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Comcast plans to compensate its TV customers for canceled baseball games after the coronavirus pandemic wiped out nearly two-thirds of the major-league baseball season.

The Philadelphia cable giant expects to get money back from regional sports networks that broadcast live games and will pass along to customers credits on their bills, company officials said. It's unclear how much customers will receive, as Comcast hasn't received rebates from the networks yet. The credits could vary, depending on where customers live.

Comcast, like other pay TV providers, continued to charge "regional sports fees" even as the pandemic suspended professional sports. That upset customers who paid for sports channels that largely [aired reruns of classic games](#). In Philadelphia, customers of Comcast's Xfinity cable unit pay \$8.75 a month for local sports, including professional baseball, basketball and hockey. The issue got the attention of New York's attorney general, who called on cable and satellite TV companies to cut the fees.

Comcast, the nation's largest cable TV company, is near the end of the sports TV food chain. The company pays regional sports networks, or RSNs, to carry their channels. In turn, regional sports networks, such as NBC Sports Philadelphia, pay the teams for the rights to broadcast games, teams that in turn pay millions of dollars to players. Xfinity charges customers regional sports fees to recoup costs.

The regional sports fee varies by market. One of the fastest-growing fees on cable bills, in Philadelphia it was \$3 in 2016 and [jumped an additional 6% to \\$8.75 this year from the \\$8.25](#) charged in 2019. The [fee](#) is usually included in several TV packages, so many customers who may not want sports still end up paying for it. "We have consistently said that we would pass along all credits or any other adjustments we receive from RSNs to our customers," company spokesman John Demming said in a statement.

Comcast, with more than 20 million TV customers nationwide, will offer credits based on the MLB games that weren't played from April through June, Demming said. If the company receives adjustments from regional sports networks for other pro sports, it will pass those credits to customers too, Demming said. The MLB, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League suspended or delayed their seasons in March due to the coronavirus. The NBA and NHL resumed play two weeks ago, while the MLB started a shortened, 60-game season in July, less than the usual 162 games.

NBC Sports Philadelphia, which is owned by Comcast, doesn't expect rebates from the NBA and NHL. Both leagues nearly finished their seasons before the pandemic put their games on hold. "The rebates will be determined after the number of games played by each league this season are finalized, and we will pass along the appropriate credits or other adjustments as necessary, according to our agreements," a NBC Sports Philadelphia spokesperson said.

A spokesperson for MLB declined comment and an official for the NHL did not return requests for comment. An NBA spokesperson said: "We are supportive of the RSNs and the teams working together on addressing any issues based on their individual deals and circumstances." Comcast officials told investors on July 30 that its cable revenue was slightly down after accounting for the sports credits it expects to pay customers. The cable unit's revenue was [down 0.2% to \\$14.4 billion](#) during the second quarter, but [would have risen 1.4%](#) if not for the sports fee adjustments, Michael Cavanagh, Comcast's chief financial officer, said during an earnings call. There could be additional sports fee adjustments during the third quarter, he added. Verizon, with nearly four million TV customers nationwide, is "working with programmers to secure

Allentown Morning Call

What Kamala Harris brings to the Democratic ticket as Joe Biden seeks to flip Pennsylvania blue

The 2020 John Walson Jr. Golf for Kids' Sake, presented by **Service Electric Cable TV & Communications**, is only a month away. The mission of this popular event – an annual fundraiser benefitting Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Lehigh Valley – is to create and support one-to-one mentoring relationships that ignite the power and promise of youth. This year's John Walson Jr. Golf for Kids' Sake is Monday, September 14 at the Woodstone Country Club and Lodge in Danielsville, Northampton County. [Click here for registration and sponsorship info.](#)

rebates that we can pass on to customers," spokesman David Weissmann said.

Comcast created the regional sports fee years ago to show customers how much of their bill goes to sports, one of the biggest drivers of programming costs for pay TV companies. By itemizing the fees from the base price, cable companies can shift blame for price hikes, [consumer advocates have said](#). The fee drew attention from customers who were stuck at home with no sports to watch. In April, New York Attorney General Letitia James [sent letters](#) to seven major cable and satellite TV providers, including Comcast, calling on them to cut the sports fees while no games were played. James' office did not answer emails seeking comment. – *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Facebook Inc., Alphabet Inc.'s Google and Twitter Inc. have discussed with federal officials how the social-media platforms can prevent the spread of misinformation in the days before and after the election, after the U.S. intelligence community warned of foreign interference and President Trump called the vote's integrity into question.

The conversations are designed to address problems that may arise from across the political spectrum and have included the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Homeland Security and intelligence agencies, according to people familiar with the matter. They have been shaped by the [impact of the coronavirus pandemic](#), which is expected to result in far more people voting by mail than in previous elections, making it unclear how long it will take to have final election results.

The discussions have grown more urgent, the people said, as President Trump has repeated his warning of likely vote-by-mail fraud. In late July, for example, he tweeted to his 85 million followers: "2020 will be the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history. It will be a great embarrassment to the USA. Delay the Election until people can properly, securely and safely vote???" The U.S. intelligence community has assessed that Russia [has undertaken a broad effort](#) to damage Democrat Joe Biden's bid for the presidency, while China prefers that President Trump not win re-election, a senior intelligence official said recently.

The concern among officials and social-media companies is that any delay in declaring a result or widespread problems with mail-in voting could trigger the spreading of false stories about how the votes are being counted. The broader rollout of mail-in voting will test states' abilities to count votes quickly and accurately. Studies show absentee-voter fraud has been rare in prior elections. But politicians in both parties have sometimes been emboldened by delays in certifying results in past elections [to speculate about foul play](#).

Among the possibilities being discussed at Facebook and other tech platforms are putting in place procedures to act more quickly on misinformation, because false posts can sometimes exist online for hours before platforms take them down, said people familiar with the discussions. Facebook, for instance, is looking at updating policies related to the time between voting and when results are announced, one of the people said. It is also examining potential product updates through its Voting Information Center and additional labels added to posts from politicians, the person said.

Matthew Morgan, general counsel for the Trump campaign, said that Democrats were "trafficking in conspiracy theories and hypotheticals" and that Mr. Trump's concerns stemmed from states with little experience in mail balloting rushing to adopt the method. "Democrats are trying to undermine the integrity of our election mere months before Election Day by hastily implementing chaos-ridden universal vote-by-mail schemes in states that have no experience or infrastructure to support these systems," Mr. Morgan said.

The National Security Council said in a statement that the Trump administration doesn't tolerate foreign election interference and that it was

working with states, social-media firms and election vendors “to protect the integrity of the 2020 elections.” Representatives for Facebook, Twitter and Google said they are working closely with election officials and industry peers to safeguard the process, including by strengthening policies and procedures that were put in place after the 2016 election.

Democratic Party officials have pressed Facebook on similar subjects, including in a late July meeting when representatives of campaign committees asked the company for assurances that it would intervene if Mr. Trump or others promoted misinformation about the outcome during the counting of votes, according to people familiar with the conversation. Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg has convened a series of high-level meetings over the past several months to discuss the company’s potential response to election-related misinformation, a person familiar with the matter said.

At an internal Facebook employee question-and-answer session on Aug. 6, Mr. Zuckerberg said the company is “sort of in an unprecedented position” given that election results could be unknown for days or weeks, according to the person. BuzzFeed News earlier reported on the meeting. Chief among the issues, said several current and former officials from different agencies, were Mr. Trump’s repeated attacks on the security of voting by mail and his suggestions that election results could be tampered with because of the potential effect such messages could have on public confidence in the outcome. Some current officials working on election security said they consider such messaging from the president to be a more significant threat than efforts by foreign countries to undermine the election’s integrity.

A Wall Street Journal review of Mr. Trump’s tweets dating back to 2012 found more than 110 instances of the president claiming widespread illegal voting, asserting an election or primary was rigged, or that voting by mail would allow for rampant fraud. More than half of those tweets were from this year, with the most of them concerning mail balloting. Experts in both election security and foreign disinformation said Moscow’s efforts to sow division and undermine faith in U.S. democracy [have continued and evolved since 2016](#), moving away from automated, spamlike content and toward more-refined efforts to seed disinformation content on websites presented as authentic.

Clint Watts, a former FBI official and a research fellow with the Foreign Policy Research Institute, said that Mr. Trump’s direct attacks on the election’s integrity represented a different problem. “Rewind four years: The Russians could never have pushed this volume or intensity of disinformation into our election space that comes directly from the president,” Mr. Watts said. Trump administration officials at times have faced the dilemma of trying to shore up public confidence in the election process, including vote-by-mail balloting, without provoking a reaction from Mr. Trump that undermines the effort, according to current and former officials.

Chris Krebs, the top cybersecurity official at the Department of Homeland Security, urged last week in a speech at the Black Hat cybersecurity conference that the public be calm in expecting delayed reporting of results. “The last measure of resilience in the 2020 election is going to be an informed, patient voter,” Mr. Krebs said at the conference. “It’s going to take time to count the vote, whether it’s absentee ballots coming in, whether it’s longer lines. Whatever it takes, it’s going to take a little bit more time.” — *Wall Street Journal*

It’s a simple question, really.

Do state Republicans, constantly thrashing Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf over his handling of COVID-19, pump up President Donald Trump’s Pennsylvania base? And, if so, does that push the state off its “Leans Dem” designation (reflected in views of prognosticators from the University of Virginia’s [Larry Sabato](#) to the [Cook Report](#) to [Inside Elections](#)) and put it into the “Toss-up” group?

Instinctively, you'd think, nah. Polling and most punditry suggest the structure of the state race is set, in favor of native-son Joe Biden. His VP pick of Kamala Harris further helps in that it's likely to boost turnout among minority voters, especially women. Besides, since when do state issues sway presidential races? Ah, but can the coronavirus, a *global* issue impacting every aspect of our lives, shove political "structure" off kilter? And can partisanship around the issue affect the state vote in a presidential election?

Consider: Trump's base is mostly outside cities. The loudest complaints about Wolf center on one-size-fits-all restrictions. Often, less populous Republican areas with few virus cases are treated the same as Democratic population centers with lots of cases. That riles Republicans. GOP voter registration, through June, is running much higher than Democratic registration. So far, it's cut the state Democratic edge down to 801,000. It was 916,000 in November 2016, when Trump won the state by 44,000 votes.

Meanwhile, Republicans paint Wolf an out-of-touch elitist who exaggerates health risks while favoring government control over personal freedoms. Wolf's hit for ordering or advising curbs on business, booze, golf, bars, churches, restaurants and high school sports. He's at the center of mask/no mask wars. He takes heat for not working with the Republican legislature. Franklin County GOP Sen. Doug Mastriano, a harsh critic who's on social media (hourly, it seems) busting on the Guv, wrote in a recent op-ed piece that Wolf, "Enjoys being a fearmonger." Senate Republican Leader Jake Corman and others label Wolf's decisions "unilateral, ill-considered."

Facebook, Twitter and conservative talk radio (KDKA Pittsburgh personality Wendy Bell comes to mind) hound Wolf repeatedly. Does it, over time, build on Trump's base? I don't know. I asked around.

Robin Kolodny chairs Temple University's political science department: "What we know from 50 years of political science data is that presidential approval and economic prosperity/hardship are the two things that propel turnout. "I don't see anything at the state level that could change that dramatically...also, how are those new coal and steel jobs working out where (pro-Trump/anti-Wolf) protestors live?"

Philip Harold, poli-sci prof at Robert Morris University in Allegheny County: "There's a lot of anger and frustration out there...Wolf's position on high school sports is politically dangerous in this regard. Without a reversal, and if Democrats are seen as the shutdown party, Pennsylvania should definitely be ranked as a toss-up state." Elizabethtown College poli-sci prof Fletcher McClellan: "It's definitely a base turnout strategy and would be effective if we were talking strictly state politics in 2022...(but) at the presidential level, I think both D and R bases are highly motivated regardless of what state politicians do...I think Pa. is a toss-up, mainly because of the mess over mail-in voting, which includes pending lawsuits, Russian hacking, Trumpian tricks and the politicization of USPS."

Penn State poli-sci associate prof Robert Speel: "While national politics often affect how people vote in state elections, the reverse is rarely true...(So) my guess is probably not, unless Gov. Wolf does something within a week or two before the November election that upsets rural and exurban voters...and even that may be too late if most voters have voted by mail."

Berwood Yost, director, Franklin & Marshall College's Center for Opinion Research: "I'm not sure talking about Wolf will drive voting in the presidential race. Generally, Wolf is more popular than the President in this state...Trump's vote will turn out no matter what, and he will win most counties...the keys are whether voters see Biden as a reasonable alternative who they turn out to support, and whether Biden can cut into Trump's margins in counties Biden doesn't win."

So, there's a case with historical precedent suggesting GOP squabbles with Wolf don't much play to Trump's advantage. But, due to COVID, there is no historical precedent for the atmosphere and politics of 2020. Question then is what factors (COVID, economy, mail-in voting, debate performance, etc.), and reaction to them, most move votes and how? And that's not so simple to answer. – **John Baer's column in Harrisburg Patriot-News**



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