

Ensuring Safe, Secure, Free & Fair Elections amid COVID-19

Key policies for Pa. to address in advance of the November election

The agreements between Gov. Tom Wolf and the General Assembly to enact Act 77 of 2019 and Act 12 of 2020 were historic. The COVID-19 pandemic requires bipartisan leadership once again from Harrisburg. The administration and legislature must act quickly to ensure that all eligible voters can exercise their right to vote without risking their health and safety in the November General Election. **The following legislative agenda must be enacted as soon as possible:**

1. It is unlikely there will be enough poll workers to staff the usual voting locations in communities across the state in November. **Counties need the flexibility to consolidate polling places now**, so they can find the best alternative locations and set realistic goals for poll worker recruitment. **There must be a limit on the number of voters these consolidated polling locations serve to ensure public health and safety.** Because of challenges staffing these locations, **poll workers should be permitted to be assigned anywhere in the county --- not just their home precincts.**
2. Disruptions caused by the coronavirus resulted in ballots that did not make it back to county election offices by 8 p.m. on Election Day, especially because of challenges facing the U.S. Postal Service. The volume of mail-in ballots is expected to be high in the General Election. **Ballots post-marked on Election Day should be counted up until seven days after the election.**
3. New hand-marked paper ballots and mail-in ballots mean it will take days to tabulate votes. **Counties must be permitted to pre-canvass mail-in ballots well before Election Day**, instead of waiting until 7 a.m. on Election Day as provided under existing law. Pre-canvassing allows counties to open the secrecy and outer envelope, flatten and stack the ballots, and then lock them in a cabinet to be tabulated at the normal time.
4. The legislature must **authorize the Department of State and/or county board of elections to send mail-in ballots to all registered voters.**

The challenges of administering elections during a pandemic place significant financial burdens on counties. The administration and General Assembly must **provide financial support to county boards of election, especially for the in-person voting site safety and sanitization** (at a cost approximating \$2.4 million), and **printing and postage costs, plus extra processing abilities** (at a cost of approximately \$15 million).

It is essential for the state to continue its bipartisan work to address these issues before the General Election. We must be proactive and start planning for possible changes to the way we conduct elections in response to the coronavirus outbreak so that we have enough time to execute the November election properly.

Background:

Keystone Votes is a nonpartisan coalition comprising 43 civil rights, civil liberties, and good government groups, as well as large civic engagement organizations with members in all 67 counties. For years, our coalition has been working to update Pennsylvania's election laws to make voting more convenient, secure and equally accessible for all who are eligible. Given these unprecedented times, and with the election looming, our coalition has been hard at work to ensure a safe, secure, free and fair voting experience. **We don't know what the coming months may bring, but our democracy depends on citizens exercising their right to vote.**