



## **The Center for Election Innovation & Research 2020 Voter Education Grant Program**

March 26, 2021

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.

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 states<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 64,260,747</b>

\* 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Rejection rates for both the November 2020 General Election and 2020 primaries were available for 17 grantee states. In states without consolidated primary elections, the presidential preference primary rejection rate was used.

## 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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "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 voting materials and requirements that 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-24b89f616f2c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/voter-outreach-led-to-big-drop-in-rejected-mail-ballots/2021/03/16/6e733ff6-8665-11eb-be4a-24b89f616f2c_story.html).

Several state highlights and testimonials are included below:

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**Connecticut**

“The CEIR Voter Education Grant allowed us to speak directly to voters, online, on television, and on the radio, about the changes we made to election administration because of COVID-19, including allowing all voters to vote by absentee ballot if they chose to do so. Despite six times the number of absentee voters that we would normally expect, many of them casting absentee ballots for the first time, our rejection rate for absentee ballots was less than 1% - less than half of the rate in 2018! The CEIR grant was critical to ensure that all voters understood how to cast their ballots and make their voices heard.” – Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill

**Georgia**

Georgia used CEIR grant funds in both the November general election and January runoff election to encourage voters to apply for a ballot online. This approach sped up the process for both voters and election officials while also making it easier to track application status. Georgia also used the funds to counteract disinformation, issuing public service announcements warning voters of disinformation and encouraging them to report fraud to the Secretary of State hotline.

**Iowa**

“The CEIR funds allowed the Iowa Secretary of State’s Office to educate Iowa voters regarding options for voting absentee by mail, absentee in person, and at their polling place on Election Day. In order to reach all Iowans, we used a variety of mediums including social media, newspaper ads, television ads, radio ads and direct mail. Specifically, we were able to send a mailer to every registered voter who did not request an absentee ballot to reassure them that it was safe to vote at their polling place on Election Day.” – Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate

**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

**Massachusetts**

“Since very few of our voters had experience with voting by mail before 2020, it was crucial that we educate people about their options, the process, and most importantly, the deadlines. The grant money Massachusetts received helped enormously in spreading the word, and it assisted us in setting records for the highest number of votes cast by mail in the Commonwealth and our lowest ever ballot rejection rate.” – Massachusetts Secretary of State Bill Galvin

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**Michigan**

In addition to a statewide messaging campaign, Michigan sent out targeted mailings to engage voters. Active registered voters received information about ways to vote, elections deadlines and how to request a mail ballot, and those who had not yet returned their mail ballot received instructions on how to do so. Grant funds also helped communicate changes in election laws to voters.

According to Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, the state's low rate of ballot rejection this year was directly attributable to CEIR's voter education grant.

**Ohio**

"Even in the most challenging of environments, 2020 was Ohio's most successful election ever. A big part of making that happen depended on educating voters about the many options they had to make sure their voice was heard, and the CEIR grant was vital to achieving that mission." – Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose

**Pennsylvania**

Over 2.7 million Pennsylvania voters cast a ballot during the commonwealth's June primary, and around 60,000 of those ballots arrived during the three days after the election. However, due to court challenges in the lead up to the general election, officials didn't know whether they would be allowed to count ballots arriving after November 3. To help ensure all votes would count, Pennsylvania mounted a massive voter information campaign. Ultimately, voters cast over 6.9 million ballots in November, and only about 10,000 arrived after Election Day, a significant reduction from the primary, despite the higher turnout.

**South Carolina**

In October, voter confusion was a particular challenge in South Carolina. After a lower court removed the state's absentee ballot witness signature requirement, the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated it just days later. Fortunately, the state was able to leverage CEIR grant funds to provide voters with the correct, up-to-date information needed to successfully cast their absentee ballots. Nearly half of South Carolina's voters cast an absentee ballot last year, and CEIR's grant program helped ensure they were able to do so with minimal difficulty.

**Washington**

"With an exceptional amount of elections information saturating media markets, social media, and more, the need to overcome mis/disinformation spreading on social media and other platforms was a key concern. The CEIR grant awarded to the Washington Office of the Secretary of State helped tremendously in our pursuit to provide the electorate with timely and accurate information about important registration and voting deadlines, and ballot return methods, for the 2020 General Election." – Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman

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