

CEIR 2020 Voter Education Grant Program

In September 2020, the Center for Election Innovation & Research (CEIR) initiated the Voter Education Grant Program to support states' efforts to provide nonpartisan, accurate, and official voting information to the public. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the states were in need of this sort of support; the pandemic only served to increase demand as additional, wide-sweeping changes were enacted to address public health and logistical concerns. This grant program was specifically targeted at helping states provide voters information about voting options, polling places and hours, and how to successfully cast their ballot during this year's general election.

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Relying upon private philanthropy was never "Plan A." The states had significant needs, as millions of new voters were participating for the first time, and due to the pandemic, millions more were voting using different methods—like voting early or by mail—than ever before. Despite the critical need for more resources, Congress failed to act, providing only a small amount of funds, insufficient to meet the need. In the absence of government action to address the unique demands brought about by the pandemic, philanthropy stepped in, providing desperately needed funds to CEIR, allowing us to regrant those funds to the states for urgent voter education assistance.

CEIR contacted all states (and Washington, DC) and invited them to apply for a grant. Ultimately, 23 states¹ applied for and accepted grant funds. Those states are home to nearly 120 million registered voters. Among the states, there was a fairly even partisan and geographic balance, including states such as Missouri, South Carolina, Washington, and New York. Out of the 23 states that applied for grant funds in September 2020, 11 of the states voted for Donald Trump and 12 of the states voted for Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential election. And of those 23 states, seven were led by Republican chief election officials, 10 were led by Democratic election officials, and six were led by non-partisan or bipartisan boards of elections.

States set their own budgets and the amount of funds requested, with the requirement that the funds be used to support nonpartisan voter education. Due to the generous support of Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg, CEIR awarded every state the entire amount each requested. In total, we provided states nearly \$65 million, which they used to bolster their voter education efforts in a variety of ways.

State	Net Grant Amount
Arizona	\$ 4,788,444
Connecticut	\$ 2,100,000
DC	\$ 811,835
Florida	\$ 287,454
Georgia	\$ 5,591,800
Illinois	\$ 2,762,777
Iowa*	\$ 1,075,000
Kentucky	\$ 1,600,000
Maryland	\$ 575,000
Massachusetts	\$ 200,000
Michigan	\$ 11,939,365
Minnesota*	\$ 1,500,000
Missouri	\$ 1,129,391
New Jersey	\$ 6,180,001
New Mexico*	\$ 768,748
New York*	\$ 5,000,000
North Carolina	\$ 1,141,241
Ohio*	\$ 1,128,090
Pennsylvania*	\$ 13,260,000
Rhode Island*	\$ 632,189
South Carolina	\$ 1,071,797
Vermont	\$ 312,615
Washington	\$ 405,000
Total	\$ 64,260,747

* Final grant amount pending. Any unspent funds are to be returned, reducing the total grant.

The big story of the November 2020 General Election was voter turnout, which surpassed 90 million in grantee states—over 10 million more votes cast than in 2016. Additionally, convenience voting (i.e., voting early or by mail) more than doubled. The significant shift toward mail voting during the pandemic could have led to a major increase in the number of rejected ballots, and in many states' primary elections, that's what happened. Fortunately, due to election officials' efforts to inform voters, rejection rates plummeted for the November general election. On average, grantee states rejected around 70 percent fewer ballots in the general election compared to their primary elections.² North Carolina was immensely successful in driving down rejection rates, with rates dropping from 9.8 percent in the primary to 1.2 percent in the general election. Several states, including Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, and Rhode Island, cut their rejection rates to 0.2 percent or less in November.

How States Used CEIR Grant Funds

CEIR encouraged states to apply for funding based on their individual voter education needs and their plans to address the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic. Grantees were asked to segment their spending into three categories: direct mail outreach, paid media campaigns, and other communication activities.

Most states focused on bolstering their paid media campaigns to quickly communicate with a large number of citizens. Approximately 85 percent of grant funds were used for paid media, followed by 11 percent for direct mail and 4 percent for other communication activities.

Though each state designed a voter education project to meet their specific needs, we saw an overlap in key activities as states faced similar challenges due to the pandemic. Nearly every grantee staged a statewide messaging campaign over a variety of media to inform the public about their voting options during the pandemic. Many states went beyond that to meet the unique needs of their voters, including sending over 26 million mailers and postcards and setting up voter education hotlines to answer questions and provide up-to-date information to voters.

Here are the most common ways states used their grant funds:

Direct Mail	Paid Media	Other Communications
Mailers on absentee guidelines and voter options	TV, Digital, Radio, Social Media, and PSA ads	Establishing and staffing Election/Voter Hotline Centers
Postcards on voter deadlines	Newspaper, Transit, and Billboard ads	Printing voting center signage and health guidelines
Updates on election law changes	Texts and Robocalls	Community outreach materials

The states took full advantage of their grants, helping to ensure that all eligible voters knew how to cast their ballots safely and securely, in an election they could trust. And these efforts were a success. States were faced with a need to recruit thousands of new poll workers, while also preparing for high voter turnout and an unprecedented number of voters voting early or by mail for the first time. The voter education efforts funded by CEIR's grant program helped minimize voter problems amid those challenges.³

Several state highlights and testimonials are included below:

Illinois

"Our CEIR grant allowed us to run an extensive statewide TV and radio ad campaign alerting voters to their options for safe voting during the pandemic, with an emphasis on voting by mail as early as possible and early in-person voting to alleviate Election Day crowding. We believe this effort contributed to record early and mail voting as well as low rejection rates for mail ballots overall."

— Illinois State Board of Elections Executive Director Steve Sandvoss

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¹ Originally, 24 states applied. However, Louisiana withdrew its application before we awarded grants.

² Rejection rates for both the November 2020 General Election and 2020 primaries were available for 17 grantee states. In states without consolidated primary rate was used.

³ "Election officials and voting experts attribute the declines to extensive voter education campaigns.... In the weeks following the election, Trump seized on preliminary reports of lower rejection rates in Georgia and Pennsylvania — states he lost. But the AP analysis shows November rejection rates also declined in Florida, North Carolina and Ohio — states Trump won.... Ohio's rejection rate declined from 1.35% in the primary to just 0.42% in November. The state's chief election official, a Republican, credited more user-friendly voter registration requirements than local election officials call and email voters about ballot problems, rather than just notifying them by mail. Absentee ballots represented 36% of all votes cast. 'All of those things that we did helped to reduce the error rate,' said Secretary of State Frank LaRose. 'And that's a really big success story — that we had massive absentee voting and a tiny number of errors.'" Cassidy, Christina A. "Voter Outreach Led to Big Drop in Rejected Mail Ballots." March 16, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/voter-outreach-led-to-big-drop-in-rejected-mail-ballots/2021/03/16/6e733ff6-8665-11eb-be4a-24b89f616fc_story.html