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Gov.'s Proposed Budget Includes Key Election Reforms

Legislative agenda endorses issues like same-day voter registration, e-poll books

HARRISBURG (February 3, 2021) – As part of his proposed 2021-22 General Fund budget presentation, Gov. Tom Wolf also unveiled his legislative agenda for the current two-year session, calling for additional election reforms, including same-day voter registration and funding to help counties purchase and implement electronic poll books.

Both issues have been part of Keystone Votes' long-term agenda to modernize Pennsylvania's election process and bring the commonwealth in line with other states that provide voters with 21st century convenience and security at the ballot box.

"As sweeping and as bold as they were, the bipartisan reforms that Pennsylvania put in place with Act 77 of 2019 and Act 12 of 2020 were just the beginning," said Ray Murphy, state coordinator for Keystone Votes, a nonpartisan coalition comprising 42 civil rights, civil liberties, and good government groups operating in all 67 counties.

"The administration and lawmakers should be proud of the changes they made. But the job is hardly finished. Pennsylvania still lags behind the vast majority of states when it comes to making improving security and making elections more convenient and accessible to all," Murphy said. "The governor's proposals are an important step forward and should be part of the mix as lawmakers continue their review of the 2020 election and related policy proposals."

The House State Government Committee already has begun a series of hearings to review last year's general election to recommend potential policy changes.

The Pennsylvania Election Law Advisory Board, established under Act 12 of 2020, recently convened its first meeting to eventually make recommendations to the General Assembly about ways to improve the election process through legislative changes or implementation of best practices.

Pennsylvania voters are required to register or update their registrations 30 days before an election in order to participate. But many residents become most interested and engaged in elections in the final weeks before Election Day, when campaigns reach their peak. Same-day registration eliminates this deadline and makes it possible for citizens to register when they are most engaged.

Moreover, with same-day registration, voters can update registration records or register at their polling place before casting their votes. Many voters lose their eligibility merely because they have moved. This is particularly problematic for seniors moving into retirement communities and veterans and working people who move often.

An electronic poll book, also known as an e-poll book, typically is either hardware, software or a combination of the two that allows election officials to review and/or maintain voter register information for an election but does not actually count votes. This software or hardware is used in place of paper-based poll books. Functions include voter lookup, verification, identification, precinct assignment, ballot assignment, voter history update and other functions such as name change, address change and/or redirecting voters to correct voting location.

Electronic poll books save counties time and money, provide greater assistance to voters, and improve accuracy by reducing human error and enhancing Election Day guidance and support for poll workers.

“These ideas have been a success across the country. Experience shows that these policies work, that they are cost effective, and that they will preserve the integrity of elections. Equally as important, they have garnered broad support from Republicans and Democrats alike in the states where they have been enacted,” Murphy said. “We look forward to working with the administration and General Assembly to build on the bipartisan success we have achieved to modernize Pennsylvania’s election process.”

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Keystone Votes, a nonpartisan coalition comprising 42 advocacy and community organizations working to update Pennsylvania’s election system, has been urging the state to start working now on reforms that would modernize the state’s election system, help counties buy modern machines, and update technology to enhance security and accessibility before the 2020 elections. More at www.keystonevotes.org.