Keystone Votes
THE COALITION FOR MODERN ELECTIONS

Testimony presented by
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before the
House State Government Committee
from
1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.
on
Thursday, April 1, 2021
regarding
Election Integrity and Accessibility Policy through Modernization

Majority Chairman Grove, Minority Chairwoman Davidson, and members of the Committee: Thank you for providing an opportunity to Keystone Votes to participate in this hearing and testify about the ongoing bipartisan efforts to modernize Pennsylvania's electoral process.

Keystone Votes is a nonpartisan coalition comprising 42 civil rights, civil liberties and good government groups that work in all 67 counties to modernize Pennsylvania's election system. Regardless of political affiliation, all of us want the same thing: secure, modern elections that are fair, accurate and accessible to all --- because **we firmly believe that our democracy works best when all citizens participate and when election rules are nonpartisan.**

Not long ago, in 2019, we were celebrating the most sweeping reforms in decades. All of you should be proud of the bipartisan reforms you adopted with Act 77 of 2019 and Act 12 of 2020. It is good to see that momentum continuing, as we all work together to review the administration of our voting procedures, make recommendations to update election laws, and eventually implement policy changes that enhance voter engagement and security.

We are encouraged by the attention these issues have gained so early in the 2021-22 legislative session among General Assembly committees and separate advisory panels, and we look forward to working with all of you, and other stakeholders, to ensure the best forms of any legislative proposals become reality. Because the reality is that even with recent sweeping reforms, Pennsylvania still lags behind the vast majority of states when it comes to making sure that voters can count on 21st century convenience and security at the ballot box.

We really agree with Chairman Grove --- "accessibility and integrity" are essential for election security. For members of the diverse Keystone Votes coalition, "access" is all about creating a system that ultimately enables participation by every eligible voter with no significant differences based on age, race, party or physical limitations.

Among the access and integrity issues that we think are the most urgent:

Pennsylvania should allow mail-in ballots to be counted if they are **postmarked by Election Day** but arrive at the county election office after Election Day. As we learned in this last election, it is not about counting votes quickly, it's about counting votes accurately, while making sure every eligible vote gets counted. Across the country, 18 states and the District of Columbia permit receipt of mail and absentee ballots after Election Day when postmarked according to state statutes. The laws about accepting and counting a mailed ballot received after Election Day vary by state. But there are some similarities. For example, Kansas, North Carolina, and Virginia accept mailed ballots up to three days after Election Day when the ballots meet state requirements. Meanwhile, there are states with longer acceptance windows, such as Ohio which allows for up to 10 days after the election and Utah which has a window of 7-14 days after the election.

Pre-canvassing is an integrity issue, if a voter thinks their vote was not counted because they made a simple mistake --- like putting a birth date accidentally when asked to put today's date, or they forgot to sign the ballot, or their ballot is "naked." How is anyone going to ever have faith in the election system when the system does what it can to disqualify rather than count their vote? That is why the state needs to change the pre-canvassing process --- a concept that both Republicans and Democrats support --- so that counties can begin to process and prepare ballots for tabulation prior to Election Day. The practice is fairly common. Among states that allow mail-in voting, more than two dozen already allow election officials to begin the process of preparing the ballots for tabulation before Election Day. And again, the most important reason to make this change is so counties can **establish clear and unified guidelines around a better voter notification** process so these small, honest mistakes can be fixed before the ballot return deadline so that their votes can be counted. The technology already exists to ensure this notification process is safe, secure, seamless and convenient. With electronic poll books, or e-poll books, election officials can review and maintain voter information in real time.

The primary way we rely on people to update their address for voter registration is through the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. And the minimum time it normally takes someone to go there is every four years when they get their photo taken afresh. There is another way. The "National Change of Address Form" is a resource to enhance election integrity and clean up voter files. When a person moves, they submit a change of address form to the post office, which updates their address in the National Change of Address database and mail is able to be forwarded to the correct address once the individual has moved. Streamlining this process with voter registration and vote-by-mail would ensure records are up to date and elections are more secure. A 2017 survey from the National Association of Secretaries of State reports that 36 states authorize the use of NCOA info for identifying address changes, and in addition to NCOA procedures, state laws provide a variety of methods for determining when a forwardable notice should be sent.

But let me be clear: By modernizing Pennsylvania's election in a holistic way, we are making our election process more secure and more accessible --- not just for those who need special

assistance but also for the thousands of eligible voters who face barriers that make it difficult or impossible for them to cast their ballots.

That's why our coalition is offering legislators a roadmap to secure, accessible and fair elections for all citizens who want to exercise their right to vote. Taken as a whole, we believe these policies enhance security, improve integrity, and grant greater access. Moreover, we know that these policies work, that they are cost effective, and that they preserve the integrity of elections. Equally as important, they have garnered broad support from Republicans and Democrats alike.

First, Pennsylvania must improve its vote-by-mail process.

Pennsylvania faced its toughest election ever in 2020 when the state had to implement an entirely new voting system amid record turnout during a global pandemic. The state's historical performance was defined largely by Act 77 of 2019, a bipartisan measure that made some of the most significant updates to Pennsylvania election laws in 80 years.

Among the major reforms was creation of a new no-excuse vote-by-mail process that gives residents a secure and more convenient way to participate in elections. The legislative action was prescient. Because of concerns about public health during the pandemic, more than 2.6 million voters embraced the new law and submitted mail-in ballots during the 2020 General Election.

It was a monumental moment for Pennsylvania elections, and lawmakers should be proud of the early changes they made to ensure it could happen. Of course, the rollout of any new idea comes with growing pains, so there are things the administration and General Assembly need to do to improve the vote-by-mail system. And we discussed them above: changing the pre-canvassing process, establishing clear and unified guidelines around a better voter notification process, and allowing mail-in ballots to be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day but arrive at the county election office after Election Day.

Second, Pennsylvania must modernize processes to enhance security and access.

One way to modernize our system is to establish vote centers, authorize same-day voter registration, and allow early in-person voting. We saw how effective these options can be in the 2020 General Election as thousands of voters took advantage of satellite election offices, where they could register to vote, apply for mail ballots, fill them out, and return them on site.

Vote centers give voters the chance to safely and securely cast a ballot whether they are by their home, job, school or anywhere that is convenient. Voters can vote at any vote center in their jurisdiction, regardless of their personal residential address. As a bonus, vote centers also would require fewer people to staff an election, relieving much of the pressure election administrators face recruiting poll workers, and they would bring added benefits to rural election directors, giving them more flexibility for administering elections. There are currently 17 states that permit the use of vote centers on Election Day, including Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Texas, Utah and Wyoming.

Allowing **early in-person voting** also would relieve congestion at polling locations and give voters with challenging work schedules or family situations the chance to choose the time that works best for them. This is a great option for seniors, especially those who use wheelchairs or walkers, allowing more time to accommodate their needs. The 33 states that have adopted some form of early voting have shown us that it works best when it runs over at least two weeks, allows people to vote at night and on weekends to accommodate voters' varied schedules, and is offered at locations throughout each county to make it convenient for all voters. Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Texas and Utah are among the states allowing Election Day style early voting, and New Jersey is the most recent state to enable in-person early voting with Governor Murphy signing the legislation this week.

Pennsylvania lawmakers recently changed the deadline for voters to register to vote or update their registration from 30 days to 15 days before an election in order to participate in that election. That bipartisan reform was a big step forward --- but it's not enough. Pennsylvania should allow **same-day voter registration**. Currently, the District of Columbia and 21 states currently permit any qualified resident to register to vote and cast a ballot on Election Day.

Most citizens become interested and engaged in elections in the final weeks before Election Day, when campaigns reach their peak. Campaigns know this, which is why during those final weeks before an election, voters are flooded with ads, phone calls and door-knocking.

Same-day voter registration eliminates the state's arbitrary deadline and makes it possible for residents to register when they're most engaged. Same-day voter registration also ensures that all residents have their voices heard by enabling real-time corrections to inaccurate voter rolls. Many voters lose their eligibility merely because they moved. This is particularly problematic for seniors moving into retirement communities or veterans and working people who move often.

With same-day registration, voters can update registration records or register at their polling place before casting their votes. Again, with e-poll books, the technology is already widely available to ensure this process, as with all other reforms, is convenient, seamless and secure.

Third, Pennsylvania must provide funding to support secure, efficient election operations.

This is perhaps the biggest failure with our current election system --- lack of funding. All of us understand how challenging the state's budget situation is. But elections are the foundation of our democracy, and to ensure access and integrity requires a commitment to funding our elections and making sure counties have the resources they need to run them effectively.

As we continue to review and consider new election laws, we must **ensure that counties have the funds they need** to administer these new requirements, and to safely and securely operate satellite election offices that provide convenient voter registration services and mail-in and absentee ballot application processing and voting services.

That includes helping counties purchase and implement **electronic poll books** to improve election security and accessibility. At least seven Pennsylvania counties currently use or recently purchased e-poll books, and additional counties are discussing the technology as a potential resource for future elections. At least 41 states --- Red and Blue alike --- and the District of Columbia currently authorize the use of e-poll books.

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Pennsylvanians face more challenges than ever before --- farmers in the field, small business owners working long hours, students with educational pursuits, and individuals with family commitments. All of these individuals have an important stake in the outcome of our elections. None of them should be penalized by a system that creates barriers to voting. **All of them deserve access, too.**

The 2020 elections have had a galvanizing effect. Everyone is focused on the process. Now is the time to make our election system even better. The only way we do that is by keeping the will of voters front and center. Thank you for your time and attention.

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