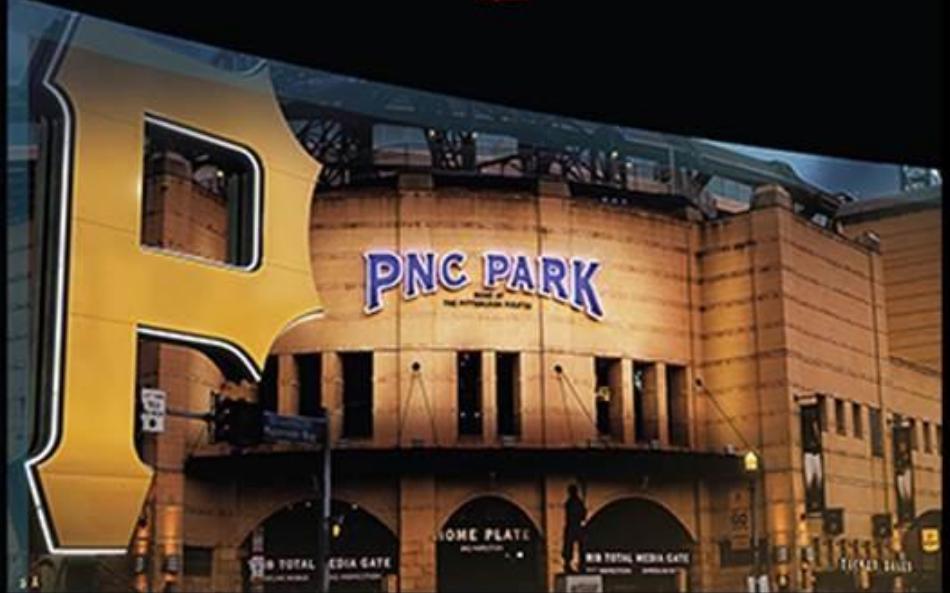




AT&T SPORTSNET



June 8, 2020

Associated Press

At least it wasn't Wisconsin.

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As with every election, [the Pennsylvania primary](#) Tuesday had its problems, from [long lines at some poll sites](#) to [ballot screwups](#). With huge numbers switching to voting by mail because of a new law expanding that option and coronavirus fears of voting in person, the state faces [a long slog of vote-counting](#) that, as of Friday, left [many elections unresolved](#). Thousands of mail ballots didn't reach voters in time. Their ability to use those ballots was only saved by a last-minute order from Gov. Tom Wolf that [extended the mail-in deadline](#).

The issues were worst in big cities — which suffered the greatest effects from [the coronavirus](#) and, just as the election arrived, the largest protests against police brutality. In Philadelphia, the [surge of mail ballot requests](#) and delays caused by protests and curfews contributed to a slow counting process to ensure that those who voted by mail didn't also do so in person, potentially delaying results for weeks. But even with those issues, Pennsylvania's election Tuesday mostly went OK — at least compared with Wisconsin's April debacle, when [lines in Milwaukee stretched for blocks](#) during one of the worst phases of the pandemic.

Still, state and county officials and election advocates said that with the primary as a test case, there is more the state can do ahead of November's general election, when turnout is expected to be much higher and [the fate of the presidency could hinge on Pennsylvania](#). "The onus needs to be on our elected officials to make sure that voters can vote ... not on the voter," said Suzanne Almeida, head of the liberal group Common Cause Pennsylvania. "Voters should not have to run the gauntlet to cast a ballot."

Pennsylvania Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar, whose department oversees elections, said Friday that she will ask state lawmakers for changes to speed the counting of mail ballots, perhaps by permitting officials to open them up to three weeks before Election Day. Current state law prohibits counting them until polls open. "That would help tremendously. We hope we'll be able to work with the legislature," she said in an interview. "Even if, say, the legislature doesn't want the actual scanning of the ballots to happen three weeks before Election Day, you could do everything but that, and then it's much faster on Election Day to just do that last part."

A number of Democratic and Republican county officials have also called for similar changes including Gene DiGirolamo, a Republican Bucks County commissioner, and Rich Fitzgerald, the Democratic executive of Allegheny County. There's a growing fear that a delayed result in a close, charged presidential race could spark distrust, especially [if the lead changes as the days, and count, go on](#). Areas of the state more friendly to President Donald Trump are likely to report vote totals first, so Democrats would likely gain ground as the more populous city and suburban returns came in later. "It plays into the narrative of rigging an election if you can't get it called quickly enough," said Daniel F. McElhatton, a Democratic consultant from Philadelphia.

Boockvar also hopes to automatically send voters mail ballot applications early, as soon as July, to allow lead time before November. Several progressive voting-rights advocates called for more aggressive steps, but they could face resistance from Republicans who control the state legislature and who signaled skepticism about several proposals. "If we expect the biggest turnout in election history for the general election, we are going to run across the same problems that we had in Philly and in Pittsburgh," said Ivan Garcia, director of community engagement for Make the Road Pennsylvania, a Latino advocacy group.

Even if they weren't on the same scale as Wisconsin, Garcia and other advocates said Pennsylvania saw warning signs. "We are going to see significant continued surges in the use of absentee mail ballots in November and we need to prepare for it," said Wendy Weiser, a voting-rights expert at the Brennan Center for Justice in New York. "Election officials do not yet have the infrastructure and equipment and staffing to handle this surge in mail ballots,

profile Democratic primary after #MeToo allegations

and they need resources now." "Whatever stresses we saw in the primary, it is going to be double or more in November," she added.

Many of the issues, including long lines due to decreased polling places, hit communities of color that are already disproportionately disenfranchised, Weiser said. Allegheny County, home to Pittsburgh, had just one drop box for people who wanted to return mail ballots in person. It was at a municipal building that, on election day, had law enforcement officers in full riot gear and German shepherds outside, Almeida said. National guardsmen were stationed near a Philadelphia drop-box location at City Hall, she added. "Black and brown people who had just suffered at the hands of the police then had to run the gauntlet to get to a place to drop off their ballots," Almeida said.

Allegheny County officials said there were concerns about being able to ensure security at additional drop-box locations. As for the police presence, Boockvar noted that many polling sites are official buildings, and when they were chosen there was no anticipation of the heavy police presence that would be deployed as protests against police brutality unfolded across the country. Charlie O'Neill, a spokesperson for the Pennsylvania Republican Party, said there were some poll sites in Allegheny County unable to locate Republican primary ballots when the polls opened, and some people receiving their ballots the day before the election, or not at all.

Garcia and Almeida were two of several progressive voting-rights advocates this week who called for new steps by the state legislature and county officials to smooth the voting process. Those proposals include automatically sending every registered voter a mail ballot to cut down on administrative work for voters and stretched election officials; opening "vote centers" in each county where any county resident could vote, providing a convenient location and reducing crowds on election day; and extending the mail-in deadline.

Some 13,500 ballots in Philadelphia alone arrived in the two days after the election this week, and would not be counted without Wolf's order extending the deadline in the city and five other counties. Boockvar embraced some changes, and said that the state would distribute \$13 million in existing federal aid, but that more funding would help. But she said she won't lobby lawmakers for the ability to automatically send a mail ballot to every voter. In a state with little history of mail-in voting, she argued that would be too fast a transition, and requiring applications — though it adds steps — helps voters understand the process and fix problems like outdated addresses. "It's an opportunity for us to give them information as they're applying," she said.

Republicans raised questions about some of the proposals, and the GOP nationally, led by Trump, has largely opposed proposals to expand voting rules, citing the potential for fraud, though it is very rare. House Republicans in Harrisburg are awaiting a state report on the election, so "making any significant changes now would be premature until we can see and verify the impact of the changes we've already made," said Mike Staub, a caucus spokesperson.

But he expressed skepticism about mailing ballots to every voter, saying it would add another expense amid tight budgets, and raised concerns about extending the deadline for returning mail ballots, citing the importance of prompt results. As for counting ballots earlier, he said the forthcoming report will help lawmakers "understand the challenges associated with increased mail-in ballots, and what was the cause of any particular issues."

Similarly, the Senate GOP is awaiting the state report, and is considering a plan that would require an even more thorough assessment by Aug. 1. Election advocates argue that change needs to come even sooner. "This was an election that gave us a lot of clarity about what could go wrong and what we need to fix for November," said Almeida, of Common Cause. "There's more that could be done. There's more that could have been done." – **Spotlight PA**



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