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Democrats and Republicans in the Pennsylvania legislature haven't agreed on much when it comes to the 2020 election — only that change is needed.

Those changes will be hotly debated during the General Assembly's next session, which begins this week. Already, two Republicans have proposed eliminating universal mail-in voting altogether, while some Democrats are again pushing in-person early voting. But the people who actually run elections across the state, whose pleas for assistance have been largely ignored by the legislature over the past few months, said they should be front-and-center in the reform process — not partisanship and misinformation.

In 2021, they want their voices to be heard. "We feel pretty strongly that we want to be at the table for those conversations with our legislature," said Sherene Hess, an Indiana County commissioner and chair of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania election reform committee. "There's no question that we can improve, and now is the time to do it."

Central to the discussions of election law changes will be the state's expansion of mail-in voting for any registered voter. Passed in 2019 and used for the first time last year in the midst of a pandemic that prevented many from going to the polls, Act 77 contributed to Pennsylvania's record turnout in the general election, with more than 2.6 million people casting a ballot by mail. County elections officials largely agree they want mail voting to stick around. But they're asking for more time and more clarity in how to administer the process, hoping to never repeat the confusing, acrimonious, and, at times, downright hostile experience with voters in 2020.

Many Republicans, however, are heading in other directions. They have proposed nearly a dozen pieces of legislation that echo some of the talking points from the lead-up to and aftermath of the election, including how to address fraud, illegal voting, untrustworthy systems, and corrupt election workers. State and federal officials have said there was no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election, which was [the "most secure in American history."](#) Pennsylvania-based judges have agreed, repeatedly ruling against President Donald Trump's campaign in lawsuits aimed at discrediting the results.

Two state Republican lawmakers, Reps. Jim Gregory (R., Blair) and Michael Puskaric (R., Allegheny), want to [abolish](#) universal mail-in voting altogether. They contend Gov. Tom Wolf's administration and the Democratic-controlled Pennsylvania Supreme Court wrongly stepped in and told counties how to run mail voting in a way that was inconsistent with what the General Assembly intended. "The year 2020 revealed the current administration's will to overstep and chip away at our fundamental beliefs of the separation of powers and the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court has rewritten the provisions of Act 77 in a manner that makes them inconsistent and unworkable," Puskaric wrote in a [Dec. 8 memo seeking support from other House members](#).

Sen. Anthony Williams (D., Philadelphia), who served as minority chair of the State Government Committee in the previous legislative session, said if Act 77 were put to a vote again right now, it wouldn't pass, especially among Republicans with an eye on higher office in 2022. "It's not going to be acceptable for Republicans to walk out and say, 'I didn't see anything wrong with it, I didn't see any fraud,'" Williams said, noting their attempts to appeal to the GOP base by casting doubt on the way elections were run.

Election officials agree guidance from the Department of State and the court — such as what to do when ballots are missing their secrecy envelopes, how to verify voter signatures, and how to ensure drop boxes are secure — was applied inconsistently, but they're asking for the legislature to clarify the law rather than get rid of mail voting completely. "Our goal is to improve the administration of mail-in voting rather than to eliminate it," said Hess, adding the election reform committee supported mail voting in 2019.

Rep. Seth Grove (R., York), who served as acting chair of the House committee tasked with reviewing election-related legislation, said in late November he submitted an extensive list of questions to the Department of State and all 67 county boards of election. He did not reply to requests for an interview for this story. "The Election Code needs to be updated to reflect the issues that exist now," Mercer County Elections Director Thad Hall said in a written response to Grove. "Having 67 different sets of election rules — with every county having their own unique spin on the law — creates confusion among voters and undermines confidence in the election process."

Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman (R., Centre) said he won't comment on his colleagues' proposals until the election can be thoroughly analyzed. Instead, he plans to [introduce a resolution](#) to create a bipartisan committee of senators to review the 2020 election "so we can move forward in a way that hopefully brings more confidence in the results of the election." A spokesperson for House Speaker Brian Cutler said he wasn't available for an interview, citing preparation for the legislature's swearing-in Tuesday.

Pennsylvania Democrats, who want to expand voter options, said the GOP measures will sow distrust in the voting system and hurt democracy. "They are living in another universe, and in that universe the election was stolen from Trump, but the election was completely fair for them," Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta (D., Philadelphia) said. A spokesperson for the Department of State said in an email that Secretary Kathy Boockvar opposes legislation that would make it more difficult for eligible voters to cast a ballot or "roll back convenient options that voters have clearly embraced."

At the top of Boockvar and local election officials' legislative priorities is more time to pre-canvass, or process, mail ballots before Election Day, something Republican leadership last year [tied to banning drop boxes](#) and relaxing restrictions on partisan poll watchers. Wolf vowed to veto that measure, and the legislature failed to pass any changes. As a result, election officials could only begin the process at 7 a.m. on Nov. 3, which led to false claims that Democrats were stealing the election from Trump as more mail votes for Joe Biden were counted after Election Day.

Lisa Schaefer, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, said the election reform committee is hoping the General Assembly gives election workers up to three weeks to pre-canvass, something they repeatedly asked the legislature for last year but didn't get. Hess, from Indiana County, thinks three to seven days of pre-canvassing is a more realistic request. "We just know that we have to be strategic," she said. "We're preparing some talking points for the county officials."

Two Democrats, Sen. Wayne Fontana (D., Allegheny) and Kenyatta, said they intend to file legislation to give election workers seven to 14 days to pre-canvass mail ballots before Election Day. Kenyatta is also proposing to create early in-person voting. Currently, Pennsylvania law only allows people to vote "early" by casting a mail ballot in person.

Other Democrats are floating the idea of automatic voter registration (people would opt out of registering when at the DMV, instead of opting in), Election Day registration, and establishing all-mail voting similar to what other states like Colorado and Utah have. Schaefer, of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, said the group opposed automatic registration because voters should have a choice in whether they want to register. She said they were also concerned it would make it more challenging to keep voter rolls up to date.

Schaefer said the association didn't have a position on all-mail voting, but thought most of the association's members "feel some mix of mail and in-person [voting] is here to stay." Williams, of Philadelphia, is hopeful Republicans and Democrats will compromise on a few measures, including one he's proposing to make primaries open to anyone, regardless of party registration (currently, only registered Republicans and Democrats are allowed

to vote in their respective party primaries). “I think voters are going to be increasingly frustrated by the fact that you have to fall 100% in one space or another, and most people are not like that,” Williams said.

Kenyatta said he hopes enough Republican legislators will break with the misinformation narrative and come to a compromise on legislation that will make it easier to vote, and easier for counties to administer elections. “They have to actually affirmatively make it clear to their colleagues, in caucus and publicly, that they are not going to be a party to this and actually vote with Democrats to preserve American democracy,” he said.

Kimberly Adams, a political science professor at East Stroudsburg University, said the misinformation being spread by elected officials is harmful when it’s used to steer legislation. “These politicians, they know what the impact of the misinformation is,” she said. “When they start creating policy based on these false narratives, that’s when it becomes really detrimental to our democracy.”

– **Spotlight PA**

State Rep. Mike Reese was diagnosed with a mild case of COVID-19 a month ago, and his symptoms already were fading when he announced his positive test results on Dec. 7. On Saturday, the Republican who represented Westmoreland and Somerset Counties died of an apparent brain aneurysm, according to a statement from House Majority Leader Kerry Benninghoff (R., Centre/Mifflin).

Were the two maladies related? COVID has been blamed for a variety of health problems outside the lungs — including in the brain. But not aneurysms, said Barbara Albani, medical director for neurointerventional surgery at the ChristianaCare health system in Delaware. An aneurysm is a weak spot in the wall of an artery that balloons outward over time, in most cases for no apparent reason. Most people who have them do not realize it, and may go their whole lives without suffering any consequences. But when an aneurysm ruptures, as it did in Reese’s case, the result is often catastrophic.

The 42-year-old lawmaker died at Excelsior Health Westmoreland Hospital in Greensburg with family members by his side. He is survived by his wife, Angela, and three children. The number of people with “silent,” undiagnosed brain aneurysms is unknown, though the rate has been estimated to be as high as 1 in 50, Albani said.

Heredity seems to increase the risk both of having an aneurysm and an eventual rupture, so physicians recommend a brain scan for patients with a history of the condition in more than one close relative. Heavy drinking, cigarette smoking, and high blood pressure also can increase the risk of rupture. Albani likened the risk of high blood pressure to what would happen if you tried to overinflate an automobile tire with a weak spot or “blister” in the sidewall. “The last thing you want to do is hook it up to an air compressor,” she said.

But for most people, the causes of aneurysms and ruptures are unclear. COVID-19 can lead to an entirely different brain problem — a stroke — when abnormal inflammation prompts the formation of blood clots, blocking an artery and cutting off the flow of oxygen. A ruptured aneurysm is the opposite problem, resulting in bleeding in the brain. Given that aneurysms can have such grim consequences, should everyone get scanned and have them treated? Absolutely not, Albani said.

That’s because most will not cause any immediate problem, if ever. Watching and waiting is the usual plan. A physician may at some point recommend noninvasive surgery to repair the weak spot, but only if the potential benefits outweigh the risks. That decision is based on a complex algorithm that takes into account such factors as the size of an aneurysm, whether it is growing, and the patient’s age and underlying health, Albani said.

The one absolute imperative is to seek immediate emergency care in the event of a sudden, severe headache that has no other explanation. People with ruptured aneurysms sometimes describe the resulting headache as a "thunderclap," Albani said. The bottom line, she said: COVID-19 has blame for plenty of things laid at its doorstep. But aneurysms are not on the list. - ***Philadelphia Inquirer***

Google has once again fallen under the microscope of the government. Attorneys general from 38 states, including Pennsylvania, have filed an antitrust lawsuit against Google alleging anti-competitive practices.

It's the third lawsuit filed against Google since October. Facebook is also facing a pair of lawsuits alleging the company has become a monopoly. Apple and Amazon have encountered probes as well, reflecting serious concern among lawmakers and in the public regarding tech's influence on information and commerce.

What exactly does the new suit allege? This newest antitrust suit argues that the tech giant is favoring its own products over competitors' in search results and unfairly driving up digital advertising prices, placing a golden finger on the scale. Google is, primarily, a search engine, a service that connects people with information and services. As the default search engine for 80% of web browsers, however, Google's power is immeasurable.

You see what Google wants you to see. That might sound nefarious, but Google has defended itself against claims of censorship and privileging some information and companies by insisting that search results are determined by a faceless, constantly improving algorithm. An algorithm may not be anti-competitive, but Google has long used contractors to cull search results and help weight certain results above others as well. And of course, the code's metrics are set by people with their own agendas and biases.

The extent and precise nature of such gatekeeping is a closely held secret in Silicon Valley. The attorneys general are seeking to restore a competitive marketplace and level the playing field for search engines and businesses in the digital world. Consumers' purchasing habits have shifted toward e-commerce far faster than anticipated, thanks to the current pandemic — this lawsuit couldn't have arrived at a more pivotal time.

For its part, Google has responded with blatant equivocation, protesting that all of its efforts to refine search results have been to generate a better user experience. This is a transparently concocted defense. In a blog post responding to news of the lawsuit in December, Adam Cohen, Google's director of economic policy stated: "To get more specifically to the issues raised in today's lawsuit: it suggests we shouldn't have worked to make Search better and that we should, in fact, be less useful to you."

The straw man argument continues: "We know that scrutiny of big companies is important and we're prepared to answer questions and work through the issues. But this lawsuit seeks to redesign Search in ways that would deprive Americans of helpful information and hurt businesses' ability to connect directly with customers."

Nobody is buying into the idea that these corporations are altruistic or anything but profit-motivated these days. Google protests that direct search result traffic is advantageous for companies as it circumvents middlemen like aggregators and travel or ranking platforms. Never mind that Google is acting as exactly that sort of platform. The prospect of government getting involved in information trafficking is a specter no American should want to see.

Perhaps Google hasn't done anything wrong. This suit will pull back the curtain and let users glimpse. — ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editorial**



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