

# Infection-prevention specialist discusses in-person voting

October 21 2020, by Enrique Rivero

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Credit: Pixabay/B Ban

In-person voting for the 2020 elections has now begun in several states, and while casting ballots by mail has been the big story of this coronavirus-influenced election season, the long lines and hours-long

wait times at many polling stations make it clear that plenty of Americans still plan to show up and vote the old-fashioned way.

For information and advice about safety at polling places, we turned to Dr. Annabelle de St. Maurice, UCLA Health's co-chief infection-prevention officer and an assistant professor in the division of infectious diseases at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. An expert on epidemiology and viral infections, she has written about safety concerns around in-person voting and is a co-author of a UCLA Voting Rights Project white paper on voting during the pandemic. Here's what she told us.

## **Overall, how safe is it to vote in person?**

Voting should be low risk if polling places are following the proper public health recommendations. In California, the state has developed detailed health guidance for polling places to keep voters safe. Precautions, including physical distancing, wearing masks, attention to hand hygiene—washing and sanitizing—and the frequent cleaning and disinfecting of voting equipment like machines, keyboards and computers.

## **What precautions are in place for poll workers?**

According to California [election](#) guidance for poll workers, [election officials](#) are required to undergo COVID-19 training, which includes instruction on how the disease is spread, how to prevent transmission to others and the importance of hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask-wearing.

Poll workers will be screened for symptoms of COVID-19 and will be provided with face masks and disposable gloves. They will also offer

face coverings to unmasked voters.

## **How can you know your polling place is safe, and what qualifies as a 'safe'?**

A safe voting place is one that adheres to physical distancing, routine cleaning and disinfection, and mask-wearing. In general, safe polling places should be well ventilated and voting equipment should be spaced. California has put a lot of effort into preparing for this election and ensuring that voting is safe for people living in the state.

## **Is there any need to worry if you're using a machine that does not have 6 feet of space?**

Maintaining a 6-foot distance is most important when you are in contact with someone for a prolonged amount of time—15 minutes or more. So you should make sure that you keep a 6-foot distance from others while you are waiting in line to vote, for instance. But because most people only spend a few minutes at the voting booth itself, maintaining a 6-foot distance may not be necessary, since it is such a short amount of time.

To cut down the time you spend at the actual voting booth, it's a good idea to make sure you've filled out your sample ballot or that you know who and what you're voting for before you go to your polling place.

## **Are there risks even with these precautions?**

Like with any activity, if people follow public health recommendations then the risk should be low. If people do not wear masks or do not watch their distance, then the risk may increase.

Additionally, people should make sure—if they are sick or any of their

family members or loved ones are sick, then they should not vote in person. People can also take advantage of the opportunity to vote early, rather than on Election Day, when polling places are likely to be less crowded.

## **Has in-person voting, either currently or in the primaries, led to any outbreaks of COVID-19?**

There isn't any data I'm aware of demonstrating that voting has led to COVID-19 outbreaks. In fact, Wisconsin's public health department published data looking at COVID-19 rates before and after their primary election—which happened in person in April, after COVID-19 stay-at-home orders—and did not find any increase in COVID-19 cases following their primary.

**More information:** Protecting public health in the 2020 elections: [latino.ucla.edu/wp-content/upl ... VRP-MED-Report-1.pdf](https://latino.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/VRP-MED-Report-1.pdf)

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