

COMMON CAUSE PENNSYLVANIA TESTIMONY

House State Government Committee

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Chairman Grove, Chairwoman Davidson and members of the House State Government Committee:

Good Morning and thank you for the opportunity to “appear” before the Committee today as a member of the stakeholder community. I’m honored to stand before you and speak on behalf of Common Cause Pennsylvania and our 34,000 members across all 67 counties. Common Cause Pennsylvania is a nonpartisan good government organization dedicated to holding power accountable to the people.

We have a unique opportunity to speak at the end of this series of hearings focused on our elections. As we know, Elections are the cornerstone of our democracy and this year we witnessed that firsthand. Despite incredible challenges, a global pandemic, limited staff and funding, we [saw a record number of Pennsylvanians participate](#) in our democracy and cast our ballots. Whether it was at their kitchen table, at a satellite elections office or at our local polling place, Pennsylvanians made our voices heard.

The bipartisan work that the Pennsylvania legislature did on Act 77 and Act 12 made that possible, and we thank you.

While we saw a record number of votes being cast in 2020, we also saw a disturbing trend in the politics of our nation - the intentional sowing of distrust in the election process, causing people to question what their government does for them. A recent poll taken by [Franklin & Marshall College](#) found that a majority of voters in both parties are committed to democratic principles. It also found that **most voters in Pennsylvania do not believe that American democracy is working as well as it should.**

What do we do with this information? In some states, like Georgia, we see legislators limiting access to the ballot box and making it more difficult for the people’s voice to be heard by the people’s government. Federal legislation is being discussed.

But what should be done here in Pennsylvania, with all the eyes of the nation on us? What we can and must do to increase trust is ensure that every voter is able to cast a ballot regardless of zip code, proximity to public transportation, disability, or language access needs.

Every eligible Pennsylvanian wants to – and should – have a say in deciding which people and policies will determine the future for our families, community, and country.

We’re encouraged to see how this committee has shown its complete commitment to access and transparency in holding these hearings. Chairman Grove has ensured that each meeting is streamed and made available to the folks at home, that each meeting is recorded and posted for later access, and that Pennsylvanians are now able

to participate in the process through the use of an online form. This committee has increased access for public participation because transparency encourages trust. That is what we must do with the election code moving forward.

Pennsylvania voters are engaged and have an appetite for change, that's clear. We must answer this call and meet expectations not with the repeal of voting access, but with increased accessibility. Pennsylvanians are not going to have faith in our government if there are new barriers to participation. The public reaction to Georgia's anti-voter legislation shows exactly that -- cutting access leads to greater distrust.

Public confidence in our government is more important now than it has ever been. **We need the people to trust their government, not the government questioning if they can trust their people.**

Act 77 and Act 12 provided Pennsylvania voters with the freedom to choose how to participate in our own government for the first time in decades. Those pieces of legislation showed that a government 'for the people' can come together in a bipartisan fashion and increase voter access. **Elections are not a *partisan* issue; they are a people issue. Our government 'by the people' is stronger when more people participate in it.**

The members of this Committee and the Legislature must uphold the bipartisan legacy of expanding voting access over time. Act 77 and Act 12 were the first steps in this legacy; you now have the opportunity to cement it in history, not with limits to existing law, but by expanding on what's already there. Common Cause Pennsylvania has some recommendations on how to expand voter participation.

We understand that election administration is a highly technical field where competing priorities often bump up against a general need for additional resources. We want to share our sincere respect and admiration for the professionals who do this incredibly difficult task, made exceedingly more difficult with the spread of disinformation. Thank you to all the county election officials, and especially to the dedicated staff at the Department of State.

We can and must support our elections officials and listen to our voters. It's not an either-or scenario, we can assist both and make changes that matter.

Expanding Vote-By-Mail

For the first time, this past year, all Pennsylvania voters had the option to vote by mail. Already this year, over half a million voters have signed up to receive a vote by mail ballot. This new option has proved to be an incredible resource to hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians, including essential workers such as doctors and nurses and other hospital staff who do not work standard hours. While we applaud the General Assembly for making this change, further improvements can be made to ensure that all voters who want to can access vote-by-mail. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- **Extending vote-by-mail ballot receipt deadlines.** Currently, a voter's ballot must be received by the county by 8:00p.m. on election night. While this is an improvement from the previous absentee ballot deadline, it still does not go far enough to ensure each mail ballot is counted. The speed of each county's mail service is not created equal. Asking voters to anticipate when their ballot will arrive at their county's election office is unrealistic. Pennsylvania should allow ballots mailed by Election Day to be counted if they are received within 7 days after Election Day -- the same deadline now used for military and overseas voters. This will allow for more voter participation and a process that is more fair,

because all Pennsylvanian voters will have the same deadline for mailing our ballots, regardless of where we live.

Precanvassing

We also recommend increasing the amount of time each county has to precanvas vote-by-mail and absentee ballots. Currently, the counties can only start canvassing these ballots at 7:00a.m. on election day. This means each county has to count several thousand ballots in one sitting. As we've heard from each county that has testified thus far, increasing the canvassing time will allow for counties to spread out the counting of ballots and decrease the number of workers or machines needed to count these ballots -- giving county elections workers much-needed relief.

This expansion must also allow for a better voter notification and cure process to enable simple mistakes to be fixed and ensure ballots are completed accurately in a uniform policy across the state.

Additional Elections Funding

We all know that elections are the cornerstone of our democracy. It is essential that we provide our counties and Department of State with sufficient funds to effectively administer elections, particularly in these uncertain and chaotic times. Additional funds from the General Assembly would help election directors purchase new technology such as high speed scanners, to handle the influx of vote by mail ballots; increase their staff; provide poll workers with increased pay, including pay for training on new voting machines; supplement the purchase of PPE for poll workers and polling places; and more. This General Assembly should provide additional funds for counties and the Department of State to carry out their mission.

Modernize the Voting Process

- **Allow early in-person voting** to 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 will give counties relief from an influx of voters on Election Day while also providing more access to voters.
- **Permit same-day voter registration.** We know that most residents do not become engaged in elections until the final weeks, when campaigns reach their peak. Permitting same day registration would allow for more voters to access the ballot and would allow the 12% of Pennsylvanians who move each year -- and who may have forgotten to update their voter registrations -- to cast ballots and have them counted.
- **Establish vote centers,** giving voters the chance to cast an in-person ballot where it is most convenient, and relieve county pressure on poll worker recruitment.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today.