

Election Reforms

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Election reforms will improve access to polls and ensure our voting system is fair and accessible to all eligible Americans. In the coming weeks and months, the Senate State Government Committee will hold additional public hearings, various work groups, and continued meetings with interested parties on the proposals outlined below.

✓ **Background:**

Last Session, the Senate State Government Committee reviewed and assessed Pennsylvania's Election Code. These efforts included public hearings, work group meetings, and many discussions with interested parties across the Commonwealth and both sides of the political aisle. Below are the first of many possible follow-up proposals.

Elections belong to the people. It's their decision.
– Abraham Lincoln

✓ **Constitutional Amendment – Absentee Ballots:**

Pennsylvania's current Constitution restricts voters wanting to vote by absentee ballot to situations where “. . . their duties, occupation or business require them to be elsewhere or who, on the occurrence of any election, are unable to attend at their proper polling places because of illness or physical disability or who will not attend a polling place because of the observance of a religious holiday or who cannot vote because of election day duties, in the case of a county employee, may vote, and for the return and canvass of their votes in the election district in which they respectively reside.”

Amending the Constitution to eliminate these limitations would empower voters to request and submit absentee ballots for any reason – allowing them to vote early and by mail.

Twenty seven other states and the District of Columbia offer “no-excuse” absentee voting: Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine,

Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

✓ **Constitutional Amendment – Poll Workers:**

Pennsylvania's Constitution excludes federal, state, county, and municipal employees from serving as poll workers. Given the challenges elections officials have in finding volunteers, this provision is an additional – and unnecessary – headache.

This problem can be addressed by repealing Article VII, Section 12 of the Constitution.

✓ **Constitutional Amendment – Separate Ballot Judicial Retention Elections:**

Pennsylvania's existing Constitution has an anomaly that causes some confusion among voters and needless costs for running elections: requiring a separate ballot or a separate column on voting machines for the retention of justices, judges, and justices of the peace.

These problems can be resolved by amending the Constitution to eliminate this requirement.

✓ **Additional Reform – Absentee Ballots:**

In tandem with efforts to amend the Pennsylvania Constitution to ease citizens' ability to vote by absentee ballot, additional reforms are proposed to:

- Reduce the requirements when applying for absentee ballots;
- Mail absentee ballots to voters earlier;
- Give voters more time to return absentee ballots;
- Authorize counties (at their discretion) to designate “drop boxes” for absentee ballots;



- Eliminate the requirement to publicly post lists of absentee voters, and;
- Clarify other requirements related to absentee ballots

✓ **Additional Reform – Permanent Early Voting List:**

Eight other states (Arizona, California, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, and Utah) allow voters to join a permanent absentee voting list. Once a voter opts in, they automatically receive an absentee ballot – with procedures for removing inactive voters.

✓ **Additional Reform – Vote Centers/Curbside Voting:**

“Vote Centers” are alternatives to traditional, neighborhood precincts. By giving voters more convenience, they may increase voter turnout –while also providing possible cost savings.

By giving counties the option of using vote centers, voters are able to cast their ballots at any Vote Center in the county – regardless of their home address.

Thirteen states currently allow jurisdictions to use vote centers on Election Day: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

“Curbside voting” would better assist voters with disabilities. If a voter is physically unable to enter a polling place, he or she may ask to have a ballot brought to the entrance of the poll or to a car at the curb. Voters must be read the entire ballot – unless the voter asks otherwise.

It would be illegal for anyone assisting a voter to:

- Try to influence the voter’s vote;
- Mark the voter’s ballot in a way other than the way they have asked; or
- Tell anyone how the voter voted

✓ **Additional Reform – Number of Votes to Qualify as a Write-In Winner:**

Write-in candidates are largely an American phenomenon: a person whose name does not appear on the ballot but is nonetheless elected by voters who write in his or her name.

However, there are sometimes unintended consequences with write-in candidates. For example, someone decides to write-in another person’s name regardless of interest or qualifications and the other person is elected due to that single write-in vote.

Proposed legislation would require successful write-in candidates receive the same number of write-in votes as would be required if they had filed signed nomination petitions. For example, if ten petition signatures are required for a given office, a write-in candidate would need to receive a minimum of ten identical write-in votes to be elected to that office.

✓ **Additional Reform – Number of Ballots to Be Printed:**

Current law requires counties to have “one book of fifty official ballots of each party for every forty-five registered and enrolled electors”. This requirement to have 110% of the number of registered voters at polls results in needless costs to counties. A 2017 Joint State Government Committee report, “Voting Technology in Pennsylvania”, recommended giving counties discretion to print 10% more than the highest number of ballots cast in the previous three Primaries or General Elections in an election district.

✓ **Additional Reform – Consolidation of Smaller Precincts:**

County elections officials have a myriad of responsibilities leading up to and continuing through Election Day – including: securing polling places, ensuring ADA compliance, getting voting machines delivered on time and ready for use, finding volunteers to work the polls, answering voters’ questions, and working to reduce waiting times.

These issues are compounded when election districts are smaller than 250 registered voters.

Legislation is proposed to give counties the option of either mailing ballots to voters in precincts with fewer than 250 registered voters or allowing counties to consolidate election districts under 250 registered voters.

Counties using the mail ballot option for small precincts would be required to give voters advance notice they will receive mail ballots and there will be no polling place for them on Election Day. These voters would mail their ballots back to the county like an absentee ballot.

Counties using the consolidation option would be allowed to combine small precincts into neighboring election districts – as long as they give voters in the to-be-combined district at least 90 days advance notice prior to a Primary Election.