

2020 ELECTIONS

Key swing state warns of November election 'nightmare'

The outcome in Pennsylvania could remain up in the air long past Election Day.



Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf signed no-excuse mail-in ballot voting and other reforms into law late last year, making the June 2 primary the first test of those changes. | Matt Rourke/AP Photo

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PHILADELPHIA — Pennsylvania could determine the presidency. But it might

not be clear for days who won the state on Nov. 3.

Election officials throughout the critical battleground, which is implementing no-excuse mail-in voting for the first time ever amid a pandemic, say they are unlikely to finish counting those ballots the night of the general election.

If the race is close enough — as it was in 2016, when Donald Trump carried the state by only 44,000 votes — that could mean the status of one of the nation’s biggest swing states could remain up in the air long past Election Day.

“My nightmare is that on Election Day in November, you're waiting for Montgomery County's results to declare Pennsylvania to declare who wins the White House,” said Montgomery County Commissioner Ken Lawrence, a Democrat who chairs the Board of Elections there. “The reality is that all of our counties are going to be in that same situation, and it will take a while to actually count the ballots.”

Less than two weeks away from Pennsylvania’s primary, some state election officials said they lack the funding and staff needed to handle the massive influx of mail-in ballots they’ve received for that race. They also said the fact that they legally can’t start counting those ballots until the morning of Election Day is complicating matters. In addition to delaying a final tally, the chaos and confusion could sow distrust ahead of the general election and give fodder to those seeking to discredit its results.

“I’ve had a lot of people reach out to me so far. They got the wrong party ballot sent to them. They got the wrong district ballot sent to them. And now I’m having people getting multiple ballots sent to them. These are the things that are inevitable when you rush the implementation of mail-in voting like we did here,” said Allegheny County Democratic Councilwoman and election board member Bethany Hallam. “But I’m worried that, if Donald Trump loses in November, do the Republicans use all these examples of errors with mail-in voting as their excuse to invalidate election results?”

Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf signed no-excuse mail-in ballot voting and other reforms into law late last year, making the June 2 primary the first test of those

changes. Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, election officials expected to have months, if not years, to acclimate voters to the option of voting by mail. Instead, they've been forced to transform the system overnight.

In Philadelphia, whose metro area is the most populous part of the state, officials predicted before the pandemic that they would get 70,000 to 90,000 applications for mail-in and absentee ballots in the primary. Through Thursday, with several days to go until the deadline, they had already received about 158,000. They said the previous record, set in a presidential general election, was roughly 23,000.

The deluge has led to a backlog: Officials said last week about 18,000 ballots are still waiting to be sent to city voters.

In Pittsburgh's Allegheny County, the second biggest county in the state, the situation is worse: It had a backlog of 80,000 ballots last week. It has received more than 225,000 mail-in and absentee ballot applications through Thursday — compared with the 10,000 absentee ballots it gets in a typical presidential primary, officials said,

“We don't just have a perfect storm. We have perfect storms,” said Republican Al Schmidt, one of the three Philadelphia city commissioners who oversee elections here. “We have new voting technology. We have an election reform that pushed back all the deadlines. And we have mail-in ballots and the pandemic.”

Though election officials said they will process all of the mailed-in votes and that most of the errors with the ballots have been minor, they worry that [news](#) reports like thousands of ballots with flawed instructions being sent to voters in suburban Philadelphia's Montgomery County will lead to increased suspicion of the new voting method.

It's unclear which party will be harmed more by such doubts. In low-income and minority neighborhoods in Democratic-dominated Philadelphia, voters have requested mail-in ballots at lower rates than those in more affluent areas. Overall, though, 69 percent of applications processed for mail and absentee

ballots in the state have come from Democratic voters, compared with 30 percent from Republicans, which some GOP insiders in the state blame on Trump's opposition to the voting method.

Trump has railed against mail-in voting, claiming without evidence that it is “a very dangerous thing for this country because they're cheaters.” On Wednesday, he incorrectly [said](#) that Michigan — like Pennsylvania, a Rust Belt giant that is critical to the president's path to reelection — is sending absentee ballots to 7.7 million voters and threatened to withhold funding to the state “if they want to go down this Voter Fraud path!”

The state is sending applications, not the actual ballots, to all registered voters.

Pennsylvania has not sent mail-in ballot applications to all eligible voters during the primary, though some local governments, such as Allegheny County, have. Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar is open to the possibility of sending mail-in ballot applications to every voter in the general election “with the necessary additional resources,” according to spokeswoman Wanda Murren. An aide to Wolf said the governor will make a determination on the idea “based on experience in the primary, as we understand county processing capacity and other factors.”

Boockvar also supports allowing election officials to start counting mail ballots before Election Day, but that would require action by the state Legislature.

Ahead of the primary, some election officials said unrealistic deadlines mean some voters won't get their mail-in ballots in time. The final day a voter can apply for such a ballot is May 26, but election administrators must receive it just a week later.

“The reality is if you apply on May 26 for your mail-in ballot, there's no way we're going to get it mailed out to you and you're going to mail it back before June 2,” Lawrence said.

Montgomery County and other areas are putting out drop boxes so voters in that situation can deliver their ballots in person.

Officials said hiring freezes and budget cuts that have been implemented because of the pandemic are making a bad situation worse. In Philadelphia, commissioners planned to hire about 50 more employees to help process the new law permitting voting by mail. But they were able to bring in only 25 before the coronavirus hit.

Mayor Jim Kenney also initially proposed a \$10 million increase to the City Commissioners Office this year, but withdrew the bump in a revised budget plan that he unveiled after the virus spread. Election officials throughout Pennsylvania said the \$14 million allocated to the state for election assistance in the CARES Act is far from enough.

“We would probably need millions in order to really adequately fulfill the huge lift,” said Lisa Deeley, a Democratic Philadelphia city commissioner. “My office has been a whirlwind.”

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