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City of Progress:
Charleston's Fight against COVID-19 and Voter Suppression

Introduction

In 2020, the United States experienced cataclysmic event after event. In March of 2020,

the Covid-19 pandemic swept over the nation, stopping the world in its tracks. Then in

November of 2020, the US experienced one of the most controversial elections of all time while

dealing with the potential of another spike in Covid cases. Finally, in December of 2020, the

FDA approved the emergency use of a Covid-19 vaccine. The purpose of this essay is to

juxtapose the city's independence in local election practices with the freedom the State of South

Carolina has given the city of Charleston to execute the vaccine rollout and examine the

effectiveness of that freedom and independence.

Charleston Elections

In South Carolina across the state, citizens are allowed to request a mail-in ballot in

normal years if they qualify under a number of prerequisites given by the state. Members of the

armed forces, merchant marines, residents living out of the country, and students whose

permanent address is within the state all qualify for absentee mail-in ballots. Most notably, in any

election help in a state of emergency, citizens may be eligible for mail-in ballots[1]. In a normal

election, any resident is eligible to request an absentee ballot, but they must

then go vote in person at a given polling place within a given time period[2]. In Charleston, any

resident may vote early absentee and can do so without registering for an absentee ballot. They

can simply show up during the early voting period and wait in line to vote just

like a normal election day[3].

[1] "Absentee Voting," Absentee Voting (South Carolina Election Commission , 2019),
https://www.scvotes.gov/absentee-voting.
[2] "Absentee Voting," Absentee Voting (South Carolina Election Commission , 2019),
https://www.scvotes.gov/absentee-voting.
[3] "Absentee Voting in Person," Absentee Voting in Person | Board Of Elections & Voter Registration (Charleston
County Council, 2020), https://www.charlestoncounty.org/departments/bevr/absentee-in-person.php.

The City of Charleston held its city council and mayoral elections in 2019 during an off-year in the election cycle. This meant Covid-19 was a non-factor during the local elections, but it is still worth digging into the 2019 local election. Six city council seats and the mayorship were up for election in 2019[4]. Incumbent Mayor John Teckleburg was challenged by five other politicians, most notably former city council members Mike Seekings and Gary White of districts 8 and 1 respectively. City council member White is forgoing reelection in his District 1 office as it is also up for reelection this cycle while council member Seekings was able to retain his seat while running for mayor as it isn't up for reelection until November 2021.

The mayoral race in Charleston must be decided by a winner garnering more than 50% of the votes as opposed to a simple majority, if no candidate wins more than half the vote then the race goes to a run-off between the top two candidates two weeks after the election. In 2019 Mayor Teckleburg won 48% of the vote on election day, falling just 2% short of an outright win on election night. Mike Seekings was the runner-up winning 34% of the vote and rounding out the top three was Maurice Washington, the only person of color in the field with just 8% of the vote[5]. Two weeks later Teckleburg and Seekings faced off in a run-off election on November 19, 2019, to decide the mayorship. Seekings conceded the race around 9:00 pm with 90% of precincts polling Mayor Teckleburg ahead with 61.84% of the vote and councilman Seekings only receiving 38.16% of the vote[6]. Despite Seekings losing the mayoral election, he was able to retain his District 8 city council seat while councilman White was forced to give his seat up to

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[4] Suzanne Detar, "Tecklenburg and Seekings Head to Runoff, Delcioppo Wins District 1 City Council Seat," City of Charleston Election Results (The Daniel Island News, November 6, 2019), http://www.thedanielislandnews.com/news/city-charleston-election-results.

[5] Suzanne Detar, "Tecklenburg and Seekings Head to Runoff, Delcioppo Wins District 1 City Council Seat," City of Charleston Election Results (The Daniel Island News, November 6, 2019), http://www.thedanielislandnews.com/news/city-charleston-election-results.

[6] Katie Smith, "2019 Charleston, S.C. Mayoral Runoff Election Results," City News (CHStoday, November 20, 2019), https://chstoday.6amcity.com/charleston-sc-mayoral-runoff-election-results-2019/.

the winner of the District 1 election. The city council race pitted five sitting city council

members against challengers (Districts 3, 5, 7, and 9) and saw one open-seat race in District 1.

Perhaps the most important piece of the 2019 local election might be the presence of the

"Satellite Voting Unit"[7]. Charleston County invested over $100,000 in a towable trailer with

space to fit six voting machines around the country to reach areas with a history of long lines or

areas isolated from voting precincts. Reaching isolated areas was the top priority for the county

in 2019 and the Satellite Voting Unit was billed as a way to cut down on long drives and waits

for residents outside the largest population centers. This is especially important in the lowlands

with the many small coastal isles and islands in the county. Under home rule laws- a set of laws

that allows a city or county to act on its own prerogative until the state directly opposes the

direction the city has gone through law- Charleston county wasn't required to notify the state of

the experimental voting experience and so when the South Carolina Election Commission found

out about it there were questions regarding the legality of it.

According to the *Charleston Post and Courier*, these questions were quickly affirmed but

the Election Commission continued to push back publicly, citing the desire to have clear,

transparent elections free of controversy and not wanting to draw attention to themselves[8]. South

Carolina House Speaker Jay Lucas's House Bill 3444 proposes, to "supervise and standardize the

performance, conduct, and practices" of county election commissions and "ensure those boards'

compliance with applicable state or federal law or State Election Commission policies,

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[7] Schuyler Kropf, "Charleston County Has a $100,000 Towable Voting Trailer. Some Wonder If It Can Stay Legal.," Palmetto Politics (The Post and Courier, March 31, 2021), https://www.postandcourier.com/politics/charleston-county-has-a-100-000-towable-voting-trailer-some-wonder-if-it-can-stay/article_53cc8f16-8347-11eb-97b2-db93a9666782.html.

[8] Schuyler Kropf, "Charleston County Has a $100,000 Towable Voting Trailer. Some Wonder If It Can Stay Legal.," Palmetto Politics (The Post and Courier, March 31, 2021), https://www.postandcourier.com/politics/charleston-county-has-a-100-000-towable-voting-trailer-some-wonder-if-it-can-stay/article_53cc8f16-8347-11eb-97b2-db93a9666782.html.

procedures, and regulations"[9] which could close the loophole that allows the county to ease the burden of elections. While many smaller counties have no need for a mobile voting system, the size, and population of Charleston necessitate innovative voting ideas.

<u>COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout</u>

Home Rules once again came into play in Chalreston when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country. Like many states, South Carolina introduced their plan to vaccinate the population in phases. Phase 1A began in late December of 2020 with the first shipment of Pfizer vaccines available on December 14th. Included in the first phase of those eligible for vaccination were first responders, health care workers, and anyone over 70 years old. These were deemed to be the most at-risk populations in the state. The state originally planned to move to phase 1B in late January or early February[10], but due to a limited supply of vaccines, was unable to move forward with the next phase until early March[11]. When the announcement came that phase 1B was open, it allowed essential workers like teachers, law enforcement and grocery store employees as well as people with outstanding health risks to get the vaccine. The state set the boundaries on who would be eligible for the vaccine, and Charleston County worked with Charleston to supply vaccine locations equitably under its jurisdiction.

Within the city, twenty different local pharmacies and grocery stores have been designated Covid vaccine locations which are working with the city and the state to provide

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[9] Schuyler Kropf, "Charleston County Has a $100,000 Towable Voting Trailer. Some Wonder If It Can Stay Legal.," Palmetto Politics (The Post and Courier, March 31, 2021), https://www.postandcourier.com/politics/charleston-county-has-a-100-000-towable-voting-trailer-some-wonder-if-it-can-stay/article_53cc8f16-8347-11eb-97b2-db93a9666782.html.

[10] Jenna Kurzyna, "A Look at South Carolina's COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout Timeline," wltx.com (WLTX, February 6, 2021). https://www.wltx.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/look-at-south-carolinas-vaccine-rollout/101-3752cc96-2f83-4009-a12d-c13b909776c5.

[11] Patrick Phillips, "SC Phase 1B Vaccine Rollout to Include People 55+, Teachers, Those at Higher Risk," https://www.live5news.com (Live 5 WCSC, March 2, 2021), https://www.live5news.com/2021/03/02/mcmaster-give-update-sc-covid-vaccine-distribution-plan/.

vaccine opportunities for those who qualify under the rollout guidelines. The Medical University of South Carolina (MCSU) has also helped supply the vaccine to those in need. Its presence as the top medical and research hospital in South Carolina allowed MUSC to be one of the first places in the State to receive doses of the vaccine in mid-December. Their location in the city of Charleston allowed the city to lean on a partnership with MUSC, much like many other cities lean on Public-Private partnerships to create both hard and soft infrastructure. The city of Charleston has taken that partnership one step further by actively petitioning the community through the city council website to volunteer and donate to MCSU's covid response. Any funding donated to the MCSC Covid relief fund is pledged to go directly back into the community in the form of more testing or a general geographical fund to help healthcare workers on the frontlines[12].

Charleston College, a public liberal arts school in the heart of Charleston, in partnership with Charleston County and the State Department of Health, was able to vaccinate 1500 students on campus who would have otherwise been unable to easily travel to an off-campus vaccine location[13]. Appointments reportedly filled only 30 minutes after they were released to students, showing a strong desire to become vaccinated. A recent survey of the college reported that 90% of the students plan and want to receive the vaccine[14], which is in stark contrast to the state as a whole where almost 1 in every 4 people are not planning on receiving the vaccine and are deeply

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[12] Judd, D. R., & Hinze, A. M. (2018). *City politics: The political economy of urban America*. Routledge.
[13] Logan Reigstad, "Hundreds of College of Charleston Students Get First COVID-19 Vaccine Doses on Campus," https://www.live5news.com (Live 5 WCSC, April 14, 2021), https://www.live5news.com/2021/04/14/hundreds-college-charleston-students-get-first-covid-vaccine-doses-campus/.
[14] Logan Reigstad, "Hundreds of College of Charleston Students Get First COVID-19 Vaccine Doses on Campus," https://www.live5news.com (Live 5 WCSC, April 14, 2021), https://www.live5news.com/2021/04/14/hundreds-college-charleston-students-get-first-covid-vaccine-doses-campus/.

suspicious of it[15]. Now that the campus has put in place the policies necessary to become a vaccine site, there is an opportunity for the city of Charleston to work with the college to vaccinate members of the city who might also experience difficulty leaving the peninsula to find free vaccine clinics.

School districts in Charleston County have also released plans to begin vaccination for students in the city and surrounding metro area. While not mandatory, the schools have decided to send out permission slips to parents of students sixteen and older to begin the process. Teachers and staff in Charleston County will also be eligible for the vaccine at school clinics if they have not yet received their dose[16]. There are approximately 50,000 students in Charleston County with roughly 10,000 of those students being eligible for the vaccine in the current sixteen years and older system. Creating clinics for students on campus is an excellent way to reach students who may not have had the opportunity to receive the vaccination. If the schools wanted to take things one step further, however, they should consider opening those on-campus clinics to the families of students. Schools are often easily accessible for families and located in a variety of socioeconomic neighborhoods which would allow underserved populations to receive the vaccine.

Charleston is not the only city to use educational institutions to help distribute the vaccine by any means, but the decision of the local government to work with those institutions to vaccinate students and faculty was a smart one. The downtown district of the City of Charleston is however uniquely suited to continue to rely on the public university and public-school districts. The Downtown and Historical districts are located on an isolated peninsula which could

[15] Stephanie Soucheray, "Poll: 1 of 4 Americans Will Refuse COVID-19 Vaccine," CIDRAP (University of Minnesota , March 9, 2021), https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2021/03/poll-1-4-americans-will-refuse-covid-19-vaccine.
[16] Live 5 Web Staff, "Charleston Co. Schools Releases Vaccination Plans," https://www.live5news.com (Live 5 WCSC, April 20, 2021), https://www.live5news.com/2021/04/20/charleston-co-schools-releases-vaccination-plans/.

cause transportation issues for people looking to receive the vaccine. By electing to continue to use clinics that were set up by the schools and university, the city can use existing infrastructure to quickly move towards vaccinating as many people as they can. As a city with a relatively strong mayor sitting over the city council[17], Mayor Tecklenburg could push this agenda and force a vote he would likely win in a progressive council. Under the Home Rules Act of 1975, which allowed cities and counties to enforce local control and act without the discretion of the state government[18], he could even potentially use his influence on the City Council to push for even more control over who receives the vaccine and when.

Conclusion

During the pandemic, the transparency of the mayor's office and the city council proved effective in enacting a stay-at-home order a full two weeks before the state government mandated a shutdown. The local and county governments in Charleston, South Carolina also succeeded in creating an environment in which residents could freely and safely vote in the 2019 and 2020 elections and appears to be on the way to creating equal opportunity voting for all. The Satellite Voting Unit in particular is proof that the city and county are working to provide voters with the best possible experience, even during a national pandemic and an election fraught with controversy. The unique relationship Charleston has fostered with its medical research facility and the more common relationships the city has formed with public schools and universities can continue to help lift the city out of the pandemic for as long as they need while also setting a precedent should the city ever need a plan for mass vaccination again.

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[17] Charleston, South Carolina, Municipal Code 1975, § 2-1
[18] Charles B. Tyer, "Local Government Act," South Carolina Encyclopedia (University of South Carolina, Institute for Southern Studies, April 6, 2017), https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/local-government-act/.

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