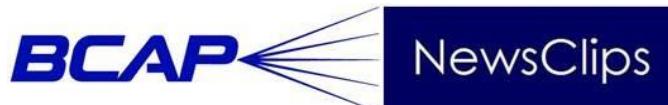


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May 26, 2020

New York Times
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Spurred by the coronavirus pandemic, federal policy makers are pushing to spend billions of dollars to close gaps in America's high-speed internet network.

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[Philadelphia Inquirer Pa. State Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta to fellow lawmakers: 'You can boo but it's true!'](#)

[Harrisburg Patriot-News Charlie Gerow op-ed: An introduction to the GOP candidates for statewide offices as primary day approaches](#)

[Philadelphia Inquirer Some Pa. seniors are turning on Trump. That could be a problem for his reelection.](#)

There is one big obstacle: Government officials say they don't have a clear picture of where service gaps exist, meaning parts of the country will be left out when it is time to distribute the funds. While the Federal Communications Commission estimates more than 94% of Americans—or about 309 million people—have access to high-speed internet services, it acknowledges that number is based on flawed data from internet-service providers. The FCC requires these companies to report that they serve a census block if they can reach even a single home or business there. That means if one of your neighbors has a broadband connection, the FCC might count your house as having broadband, too—even if the local internet-service provider can't reach you.

Citing concerns about the data, FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel wants to delay plans to auction \$16 billion to internet-service providers this October to upgrade broadband infrastructure in rural areas. "You don't manage problems you cannot measure," Ms. Rosenworcel said in an interview. She wants the auction delayed until the FCC has accurate maps of existing service areas. As a Democrat on the Republican-controlled commission, Ms. Rosenworcel is unlikely to prevail.

FCC Chairman Ajit Pai says even with the data problems, the auction will benefit many communities and should move forward on schedule. "The choice we face as a nation is simple: Do we help them now, or do we delay relief until we can determine who else needs help, too? To me, rural America has waited long enough," he said in a statement, adding that the FCC can fill in remaining service gaps when it has better data.

The flawed service data has persisted through multiple administrations. Twenty years ago, when the FCC began collecting the broadband data, it was designed as a bigpicture tool for monitoring the market for voice and internet service, said Carol Mattey, a telecom consultant and former FCC official. "It was never intended at its inception to be the tool for deciding which areas got funding," she said. Congress passed a law earlier this year ordering the FCC to start collecting better data. But the law removed the agency's preferred funding source for the work and didn't appropriate new funding. Lawmakers say they want to get the FCC the money it needs.

The HEROES Act, House Democrats' pandemic-response bill passed on May 15, would give the agency \$24 million to improve broadband data. The bill would also speed up funding to some areas. Separately, House Democrats have proposed an additional \$80 billion for broadband infrastructure. The GOP-controlled Senate hasn't taken up any of the proposals. The bank technology officer has struggled to work from his Puxico, Mo., home during the pandemic, adding to his longtime frustration with the speeds AT&T Inc. offers him via DSL technology, which sends internet signals over copper telephone wires. SEMO Electric Cooperative, a power company serving southeast Missouri, is planning on seeking FCC funding this fall to build a high-speed fiber cable that would reach Mr. McGowen and many others. Mr. McGowen says he would subscribe in a heartbeat.

But a competing company, BPS Networks, has told the FCC it is serving Mr. McGowen's area with high-speed broadband, along with many other census blocks across rural Missouri and Arkansas, via tower-mounted "fixed wireless" signals. BPS is owned by FDF Communications Co. Mr. McGowen said he recently called BPS inquiring about service. The company surveyed his property, and the service technician's report confirmed the problem, according to a copy viewed by The Wall Street Journal: "No signal, too many trees," it reads. Nevertheless, BPS's claim to serve the area could mean SEMO Electric can't seek federal dollars for a fiber line down Mr. McGowen's street.

The project could be delayed for years, said SEMO Electric CEO Sean Vanslyke. "The impact on our region would be devastating," he said. 2/3 Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt's office sent BPS a letter on May 7 questioning its claims. Reached for comment, BPS President W.F. Provance

pointed to a May 6 letter the company sent to the FCC, saying BPS is following the agency's directions and is capable of providing broadband in the census blocks where it is claiming service. The FCC is reviewing BPS's claims as well as those from other companies about changes in their service territories since the middle of 2019. If the agency accepts all the claims, that could reduce the size of the October auction by about 9%, according to Conexon LLC, a consulting firm that helps electric cooperatives build fiber networks.

In Chisago County, Minn., about a 40-minute drive from Minneapolis, many residents are desperate for faster internet. One local internet provider, Frontier Communications Corp., has a reputation among residents for poor service, said Nancy Hoffman, executive director of the county's economic development authority. Frontier, which filed for bankruptcy in April, told the FCC that it covers much of Chisago County with 25-megabit-per-second download speeds, the FCC's minimum for advanced broadband.

Data from Ookla LLC, owner of Speedtest.net, show some consumers experienced that speed but the average download speed for Frontier customers in Chisago County was just 12 megabits per second since June 30, 2019. In a statement, Frontier said it has been upgrading its infrastructure and stands by its service claims, which it said are "consistent with FCC requirements." Frontier's service report to the FCC could end up blocking parts of Chisago County from receiving funding in the October auction, though the company told the FCC in a letter Saturday it would welcome including the areas in the auction. It made similar reports across 29 states. — *Wall Street Journal*

It's a familiar election night routine: Polls close, and everyone wants to know who won — immediately. Every minute matters for Americans anxiously awaiting the results. News organizations race to meet the demand by using complex statistical models to "call" the winner long before all the votes are counted. But get comfortable waiting: Instant electoral gratification is about to become a thing of the past.

A new Pennsylvania law that allows any voter to cast a ballot by mail, along with a surge in requests for mail-in ballots driven by fears of voting in person during [the coronavirus pandemic](#), has set up a 2020 election in which everyone could be left waiting for days before results are known. That might not bother the public much when it comes to the June 2 primary, with a Democratic presidential contest that has already been effectively decided. But when President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden face off in the fall, and all eyes turn to [the critical swing state of Pennsylvania](#), delays could effectively leave the race for the White House in limbo for days. "If nothing changes before November, I would bet my house there would be no way anybody could responsibly call the presidential race [on election night]," said Forrest Lehman, elections director for Lycoming County, in central Pennsylvania.

The new law, which also changes how and when mail-in votes are counted, already stood to [wreak havoc on the public's expectation for quick results](#). "No county wants to be the reason we don't know the leader of the free world on election night," Lee Soltysiak, Montgomery County's chief operating officer and clerk of its election board, said in January. "And that's the position, depending on the margin, we're all likely to be in." Then the coronavirus hit. The number of polling places are being cut. Requests for mail ballots have gone through the roof.

Soltysiak laughed when reminded of what he said in January. "We're not in a better place," he said this week. "All of the challenges that we're preparing to face still exist — and we have layered on top of them those that go along with volume and the pandemic." Every election night, news outlets try to project winners using unofficial results from precincts, surveys of voters leaving polling

places, turnout data, and more. (Official results aren't certified until weeks later.)

But some of that modeling depends on people voting in person, and data from past elections will be less useful this year now that Pennsylvania has changed how they are run. Not to mention that voter behavior is harder to predict during a pandemic. The crisis also means it will take even longer than expected to count mail ballots, county elections officials said.

Philadelphia elections officials, for example, expect [mail ballots to make up a majority of the vote](#), and they won't even start counting them until the day after the election. Several large counties, including Bucks, Chester, and Montgomery, plan to start counting absentee ballots on election day, but expect to take at least another day or two before finishing. Christine Reuther, a Delaware County councilwoman, said "it would be unreasonable for people to expect results" from her county before Saturday. Four days after the election.

The only silver lining for the primary, officials said, is that Biden and Trump are all but assured to win their party nominations, which could lower turnout and the number of mail ballots to count. But that might also obscure the magnitude of the problem looming in November, when millions will anxiously await the results from Pennsylvania. "We don't have any choice at this point but to take our lumps on June 2 and then learn lessons from it and apply them forward," Lehman said. "That's the only hope I have," he added. "But I don't have a whole lot of it."

The time it takes to count ballots isn't a sign of fraud, corruption, or any other failure of the electoral system. Rather, it's a direct result of reforms to help expand access to voting. In the past, the vast majority of votes were cast in person. Pennsylvania had one of the most restrictive absentee voting systems in the country, and only about 5% of votes in any election were cast by mail. So when polling places sent results back to county elections offices, they accounted for almost all the votes.

The new law enacted last year changes that. It was a bipartisan move to make voting more flexible and convenient. It will also dramatically increase the number of mail ballots. (Due to a quirk in the law, Pennsylvania technically has two kinds of mail ballots, "absentee" and "mail-in," that are functionally the same for voters.) Mail ballots also take much longer to count than in-person votes. Physical voting machines keep track of votes as they are cast and spit out a summary at the end of the night. But mail ballots require opening two different envelopes and then scanning the paper ballots.

And some ballots need to be counted by hand, either due to voter error or problems with scanners. "It will definitely not be same-night election results that people are used to. We will certainly be well into the next day," said Gail Humphrey, the chief clerk for Bucks County. "Those scanners can jam." "If there's absolutely nothing that happens by technology that we didn't foresee," she said, "we'll still be at least, bare minimum, into the next day still counting."

The pandemic led to a volume of mail ballot requests that is [far exceeding officials' expectations](#). As of Wednesday, Pennsylvania voters had sent in almost 1.6 million applications for mail ballots, far exceeding the total of 107,000 in the 2016 primary. That means a significant strain on counties to actually tally them, just as social distancing guidelines make gathering workers to do so that much harder. "The number of people you're going to have being able to canvass, or to open up envelopes even, at an eight-foot table is pretty much one. And one at the next table," said Randall O. Wenger, chief clerk of the Lancaster County Board of Elections. "It's going to impact and slow down that process as well." "I don't have any delusion that we're going to have [all the ballots] opened and scanned and adjudicated that same day," Wenger said. "Not going to happen."

Counties also have to figure out how many people they can even dedicate to counting ballots, given how messy in-person voting at polling places is likely to be. In Philadelphia, which will have 77% fewer polling places this year, elections staff will be too busy to count mail ballots, said Lisa Deeley, chair of the City Commissioners, who run elections. “It’s unrealistic to think I’m going to have people to go sit and count ballots,” she said. “Election day is going to be quite the challenge, and it’s going to pretty much take up all our bandwidth on election day.”

Things could be even worse in November, officials said. It remains to be seen if the outbreak will have eased by then, or if it will be spiking anew. What is certain, though, is that the volume of mail ballots will be much higher because of higher turnout for the general election. And the presidential election in Pennsylvania will likely be decided by razor-thin margins, after Trump won by less than 1% of the votes cast in 2016.

There are two ways to lessen the waiting time, elections officials said: Start counting earlier and reduce the time it takes. Reducing the processing time requires money to buy more machines and hire more staff to operate them. So starting earlier is the simpler fix. But when the election law was changed last year, it required counties to wait until 8 p.m. before starting to count mail ballots. Pennsylvania Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar, who oversees elections, said at the time that she believed counties could manage the task. But pressure from the counties led state lawmakers to make a change in March: Counties can now begin counting mail ballots at 7 a.m. on election day, when polls open. “I’ve only got 29 precincts, it’s not going to take me days and days,” said Florence Kellett, director of elections in Wyoming County.

Kellett and officials in several other counties said they would begin counting during election day. Still, they said lawmakers should update the law again, to allow them to start counting ballots days or even weeks earlier. In recent weeks, Boockvar has taken up that call. The 7 a.m. change helps, “but I don’t think it’s going to be sufficient for many counties,” she told reporters Wednesday during a conference call. “I think some of the races that are close, we will get results quickly. But if there are close races, it may take a couple of days.” – *Philadelphia Inquirer*; more from Politico



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