social media and elsewhere — put out a press release saying: “Holding an election in the middle of a global pandemic is a complicated and difficult process. I think everyone involved should be proud of the results today.”

Correction, Aug. 21, 2020: *This story originally misattributed a quote from a press release. The state Democratic Party said: “Holding an election in the middle of a global pandemic is a complicated and difficult process. I think everyone involved should be proud of the results today.” It did not say that “other states should be reaching out to Kentucky for advice, as a potential blueprint for scaling up pandemic-safe voting for the November elections.” (That quote was from the Democratic Governors Association.)*



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