

Student Voting Rights in Pennsylvania

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Penn Leads the Vote

Introduction

In May 2018, the turnout rate for the University of Pennsylvania on-campus polling place divisions in the primary elections was a mere 2%. This number is reflective of a decrease voter turnout among Philadelphia voters at large (where only 1 in 6 Philadelphia citizens voted), through Penn Leads the Vote's (PLTV) efforts in the spring of 2019, it became increasingly clear that there are barriers to voting in Pennsylvania's primary elections that disparately affect college student voters: the election date three out of every four years, the absentee ballot system, and access to in-person voting at City Hall.

By outlining the current problems that exist within Pennsylvania's current primary election system, we hope to be able to work with government officials to take steps to resolve some of these barriers to voter access for college students. Dedicated to increasing voter engagement among students at the University of Pennsylvania, PLTV recognizes the importance that increasing participation and reducing barriers to said participation has to sustaining democracy. This is particularly important as it pertains to youth voters research shows that participation early in life is successful in creating participation habit. By reducing the aforementioned barriers to voting in local primary elections, we will be able to successfully inspire lifelong voters and in turn lifelong participants in democracy.

Current Absentee Ballot Process

Every registered student voter at the University of Pennsylvania who doesn't remain local for the summer, must vote in primary elections via absentee ballot. The vote-by-mail process in the City of Philadelphia requires multiple steps, with lots of room for error that makes casting a successful ballot a big challenge. The alternative process, going to City Hall and voting at the City Commissioner's Office during normal business hours, requires students to spend money on transportation and spend excessive time to complete both the request form and ballot in person.

The first step to vote-by-mail is to acquire an absentee ballot request form. Schools occasionally provide the forms to their students, otherwise they may pick up one from City Hall or print one out from the internet. This form has multiple sections relating to different circumstances. There is no section that specifically indicates college-student usage, students must guess that they should fill out the section dedicated to those travelling for business/employment on election day. Campus-voter advocates must diffuse this information to the student body. Beyond this, the request form asks for information that students often don't know how to access, such as the student's "district", "division" and "ward". In addition, the form requests their social security number, which they may be reluctant to share, and registration address (for many students a previous address).

Students may also choose to print out an absentee ballot request form online, which is completely different from the one provided by the city and requires students to purchase their own envelope. The form must be mailed back to the County Board of Elections with a stamp purchased by the student.

Once the form is received by the County Board of Elections, they manually process it and mail an absentee ballot back to the student. Between mailing the form into the County Board, them processing the form, mailing the ballot to the student, and -- if a student lives in an on-campus dormitory-- the ballot being processed by campus mail services, it may be weeks or even a month between when a

student mails in an absentee ballot request form and actually receives their ballot. There is no confirmation by the County Board that a request form has been received and is being processed, nor is there a notification of an incorrectly completed form.

The absentee ballot comes in a packet with many different parts, including the ballot itself, a security envelope, a packet explaining ballot measures, and more. There are no instructions regarding how to correctly fill out the absentee ballot provided in the packet. Students must fill out the ballot, place it in the security envelope, and then sign the envelope to certify their ballot. Then, students must once again pay for a stamp and mail back the absentee ballot to the County Board of Elections. If the Board does not receive a ballot on the Friday before election day, it will not be counted. There is no way for a student to find out if the County Board of Elections received their ballot in time and/or if they accepted or rejected it. It is apparent that there are many places for error within this complex, multi-step process that could lead to the disqualification of ballots or discourage college students from voting all together.

Problems

Problem 1: Primary Election Date

The date of primary elections in Pennsylvania three out of four years occurs after college students on the semester system get released for the summer. Philadelphia is home to about 450,000 college students and, excepting the less than 26,000 who attend Drexel, all of them are forced to go through the complicated absentee ballot process or forfeit their right to vote. Only 212,828 people voted in the local Democratic and Republican primary for Philadelphia Mayor in 2019. Clearly, this demonstrates that the results of elections can be seriously affected if even a fraction of college students who are currently disenfranchised were given an equitable opportunity to vote. As Pennsylvania participates in closed primary elections, this means that the nearly half a million college students in Philadelphia county do not have a voice in who their state and local elected officials are. College students are systematically blocked from making their voices heard in the most influential part of the democratic process by having the primary election date occur in May.

Studies show that voting as a young person is the most impactful way to setup a lifelong habit of voting.¹ Philadelphia college students' opportunities to vote are reduced by the May election date for primary elections. College students not only lack an equal opportunity to vote for their representatives, but they will leave school not as educated on the importance of remaining civically engaged later in life.

College students have no choice but go through the absentee ballot process if they hope to vote in three out of four of the primary elections. As shown above, this process is extremely complicated, inefficient, time consuming and without confirmation or affirmation of one's ballot being counted or whether something went wrong in the process that lead to invalidation. This absentee ballot then, only further inhibits college students from casting a ballot who are already facing a disparate impact. However, this absentee ballot process harms all groups who are unable to make it to the polling places at a higher proportion. This includes individuals who travel regularly for work, are physically disabled, or cannot take off sufficient time for work. Only those who are able to vote on election day have a fair chance at making their voices heard, while everyone else is forced to put in a much higher time and monetary commitment.

¹<https://idhe.tufts.edu/file/2138/download?token=w78Nr6eC>.

Problem 2: Absentee Ballot Process

As highlighted in the aforementioned description of the absentee ballot process, the system as it currently exists presents many barriers to college students voting. At every step, there exists a lot of room for error and impediments to students voting. The most accessible option for many college students to vote in PA primary elections is through absentee ballots, simplifying the absentee ballot process will remove barriers to college students voting and consequently increase voter turnout.

The first identifiable problem is the timing of multiple steps of the absentee ballot process. The first issue within this is the fact that voters are unable to track the timing or status of their mailed request form or absentee ballot during the process. Timing poses an additional issue due to the variance in when students will receive their actual absentee ballot in the mail, ranging from a few weeks to a month since there is no specific timeline for when students should expect to receive it. This uncertainty in timing can pose a major challenge to students who are mailing in their absentee ballot request forms at the end of April or early May, as they may receive their actual absentee ballot in the mail after they have already left campus for the summer or with not enough time to send it back to the County before the final Friday before election day. Additionally, there is no mechanism to receive confirmation from the County Board that a request form is being processed or was completed incorrectly. This prevents students from being aware of whether they need re-submit an absentee ballot request form.

Another problem that impedes college students from voting in primary elections via the absentee ballot request form due to its complex nature. Forms that are provided at City Hall or from universities are very difficult to understand, as they are composed of three different sections that can confuse young and first-time voters. Nowhere on this form does it denote which of these features can be ignored, leaving students who may not know this information to abandon the form when in actuality the forms could be completed without it. For example, the division and ward are not required for the form to be processed correctly, but this is not indicated anywhere on the form. Since this is information that many students do not already know, this can cause them to abandon the form and consequently not vote in the election. Another barrier presented by the absentee ballot request form is the fact that it requires students to provide a reason for absence, and many students are unaware that being a college student qualifies as this is not denoted anywhere on the form.

The mail-in requirement of the absentee ballot process poses an additional voting barrier, as this requires students to purchase two stamps: one to mail the absentee ballot request form and one to mail in the absentee ballot itself. College students should not be required to pay in order to vote, especially given that many live on a small budget-- if any at all. Moreover, the mail-in feature itself can pose an additional barrier due to the fact that in our current age of technology very few students have experience using the US Postal Service for official transactions. Many students do not know where to purchase stamps or the timing required for mailing documents, which can lead to unnecessary errors in voting by mail due to inexperience. Young and first-time voters should not be prevented from voting merely because they lack experience in using the US Postal Service.

As previously stated, the only alternative to this arduous and error-ridden mail-in absentee ballot process is to complete an absentee ballot in person at the City Commissioner's Office during normal business hours at City Hall. However, this requires students to take time out of their busy schedule during finals season and pay money for transportation in order to vote. By only offering this alternative

to the mail-in absentee ballot, students are again being discouraged from voting in primary elections. By not being able to come to college campuses and allowing students to vote in person during select hours, the City Commissioners are creating additional barriers to voting in primary elections.

Case Study: Los Angeles, California

Although the primary election happens even later in California than in Pennsylvania, election officials are committed to ensuring that students have a voice by providing a more robust alternative to voting in-person on election day. In Los Angeles especially, officials ensure that students have multiple avenues to cast their vote in primary elections that occur after universities release students for summer break. While Pennsylvania technically only permits college students, those whose work or vacation takes them away from their homes, those with a physical disability or illness that prevents them from going to their polling place, active military members, or those with a religious conflict to vote absentee, California allows anyone to opt-in. In fact, when voters register online, they have the option to automatically and permanently receive an absentee ballot in the mail. Otherwise, voters may fill out a simple half-page form and receive an absentee ballot up to 29 days before the election. Ballot request forms are accepted much later than in Philadelphia County (for a March 3rd election, for example, request forms were accepted until February 25th). Ballots themselves are accepted as long as they are postmarked by election day and received within three days following the election by the County registrar-recorder. If a voter forgot to sign their ballot, officials will automatically mail them a form that they can submit with their signature to verify their ballot up to eight days following election day. Most importantly, however, voters can track the status of their absentee ballot online. This transparency allows voters to ensure that their vote is counted and gives them the opportunity to remedy any mistakes they may have made during the vote-by-mail process.

If a voter wishes to vote in person but cannot make it to the polls on election day, they have the option to visit an early voting location. Although the exact times and locations of these early voting locations change depending on the election, this provides students with the flexibility necessary to make it to a polling location even if they are not free on election Tuesday. However, early voting locations do not provide for as much flexibility as vote-by-mail, as students would still need to be on campus very close to the election date. Thanks to the state and county's joint effort to make voting as accessible as possible through both early voting locations and absentee ballots, it comes as no surprise that turnout in 2018 primary elections in California was the highest in two decades with Los Angeles leading the charge. Clearly, Los Angeles is a model to other regions as to steps election officials can take to give students a fair chance to cast a vote in a primary election without moving the date.

Solutions

Solution 1: Moving the Primary Date

The most ideal solution would be for the State of Pennsylvania to move the dates of primary elections to the end of April or beginning of May, thus allowing students not just in Philadelphia but across the state to vote in person. Not only is this the most effective way to increase student turnout but voting in person will also allow students to get a handle on the traditional voting process while they still have access to school resources and organizations to guide them, thus preparing them for a lifetime of democratic engagement. If only given the opportunity to vote absentee due to late primaries, students

will inevitably spend what limited time and resources they have for elections on ensuring that their successfully complete the tedious procedures instead of educating themselves on the candidates, offices and issues they are actually voting on. While the solutions below that make the vote-by-mail process more efficient and voter friendly are within Philadelphia county's capacity to implement, smaller and more rural counties may not be able to provide these resources to students within their boundaries. Therefore, the ultimate onus is on Pennsylvania to remedy these voting barriers for all students across the state.

Solution 2: Allowing Early Voting for Students

Philadelphia allows voters to visit City Hall during normal business hours and fill out both the absentee ballot request form and the absentee ballot itself at the City Commissioner's office, removing some of the existing barriers to the vote-by-mail process- but not all. This option is only available Monday through Friday during normal business hours while request forms are accepted for that election, and requires students to find a multi-hour gap in their busy schedules and pay to travel into Center City, where there is no guarantee that staff will be on hand and be able to assist them immediately. To remove some of these hardships on students but still give them the option to fill out the very confusing request form and ballot with the assistance of officials, City Commissioner staff should travel to college campuses and allow students to complete this process on their campus. This gives students the opportunity to complete the process in a more efficient manner while removing the strong travel and monetary barriers associated with it. Additionally, voting under the supervision of a city official ensures that ballots are completed correctly and not lost, ensuring student votes are actually counted. Lastly, this provides an unparalleled opportunity for students to ask questions directly to officials responsible for running elections and learn more about how they work and why they are important.

Solution 3: Remedies to the Absentee Ballot Process

The next best solution would be to revise the absentee ballot process since this is the most accessible way for most college students to vote in primary elections. As outlined above, there are many barriers to voting that exist within the absentee ballot process itself, that if remedied would allow college students to vote much more easily and consequently in greater turnout.

The first aspect of the process that could be reformed is the absentee ballot request form, as its unnecessarily complex nature deters many students from voting absentee from the very beginning. By revising the form to look similar to the print-out version, thus not requiring unnecessary information such as the district or ward, students will be more able and consequently more likely to complete the form.

Pennsylvania is also one of only 18 states that still requires an excuse be provided as to why an absentee ballot is being requested, but many students are unaware that being a college student is a sufficient excuse for acquiring an absentee ballot. By removing this barrier to voting by mail, many more students will be encouraged to vote by absentee in primary elections.

Another reform to the absentee ballot process would be to allow college students to automatically enroll in absentee ballots for an extended period of time (such as four years), which would allow

students to receive an absentee ballot for four primary elections without having to go through the entire application process each year. Since most students' undergraduate careers last four years, such a system would make it much easier and more convenient for college students to vote by absentee ballot in primary elections.

Reforming the absentee ballot request process so that college students are able to register online would also alleviate many of the barriers posed by the current absentee ballot process. Whereas students currently have to pay for stamps and mail in their absentee ballot request form, allowing students to register for an absentee ballot online would bypass this issue. It would also allow students to register in a much more efficient and convenient way, alleviating the issues that can arise due to strict deadlines and slow mail times that are under no control by the voters themselves.

Another important reform to the process would be to make it so that people can send back their absentee ballot without a stamp. As previously stated, the monetary requirement posed by the absentee ballot stamp can pose an impediment especially to college students due to the minimal budget that many college students live on. By working to create a system where absentee ballots can be mailed to the City Commissioner for free, college students will be more able to vote by absentee.

While many of the reforms to the absentee ballot process would require legislative action on the state level, the City of Philadelphia could improve the system independently of the state by having the City Commissioner visit college campuses so that students could vote in person. Rather than being required to travel to the City Commissioner's office in order to fill out the absentee ballot request form and absentee ballot at the same time in person, students would be able to do this on their own campus if the City Commissioner were able to come to campus. By doing this, students would also not be required to spend their own money on stamps in order to vote by absentee.