

Commonwealth Forum: Should Pennsylvania Adopt Early Voting?

YES

Pennsylvania has some of the most restrictive voting laws in the country. Voters must register at least one month in advance of a primary or general election. In addition, voters must register with a party in order to participate in primaries. Voting takes place during a thirteen-hour window for one day each spring and fall and must be done at the voter's assigned precinct. If a citizen wants to cast a vote but cannot do so in person, an absentee ballot requires an excuse. Such restrictions are clearly the result of lawmakers looking to make voting harder and constrict the size of the electorate.

Just thirteen states have such obstructive barriers in place to keep voters from the polls. Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia allow voters to cast ballots earlier, either through the mail or at designated early voting places. Some states even allow voters to permanently add themselves to an absentee voter list, where ballots are then mailed every election, no excuse required. Three states mail ballots to every eligible voter, making voting as easy as filling out a form and dropping it in the mail whenever it is convenient.

The average time for early voting before an election is twenty-two days. This gives citizens plenty of time to cast their votes without the demands of work, family, school, or unpredictable matters in life preventing the exercise of a fundamental right. But access to early voting is about a lot more than making voting more convenient. Early voting gives those with less flexible schedules, generally people working hourly jobs for less pay, and those with less reliable transportation, generally the poor, greater ability to participate in democracy and have their voices heard. Lawmakers in Pennsylvania should enact early voting out of a concern for better democratic representation and stop fearing the results.

NO

The 2016 presidential election was held on November 8. If you lived in Minnesota, New Jersey, South Dakota, or Vermont, you could have voted before any of the three presidential debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. These four states allow early voting at least forty-five days before an election. Imagine that. People could actually cast votes before being able to compare the candidates' ideas and temperaments in the highest pressure political events of the election season. For all of the other states that allow early voting, think of what else might happen after a person casts her vote. Candidates might be accused of crimes or could cast objectionable votes as public officials, or a new crisis might occur without the voter knowing how the candidates would react.

Early voting also allows special interests to use their deep pockets to influence elections. Publicly available lists of people who have not yet voted can be used to mobilize people beholden to the cause of single-issue groups. Remember, when they canvas people to get out the vote, it is not an effort to encourage everyone to exercise their right to the franchise. It is an attempt to get voters to support their cause.

Finally, there is no definitive evidence that early voting actually increases turnout. Given all of these drawbacks, why not stick with Pennsylvania's current system? Let's have a period of debate and discussion about candidates and then all vote on the same day with the same information.

For More Information

The **Early Voting Information Center** (<https://blogs.reed.edu/earlyvoting>) is a nonpartisan research center located at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. They conduct research on early voting and election reform.

The **League of Women Voters** (<https://www.lwv.org>) is a nonpartisan organization that provides information on registering to vote, where to vote, and ballot information.

The **Pennsylvania Department of State** (<https://www.dos.pa.gov>) allows citizens of Pennsylvania to register online, check their voter registration status, and find polling places, and provides much more information about elections.

The **U.S. Vote Foundation** (<https://www.usvotefoundation.org>) aims to provide citizens with easy access to voting information and laws in their respective states.

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