



Pennsylvania
Holding Power Accountable

Common Cause Pennsylvania
Written Testimony Regarding Election Reform SB411 – SB422 & SB300
Senate State Government Committee
April 25, 2019

To: Senator Mike Folmer, Majority chair of PA Senate State Government Committee, Senator Anthony Williams, Minority chair of PA Senate State Government Committee and the members of the PA Senate State Government Committee.

My name is Micah Sims, Executive Director of Common Cause Pennsylvania and I'm honored to share this testimony regarding the package of Senate bills seeking to improve access for Pennsylvanians voters to demonstrate one of the tenets to our democracy, voting.

Common Cause Pennsylvania has led efforts for over 30 years to protect, improve, and create greater access for eligible voters to cast a meaningful vote on Election Day. Currently, in addition to mobilizing our 36,000 members to advocate for fair, secure and accessible elections we work to educate members of the public, lawmakers, and the media on democracy issues in Pennsylvania and nationwide. Common Cause is also an active participant in several Pennsylvania coalitions that work to improve voter access and modernize our elections. Most importantly, Common Cause leads the nonpartisan election protection work in Pennsylvania during primary and general elections which includes recruiting, training and mobilizing hundreds of volunteers on Election Day to ensure that every Pennsylvania voter has a positive experience at the polls.

Our interest in improving the voting process is not dictated by allegiance to a political party or partisan agenda. Simply, our goal is to ensure that all eligible Pennsylvanians can register and vote in secure, fair and accurate elections as provided by the Pennsylvania and United States Constitutions.

Common Cause Pennsylvania extends our thanks to Senator Folmer and others in bringing forth this package thoughtful improvements to our election code. Senator Folmer and his staff were gracious to discuss some of these bills with us earlier this year and grant us opportunity to

provide initial feedback. We look forward to continuing that dialogue after this hearing has concluded.

Our testimony will give our reflection on a few of the proposed bills that before the committee today. We are grateful to the committee for inviting **Keystone Votes**, a coalition that Common Cause is proud to be a part of, to testify during this hearing. We stand in support of the testimony and recommendations from Keystone Votes on those bills not addressed below.

1. Open Primaries (SB300) SUPPORT

Common Cause Pennsylvania fully supports this bill sponsored by Senator Scarnati. We have been working with several organizations, including the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania, Committee of Seventy, Independent Pennsylvanians, and others over the past year to push for open primaries in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Our elections are paid for by the taxpayers of Pennsylvania, therefore all eligible and registered voters should have the opportunity to select candidates found on the primary ballot.

Additionally, allowing eligible voters who are not registered with either the Republican or Democratic parties in Pennsylvania to vote in primary elections will hopefully have the effect of increasing voter turnout and engagement from voters who are not enrolled in either of the major parties. This is important for several reasons, including the fact that Pennsylvania allows constitutional amendments and other initiatives to be voted on in primary elections.

2. Absentee Voting: Constitutional Amendment versus Statute (SB411)

We oppose a constitutional amendment that only allows absentee ballots to be cast by voters who are physically outside of their town between 7 am and 8 pm. We have evaluated the current election code and our legal experts agree that SB411 to implement updated processes for absentee ballots can be done through statute.

We would enthusiastically support a statutory version of this bill which allows any voter—regardless of whether they are in or out of their city or town—to qualify for an absentee ballot to optionally vote by mail.

It is time to address the current timeline, excuses and process of absentee ballots. These ballots should be helping, not disenfranchising voters in Pennsylvania. We should not be pushing a bill forward that will legally jeopardize the voting rights of any voter. We cannot eliminate one set of limitations and replace it with a new set of limitations.

3. Poll Workers Needed (SB412) SUPPORT

In organizing and managing election protection program across Pennsylvania in the past few years, we have witnessed the need of several counties for poll workers. We believe this bill will allow hundreds, if not thousands, of citizens across Pennsylvania an

opportunity to help ensure our elections are fair, accurate and secure. We fully support this bill.

4. Judicial Retention (SB413) SUPPORT

We value the importance of the third branch of government, therefore providing a proper place on the ballot, as opposed to an additional page, for voters to cast a yes or no decision on the retention of judges on the state appellate and county level is the right thing to do. We fully support this bill.

5. How Many Votes To Win (SB417) OPPOSE

There is a difference between establishing a required number of petition signatures to get on the ballot and establishing predetermined win number on election day. Candidates should win an election by having one more vote than their opponent, not by reaching a specific number of votes. We acknowledge the burden on local election directors and municipal government that can arise when multiple write in candidates receive the same very small number of votes and the “winner” fails to uphold the duties of the office. However, this solution is untenable and we oppose this bill as drafted.

In conclusion, this election reform package is thoughtful and insightful around upgrading some of the outdated Pennsylvania election codes. This is a valued step forward and a strong way to create dialogue, debate and meaningful resolutions in improving how we provide further accessibility to voting in Pennsylvania.

We thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony. Our goal is having an election code that affords all voters the opportunity to fairly and securely cast ballots during primary, general and special elections. We look forward to working with this committee and every senator to advance legislation that brings forth voting reform and election modernization and results in stronger civic engagement and increased public participation by the registered voters of our great commonwealth.

Humbly Submitted,

Micah Sims
Executive Director
Common Cause Pennsylvania