

Should Pa. lawmakers implement voter ID requirements?

By: JUSTIN SWEITZER [JUN 16, 2021 AT 1:24 PM]

State lawmakers will soon be taking up a raft of election reforms this month after holding a series of hearings throughout the year on election procedures and administration. The push comes as some conservative states, such as Florida and Georgia, have overhauled their own voting laws following the 2020 presidential election cycle.

In the Pennsylvania General Assembly's upper chamber, Senate lawmakers have released a lengthy report with recommendations on how to improve elections in the Keystone State, while House lawmakers have already started to advance a 147-page bill that would make sweeping changes to the state's Election Code.

House Bill 1300, sponsored by House State Government Committee Chairman Seth Grove, would bring in-person early voting to Pennsylvania in 2025, allow curbside voting for disabled individuals and establish voter ID requirements for every voter in the state. Senate Republicans have also advanced a constitutional amendment that would establish ID requirements in the state constitution.

And while constitutional amendments would circumvent Gov. Tom Wolf's desk, the Democratic governor has already pledged to oppose any bills that contain voter ID requirements or would make voting more difficult. Grove, however, has defended his legislation, claiming that it would make elections simultaneously more accessible and more secure.

"No one can get turned away at any poll in the United States. This is a requirement of federal law. If you show up at a poll in Pennsylvania or any other state, you have the right to vote and there's procedures put in place to do that," Grove said, adding that his bill, dubbed the Pennsylvania Voting Rights Protection Act, "perfectly weighs the balance of access and security."

City & State reached out to several experts about the potential impacts of a voter ID requirement: Salewa Ogunmefun, executive director of Pennsylvania Voice; Andy Hoover, a spokesperson for the ACLU of Pennsylvania; and Kadida Kenner, executive director of The New Pennsylvania Project. The following responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Pennsylvania lawmakers have expressed interest in implementing a voter ID requirement. What impacts would this have on voter access?

Salewa Ogunmefun: I think it's important to make clear that after all the hours of testimony we have heard in all of these hearings, none of the election directors and election officials who work in Pennsylvania said, "We need a voter ID requirement." The biggest area of consensus among voters, election officials, and other experts was the need for pre-canvassing and e-poll books, not voter ID. We all care about the integrity of our elections, but the keys to improving that system include enhancing our vote-by-mail process, modernizing the Election Code, and adequately funding elections.

Andy Hoover: To clarify, some Republican lawmakers are interested in voter ID. The last time they tried this, we showed in court how hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians would lose their right to vote with a burdensome ID requirement. The fact is that these politicians cannot produce any evidence of a need for voter ID. In the court case in 2012, the commonwealth had to admit that it had no evidence of in-person voter impersonation.

Politicians might get away with lying on the floor of the House and Senate. They cannot lie in a court of law.

Kadida Kenner: We've seen this in Harrisburg before, when elected officials attempt to implement restrictive voter ID laws for their own political gains. It puts our democracy at risk. Less than 10 years ago, Speaker Mike Turzai made it very clear how he viewed restrictive voter ID laws, and exactly who those laws would impact. Turzai said the quiet parts out loud in 2012 as he boasted that voter ID laws would give the 2012 election to Mitt Romney. Today, Republican

lawmakers are again repeating Turzai's sentiments. We have lawmakers who will not accept defeat and the accurate results of our elections. They are putting our democracy at risk.

Pennsylvania already has a voter ID requirement. Voters in the Commonwealth need to have an ID to register to vote, request a mail-in ballot, and cast their ballots when voting for the first time. Proposed changes, disguised as "election integrity" are simply a retaliation against voters for casting their votes and accessing their ballots. HB 1300 will do more harm than good, and will not make voting easier. Our votes are sacred.

How would a voter ID law impact minority communities and communities of color?

Salewa Ogunmefun: Republican, Democratic, and Independent voters expect that the people making changes to election rules aren't trying to rig the game, but instead protect our democracy by ensuring our election laws are nonpartisan and make voting safer, more convenient, and more accessible to all. Most BIPOC voters are going to see a voter ID bill as yet another attempt to keep Black and Brown people in this state from voting. And, to add insult to injury, a voter ID law would make their taxes go up. The associated cost and implementation burdens with voter ID alone are huge. (For example, Texas spent \$2 million on voter education when it implemented voter ID and Indiana spent more than \$10 million over three years on free IDs. That's funding that legislators could allocate to address other issues in the state.) Voting is a fundamental right, and we should be working to remove barriers to participation with the goal of increasing accessibility and voter participation.

Andy Hoover: Research shows that there are particular communities that would be disproportionately impacted by a strict voter ID requirement, including Black Pennsylvanians. Other voters who would be harmed include people with disabilities, senior citizens, transgender folks, people living in poverty, college students, and urban residents who rely on public transportation. Perhaps Harrisburg Republicans want to make it harder for these citizens to vote.

The ACLU of Pennsylvania believes that barriers to voting should be minimal while maintaining security. Under our current system, the counties have the capability to verify a voter's eligibility. Another barrier, like a voter ID requirement, is unnecessary.

Kadida Kenner: These communities have seen elected officials attempt to put up barriers to silence them and their votes before. Record numbers of young voters and voters of color made their voices heard in 2020. Any current attempts to overhaul our election code will further risk disenfranchising marginalized communities. Whenever electoral strides are made in communities of color or other minority communities, such as the people in the disability community or LGBTQ communities, attempts by the right-wing elite to suppress votes and disenfranchise voters soon and strategically follow.

No matter our race, background or zip code, most of us believe that democracy works best when it works for everyone. Unfortunately, we have a handful of politicians who want to set targeted communities back and make it harder for them to vote, especially Black, young and new Americans. The impact restrictive voter ID laws have on our daily lives is even greater for marginalized communities already struggling coming out of a global pandemic and needing their lawmakers to deliver economic support, restore our infrastructure, and deliver healthcare for all. Communities of color need leaders who will govern in their interests and make the promise of our democracy real for everyone.

With lawmakers so focused on election security, are there any alternatives to voter ID that you would suggest they consider to build confidence in Pennsylvania's election systems?

Salewa Ogunmefun: Voter ID is about trying to exclude some voters. Modernizing Pennsylvania's election in a holistic way is the right way to make our process more secure and more accessible. Instead of making it hard to vote, Pennsylvania should allow early, in-person voting, same-day voter registration and the establishment of vote centers, and guarantee paid postage for every voter who utilizes mail-in voting. Small change is better than no change at all, so lawmakers really need to act on issues where there is wide agreement and broad bipartisan consensus:

- 1) Funding electronic poll books.

2) Increasing poll worker pay and providing more resources, in general, for county election operations.

3) Allowing counties to start processing mail-in ballots two weeks before Election Day, so that voters have a chance to correct any simple mistakes and so that we can know who won the election hours – or days – not weeks, after the election is over.

Andy Hoover: Voter ID is a solution without a problem. The 2020 election was safe and secure, and the Trump administration's Department of Homeland Security admitted as much. Donald Trump and the Republicans had every opportunity to prove their case in court, and they failed miserably. Court after court turned them away, including by judges appointed by Trump and other Republican presidents. The only reason this question comes up is because politicians in Harrisburg are feeding the “Big Lie,” which creates hysteria among their supporters, which they then use to justify more burdens to voting. It's a twisted cycle, and it's undemocratic. ACLU-PA and our allies will continue to defend democracy, even if, and especially if, some cynical politicians won't.

For the ACLU-PA, building confidence in Pennsylvania's election system would include legislation that provides for same-day registration, vote centers, early, in-person voting, language access, and increased state funding for chronically underfunded county election offices. Each of these changes would modernize our election system and expand access to the ballot to ensure that every eligible voter can participate in our electoral process with no significant differences based on age, race, party or physical limitations.

Kadida Kenner: First and foremost, several lawmakers in Harrisburg need to stop perpetuating the "Big Lie" and undermining the confidence and faith some Pennsylvanians have in our elections so that we can restore the public's trust. Any lack of confidence felt by some Pennsylvanians is likely due to former President Trump and his sycophants in elected office in the Commonwealth intentionally undermining the confidence of voters in our elections, and the safeguards, already in place, that have resulted in people being caught when trying to vote illegally. The current system works. We need to make it easier for voters to cast their ballots. We don't need to modernize our elections in order for the system to work with our current safeguards.

Pennsylvania had an accurate, free and fair election in the Commonwealth. We already have effective voter ID requirements in the Commonwealth. I'll repeat myself; voters need to have an ID to register to vote, request a mail-in ballot, and cast their ballots when voting for the first time. It's effective. Lawmakers should be focused on funding our local elections so that election officials can ensure timely results, prec canvass, and also receive increased training for election workers to decrease errors. Lawmakers in the Commonwealth should be focused on policy that helps people, not peddle electoral lies that attempt to undermine our faith in elections.

<https://www.cityandstatepa.com/content/should-pa-lawmakers-implement-voter-id-requirements>

SB 7 Article #2

New poll shows broad support for voter ID in Pa.

By: JUSTIN SWEITZER [JUN 17, 2021 AT 3:47 PM]

Just one day after a poll showed support for early voting and increased funding for election administration in Pennsylvania, a new poll from Franklin & Marshall College found that a large majority of Pennsylvania voters also support strengthening the state's voter ID requirements.

The poll's findings come as Harrisburg lawmakers prepare to consider a sweeping proposal that would require all voters to show proof of ID at the polls, establish signature verification requirements and implement early, in-person voting in the state.

The F&M poll found that nearly three-quarters of voters support strengthening the state's current voter ID law, with 74% saying that voters should be required to show ID at the polls. Republicans were much more likely to favor voter ID than Democrats, with 95% of Republicans supporting bolstered voter ID requirements, compared to 47% of Democrats.

Additionally, 81% of voters said county election officials should be required to verify signatures on mail-in ballots with those already on file, with a majority of both Democrats and Republicans favoring the idea.

A majority of voters also favored new updates to state election laws, with 59% of voters calling for the state's Election Code to be revised.

The broad support for voter ID and signature-matching will likely be vindicating for Republicans, who are championing the two proposals as a way to increase election security. State Rep. Seth Grove, who chairs the House State Government Committee, recently introduced an election reform proposal that would establish voter ID, require signature-matching, establish early voting centers and allow curbside voting for disabled voters, among an array of other proposed changes.

Grove told City & State PA on Thursday that the poll underscores the desire for many of the changes outlined in his proposal, House Bill 1300.

"I think within House Bill 1300, there's a lot of popular measures. You see polling for dropboxes – we have dropboxes. Satellite offices? We have satellite offices. We have in-person early voting, right? So we have all these provisions for increasing access and then we have increased security features – voter ID, signature verification – people are supporting those measures, as well," Grove said.

"[The poll] just validates what we're doing in House Bill 1300. It has a lot of the popular measures both Republicans and Democrats like, which is why it's such a good bill."

Gov. Tom Wolf, however, has expressed strong objections to components in Grove's bill, including voter ID requirements and moving voter registration and ballot application deadlines further away from Election Day. Grove wrote to Wolf this week urging a meeting with the governor after initial election reform talks broke down, and Wolf responded by saying "voter ID and similar attempts at voter suppression are non-starters with my administration."

"Instead of pandering to the conspiracists and trying to silence the voices of Pennsylvanians, in the near term, we should be working on a bipartisan basis to address a few limited priorities upon which we can agree," Wolf wrote, expressing an openness to working with Grove on issues like expanding time for counties to process ballots, increasing pay for election workers and providing more funding to counties – all of which are included in HB 1300.

Grove, however, suggested Thursday that HB 1300 may be the governor's one chance to get some of the election reforms he's seeking.

"If this bill gets shut down by the governor, we're not coming back to election reform," he told City & State. "We've got to go do congressional redistricting and we've got to move on to other priorities. So, if counties want their entire wish list done, they better go start talking to the governor."

The F&M poll surveyed 444 registered voters – 205 Democrats, 177 Republicans and 62 independents – from June 7 through 13. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 6.4%.

The poll also asked Pennsylvania voters their thoughts on the most pressing issues facing the state. The coronavirus pandemic is no longer the top issue concerning voters, with only 7% listing the pandemic as their chief concern. Instead, 30% listed "government and politicians" as the chief concern facing Pennsylvania, with another 15% identifying the economy as their top worry.

Wolf's approval numbers also saw a drop since last year, with 52% of voters believing Wolf was doing an "excellent" or "good" job in July 2020. This month, however, just 39% of respondents said the same.

GOP election reform bill would bring voter ID, early voting to Pa.

By: JUSTIN SWEITZER [JUN 11, 2021 AT 4:11 PM]

Harrisburg Republicans have unveiled a sweeping proposal to overhaul the state's election laws after fielding input from county officials, election administrators and voting reform advocates over the course of the year.

The result is a wide-ranging proposal that would require voters to present ID at the polls, establish in-person early voting starting in 2025, expand the time counties have to process mail-in ballots and allow curbside voting for disabled individuals.

The bill is authored by state Rep. Seth Grove, who chairs the House State Government Committee and spearheaded a series of informational hearings to receive feedback on how to update the state's chief election law. Grove told City & State that the proposal – contained in House Bill 1300 – would both increase access to the ballot and strengthen election security.

Grove said: "It has a lot for everybody. It was a holistic look at the approach and said: 'What are the best practices? What do we have now? And how do we make it better?'"

One of the more contentious pieces of the bill will likely be its voter ID requirements. Under the legislation, all voters, not just first-time voters, would be required to provide a form of ID at the polls. Acceptable forms of ID include a driver's license, a military ID, and a new, durable, scannable voter registration card created under the proposal, among other forms of identification. And if voters aren't able to provide ID at the polls, they can sign an affidavit affirming their identity, which would allow them to vote.

Grove said that voters could also submit a provisional ballot if they don't want to sign the affidavit. "You cannot be turned away at the polling place," he stressed. "That is against the law."

Other changes outlined in HB 1300 include:

The creation of a five-day window for county election workers to count and process mail and absentee ballots

The establishment of in-person early voting centers, allowing voters to cast their ballot before Election Day starting in 2025

The elimination of the permanent mail-in voter list

The requirement that counties use electronic poll books that have the capability to verify a voter's ID

The creation of a process for voters to "cure" or correct incomplete mail and absentee ballots prior to the close of polls on Election Day

The development of guidelines for how counties can use dropboxes to collect ballots

The creation of a voter's bill of rights, disabled voter's bill of rights and senior voter's bill of rights

The establishment of a Bureau of Election Audits with the state Auditor General's office

The doubling of penalties for any violations of the Election Code

Grove's legislation includes provisions that have traditionally been supported by Democrats, like early voting and the expansion of pre-canvassing time for county election officials. HB 1300 would permit the use of in-person early voting centers by counties, requiring counties to establish one earling voting center for every 100,000 residents. Counties must have a minimum of at least one early voting center and no more than 10.

The legislation also allows disabled voters to make use of curbside voting – with a poll worker representing each of the state’s two largest political parties required to be present. The “Disabled Voter’s Bill of Rights” outlined in the legislation would also allow disabled voters to move to the front of the line at polling places, vote using an accessible machine and receive any assistance necessary to cast their ballot.

“This is the largest reform in the country, currently. It's the largest reform in the state's history since the Pennsylvania [Election] Code of 1937, and it's the largest election code reform since Florida 2000,” Grove said. “So this is a serious piece of work that really modernizes our election system.”

But while Grove has championed the proposal as one that improves accessibility and security, the legislation has already given Gov. Tom Wolf pause.

Earlier this week, Wolf pledged to oppose any legislation that disenfranchises voters or limits access to the ballot. “I will not allow bad actors to put up barriers to voting in Pennsylvania. Not only will I veto any legislative efforts to roll back the freedoms Pennsylvanians right now have, I will continue to push for changes that expand our access to the polls,” Wolf said at a press conference. “In Pennsylvania and around the nation, we need to expand the freedom to vote, because every citizen’s voice needs to be heard, and the vote is how we make sure those voices are heard.”

Wolf’s press conference came before the rollout of Grove’s proposal, so Wolf couldn’t comment on the specifics of the Republican plan. However, he did express his opposition to voter ID proposals. “We don’t need voter ID,” the governor said.

Lyndsay Kensinger, a spokesperson for Wolf, expanded upon HB 1300 on Friday, characterizing it as an “extremist proposal to try and undermine confidence in our election system.”

“They don’t like the outcome of the November election and now they are retaliating against the voters by pushing a proposal disguised as ‘election integrity,’” Kensinger said of Republican lawmakers. “They want to create new barriers to voting and silence the voices of Pennsylvanians.”

“It is appalling to try to pass laws to take away the freedom to vote for your own political gain. The governor will always defend our democracy and the right to vote for every Pennsylvanian, regardless of your political party,” Kensinger added. “Our founding fathers created a democracy that has inspired billions of people around the world for generations and we will not allow access to voting to be warped into a political weapon.”