

2021 County Government Priorities

Election Reforms: Pre-canvassing and Mail-in Ballot Application Deadlines

As the entities that run the elections, Pennsylvania counties seek meaningful Election Code reforms that will significantly reduce the challenges counties faced in 2020, while still maintaining a secure and effective election process.



Counties anticipated that the new mail-in ballot option, created under Act 77 of 2019, would be popular in 2020, but they became significantly more popular than predicted, as voters exercised their civic duty during a global pandemic. While the first two elections using mail-in ballots were successfully completed, counties are reviewing their experiences and lessons learned to call for additional changes to the Election Code that will streamline administrative requirements and provide clarity and consistency across the commonwealth. Based on their experience, a significant portion of the challenges counties saw could be resolved by allowing counties additional time to pre-canvass, and by moving the deadline for mail-in ballot applications back to 15 days to coincide with the voter registration deadline.

For several months prior to the General Election, counties asked for legislation that would allow them to begin pre-canvassing—opening and preparing the mail-in and absentee ballots—prior to Election Day so that results could be available on election night or shortly thereafter. But with counties only able to begin pre-canvassing on Election Day, it took several days for the millions of mail-in ballots to be counted, delaying election results and causing confusion despite counties' best efforts. Permitting pre-canvassing to begin prior to Election Day would allow counties to focus on administering an in-person election on Election Day, improving workload management and allowing results to be available much more efficiently.

In addition, voters who waited until the current deadline of seven days before an election to apply for a mail-in ballot faced uncertainty about whether the county would receive their ballot in time. This led many voters to come to their polling place to vote by provisional ballot, just "to be on the safe side," undermining the flexibility and convenience mail-in ballots should provide. Shifting this application deadline to 15 days before an election will benefit voters by providing more time for the ballot to be able to get from the county to the voter and back again through the mail, creating less uncertainty over whether ballots were received by 8 p.m. election night.

There are many other issues that need to be resolved and counties must be at the table with the General Assembly and administration to help develop solutions that can be implemented clearly and consistently, and to assure appropriate resources are available to do so.

COUNTIES SUPPORT:

- Extending the pre-canvassing period for mail-in and absentee ballots to allow ample time for counties to prepare ballots for tabulation so that accurate results can be provided as soon as possible.
- Moving back the deadline for absentee and mail-in ballot applications to 15 days prior to an election to allow for sufficient time for the county to process the application and for the ballot to be mailed from county to voter and back again.
- Convening the Election Law Advisory Board and ensuring that counties are at the table to develop meaningful election law reforms that create positive, effective election policy clarifications moving forward.

For more information on **election reforms**, contact **Lisa Schaefer** at (717) 736-4748 or lschaefer@pacounties.org.



THE VOICE OF PENNSYLVANIA COUNTIES