

# targetsmart



DATE: June 15, 2020

TO: Nikkilia Lu, State Innovation Exchange  
Marc Stier, Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center

FROM: Ben Lazarus and Gabby Weisberg, TargetSmart

RE: Pennsylvania Statewide Issues and Messaging Poll – May 2020

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## Executive Summary

TargetSmart was commissioned by Project Keystone to conduct a poll<sup>1</sup> of likely presidential election voters in Pennsylvania on a number of important debates within the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Overall, we find the Pennsylvania electorate is broadly open to a progressive agenda in Harrisburg, particularly as it relates to public health and economic responses to the coronavirus and critical democracy reforms. This memo summarizes the key findings from the poll and highlights broad trends and messages that resonate with likely Pennsylvania voters.

## Voters' Issue Priorities are Diffuse

In an open ended exercise that probes voters on the issues on which they'd like to see the General Assembly focus, we find that voters cite re-opening the economy and businesses (15 percent) and concerns about the coronavirus spread (11 percent) as top issues. Republicans are more likely to cite re-opening the economy as their top issue (22 percent) than independents or Democrats are (16 percent and 8 percent, respectively), however, we see Democrats, independents, and Republicans cite concern about the coronavirus spread at similar frequencies (11 percent among Democrats, 13 percent among independents, 10 percent among Republicans).

Following issues surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, voters gravitate towards employment (10 percent), education (9 percent), health care (9 percent), and taxes (9 percent) as other top issues on which they would like the General Assembly to focus. Issues that rank relatively lower on voters' issue priorities list, though still salient, are budget issues (4 percent) and infrastructure (3 percent).

## Voters Broadly Supportive of Free and Widespread Coronavirus Testing, Vaccination, and Treatment

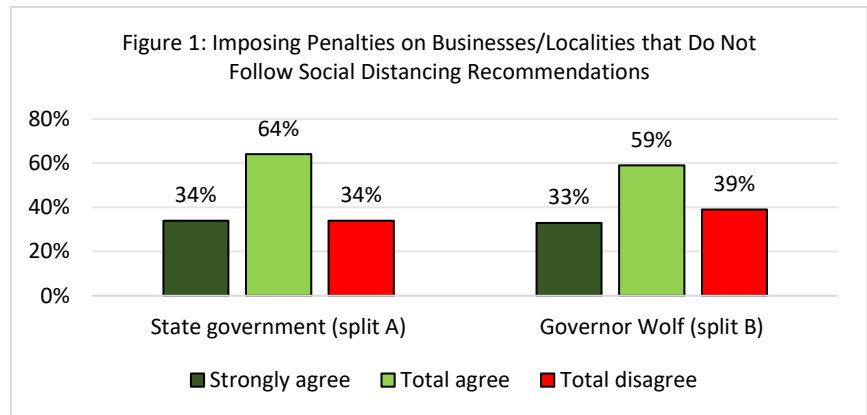
Findings from this poll reveal that Pennsylvanians are open to several public health responses to the coronavirus pandemic, particularly as it pertains to testing, vaccination, and treatment of the coronavirus. Voters strongly agree with both widespread testing (66 percent strongly agree, 89 percent total agree) and widespread testing *and* vaccination of Pennsylvanians (65 percent agree, 89 percent total agree). Furthermore, voters strongly agree that coronavirus testing and treatment should involve no out-of-pocket costs (56 percent strongly agree, 82 percent total agree)

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for full survey methodology.

Voters also agree that the federal government and Pennsylvania state government were unprepared to handle a public health crisis like the coronavirus, however, there is more intensity behind negative assessments of the federal government’s preparedness. We find that a majority of voters *strongly* agree that the federal government was unprepared (50 percent strongly agree, 76 percent total agree), while just 2-in-5 voters *strongly* agree that state and local governments were unprepared (38 percent strongly agree, 74 percent total agree). At the same time, over 3-in-5 voters agree that the federal government is not doing enough to provide front-line health care workers with the resources and protective gear they need to protect themselves and their patients (41 percent strongly agree, 61 percent total agree).

Voters also agree that penalties should be imposed on local governments and businesses that refuse to comply with social distancing recommendations. A split exercise reveals that there is no discernable difference between “Governor Wolf” imposing penalties or the “State government” imposing penalties, as around 3-in-5 voters agree with both statements (See Figure 1).



### Pennsylvania Voters Support Various Economic Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Pennsylvania voters generally support a range of economic responses to the pandemic that benefit working and unemployed Pennsylvanians and small businesses. Voters clearly prioritize working people over big corporations and corporate executives, as over 4-in-5 voters agree that corporations and big businesses should spend their bailout and tax cut money on their employees, rather than on stock buybacks and bonuses (83 percent total agree). This measure receives the strongest agreement of all economic responses tested as 64 percent of voters *strongly* agree with it. When it comes to unemployed Pennsylvanians, an overwhelming majority agrees that state government should expand unemployment benefits throughout the state so more people can qualify for benefits (48 percent strongly support, 81 percent total support).

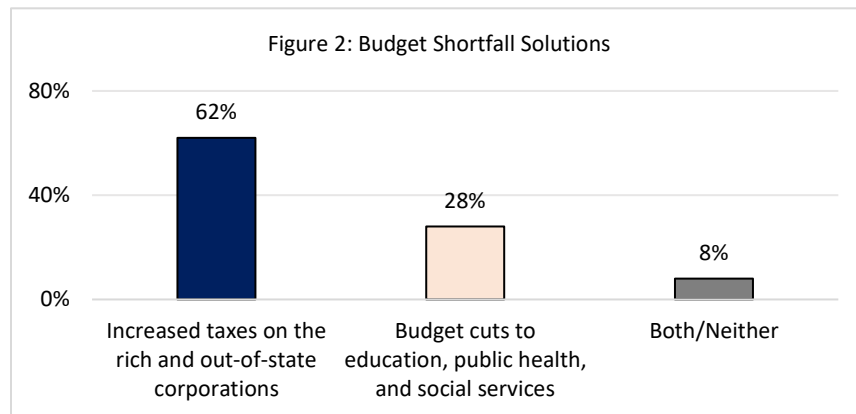
Pennsylvanians also strongly agree that state government should create relief packages for small businesses throughout the state. That said, a split exercise reveals that voters more strongly agree with relief packages for small when there are no caveats or requirements to qualify for government assistance. Forty-five percent of voters *strongly* agree with relief packages for small businesses that continue paying their staff and pledge to avoid layoffs (81 percent total agree), while 55 percent of voters *strongly* agree with relief packages for small businesses with no qualification requirements (88 percent total agree).

Pennsylvanians also agree that state government should suspend and forgive rent and mortgage payments during the pandemic, however, this economic response receives the softest agreement of all responses tested. Overall, 67 percent of voters agree with rent and mortgage suspensions and forgiveness, however just over 1-in-3 voters *strongly* agree (35 percent strongly agree). That said, we

find that Black voters (55 strongly agree, 88 total agree), younger women (42 strongly agree, 78 total agree), and blue collar voters (40 strongly agree, 71 total agree) show strong support for housing payment suspensions and forgiveness.

## Two-in-Three Voters Prefer Tax Increases on the Rich and Out-of-State Corporations Over Budget Cuts

When presented with two possible solutions for addressing Pennsylvania’s budget shortfall due to the coronavirus pandemic, a solid majority of voters gravitate toward the progressive argument for increasing taxes on the wealthy and out-of-state corporations (See figure 2). Nearly 2-in-3 voters express a preference for increased taxes while fewer than 1-in-3 voter prefer spending cuts on core services.



Audiences that most strongly prefer tax increases include voters urban census blocks (39 percent much more, 23 percent total more), Black voters (45 percent much more, 74 percent total more), and college educated women (38 percent much more, 72 percent total more).

## Voters Divided on Property Tax Freezes

This poll explored some potential property tax reform proposals designed to help homeowners during the coronavirus crisis. A split messaging exercise was conducted to assess voters’ preferences between a total state-mandated property tax freeze, and either a targeted property tax freeze, or local government discretion for property tax freezes. This exercise reveals that voters strongly prefer state-mandated property tax freezes (56 percent) over local discretion on property tax freezes (34 percent). However, voters are evenly divided between the arguments on state-mandated property tax freezes (46 percent) and targeted property tax freezes (44 percent). Self-identified Democrats (51 percent targeted freeze, 41 percent total freeze), Black voters (49 percent targeted freeze, 39 percent total freeze), and college educated men (51 percent targeted freeze, 43 percent total freeze) are among some audiences that express a preference for targeted freezes over total freezes, but it is important for progressives to recognize how property-tax sensitive Pennsylvania voters, and how much pull the state-mandated property tax freeze has among voters today.

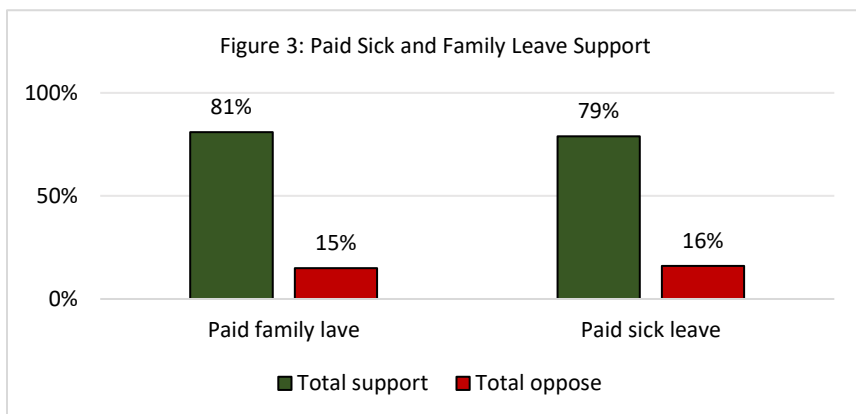
## Electorate Open to a Progressive Working People’s Agenda

The Pennsylvanian electorate is broadly open to a litany of working people’s policies, including a \$15/hour minimum wage. A plurality of voters believes a fifteen dollar an hour minimum wage would help Pennsylvania’s economy (47 percent), while 31 percent of voters believe it would hurt Pennsylvania’s economy and 15 percent believe it would make no difference.

Pennsylvania voters are very responsive to messages advocating for an increase in the minimum wage. This is particularly the case when the message is framed in the context of the coronavirus as half of voters say they find a message centered on frontline workers to be very convincing (50 percent very

convincing, 75 percent total convincing), specifically focusing on an argument that janitors, grocery store, and hospital workers deserve higher pay since they are keeping families fed and healthy throughout the pandemic. Similarly, 71 percent of voters find an argument about Pennsylvanians working multiple jobs to make ends meet to be convincing (49 percent very convincing), and 69 percent of voters find an argument about Pennsylvanians living under the poverty line despite working 40 hours a week to be convincing (46 percent very convincing).

Near consensus public opinion emerges around support for paid family leave and paid sick leave in Pennsylvania during the coronavirus pandemic. Over 4-in-5 voters support Pennsylvania establishing a paid family leave program that provides a guaranteed basic paycheck for workers who need to take time off in the wake of the coronavirus,



and nearly half of the electorate *strongly* supports this measure (48 percent strongly support, 81 percent total support). Likewise, 79 percent of voters support requirements for employers to provide paid sick leave for employees who are unable to work during the coronavirus crisis, with over half of the electorate *strongly* supporting this requirement (52 percent strongly support).

The Pennsylvania electorate also believes that state government should make it easier for employees to come together and collectively negotiate for wages, benefits, and safe working conditions. Nearly 7-in-10 voters believe it should be easier for employees to collectively bargain (69 percent), with over 1-in-3 voters believing it should be *much* easier (36 percent). In comparison, fewer than 1-in-5 voters believe it should be harder for employees to collectively bargain (19 percent).

### Voters Divided on Solutions to Pennsylvania’s Public-School Budgeting Crisis

The Pennsylvania electorate is divided on solutions to the public-school budgeting shortfall caused by the recent economic turndown in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Forty-four percent of voters prefer state government to increase taxes to fill funding gaps (21 percent much more), while 45 percent of voters prefer districts to make large cuts to their budgets (26 percent much more). While Democrats prefer increased taxes by a 37-point margin (62 to 25 percent), independents (40 percent taxes, 50 percent cuts), and Republicans (25 percent taxes, 64 percent cuts) prefer budget cuts. That said, voters of color (58 percent taxes, 28 percent cuts), younger women (51 percent taxes, 32 percent cuts), and voters in urban census blocks (54 percent taxes, 33 percent cuts) strongly prefer increased taxes.

Despite the split opinion on what to do about the budget crisis, we find that voters are very concerned about many of the potential outcomes associated with cuts to state aid for public schools, including large-scale staff cuts (52 percent very concerning, 77 percent total concerning), increased school property taxes (51 percent very, 78 percent total), and cuts to technology access for lower income students (50 percent very, 77 percent total). Concerns that rank relatively lower on voters’ lists, though still salient, include cuts to sanitation (48 percent very, 75 percent total), increased class sizes (47

percent very, 73 percent total), cuts to electives (43 percent very, 70 percent total), and cuts to extracurriculars (37 percent very, 67 percent total).

Voters residing in rural census blocks were read an additional concern about consolidating and closing school districts in rural areas, and we find that this ranks relatively lower on rural voters' lists of concerns. Rural voters' concerns about property taxes (59 percent very, 83 percent total), increased class sizes (46 percent very, 72 percent total), and cuts to technology (44 percent very, 74 percent total) outpace their concern for school consolidation and closings (38 percent very, 67 percent total). In a similar exercise, voters in urban census blocks were read an additional concern about severe budget cuts to historically underfunded districts with high percentages of students of color. We find that urban voters are just as concerned with these severe budget cuts (59 percent very, 80 percent total) as they are about teacher lay-offs (64 percent very, 82 percent total) and technology cuts (60 percent very, 79 percent total).

Following exposure to these potential outcomes the debate shifts and 49 percent of voters indicate they prefer tax increases to fill funding gaps (25 percent much more) while 41 percent of voters still prefer budget cuts (24 percent much more). Exposure to the various outcomes helps tighten the debate among independents (47 percent taxes, 46 percent cuts) and suburban voters (48 percent taxes, 43 percent cuts), and it helps to intensify support for tax increases among Black voters (76 percent taxes, 15 percent cuts) and younger women (63 percent taxes, 26 percent cuts).

### Democracy Reform Agenda Broadly Popular, Particularly Among Black Voters

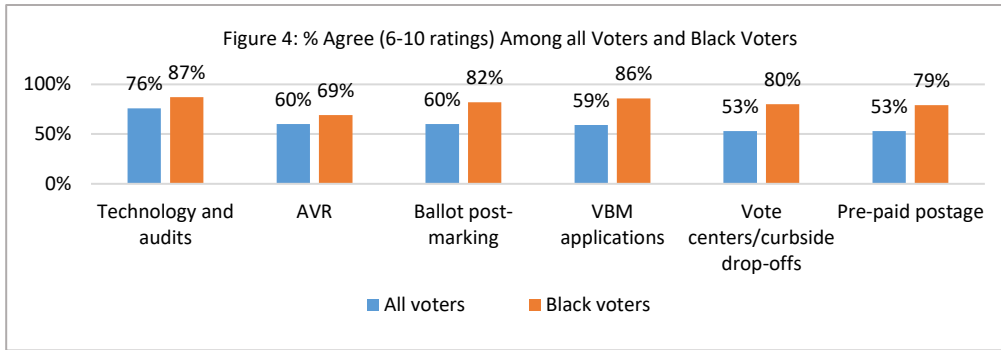
Voters were presented with various Democracy reforms and were asked to rate each on a scale from zero to ten, where ten means they strongly agree with the reform. Overall, we find that majorities of voters agree with each of the reforms tested in the poll, and some of the strongest agreement stems from Black voters. Investments in election technology and conducting mandatory audits surfaces as the top reform tested in the poll, with 76 percent of the overall electorate agreeing<sup>2</sup> (8.0 mean rating) with this reform and 87 percent of Black voters agreeing with it (8.7 mean rating).

Also salient is the creation of an automatic voter registration program in Pennsylvania – 60 percent of the electorate agrees with this reform (6.8 mean rating). The creation of an AVR program is quite popular across the partisan spectrum, as majorities of Democrats (68 percent agree), independents (57 percent agree), and Republicans (54 percent agree) all agree with it. However, AVR is the least popular reform among Black voters, while still receiving 69 percent agreement from this audience (7.5 mean rating).

Several vote-by-mail reforms were also tested, and they receive solid support from the electorate. Nearly 3-in-5 voters agree that state government should send mail-in ballot applications to all registered voters (59 percent, 6.4 mean), and Black voters almost unanimously agree with this reform (86 percent, 8.6 mean). Likewise, 3-in-5 voters agree that mail-in ballots postmarked on or before Election Day should be counted up until seven days after the election (60 percent, 6.7 mean), and over 4-in-5 Black voters agree with this reform as well (82 percent agree, 8.2 mean).

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<sup>2</sup> Ratings 6-10 mean agree, ratings 0-4 mean disagree, and a rating of 5 means neutral.



A majority of voters also agree with the creation of community vote centers and designated curbside ballot drop-offs – 53 percent of the overall electorate agrees with this reform (6.1 mean) while 80 percent of Black voters agree with it (8.0 mean). Furthermore, requiring state government to provide prepaid postage for all Pennsylvanians who want to vote by mail is slightly less popular among voters, but still receives 53 percent agreement from the overall electorate and 79 percent agreement from Black voters.

## Appendix A: Survey Methodology

TargetSmart designed this multi-modal survey. Six hundred interviews (637 weighted) were conducted via professional telephone agents (382 on wireless phones, 218 on landlines), and 600 interviews (563 weighted) were conducted online among panelists who were matched to the TargetSmart voter file. In total, the survey reached 1,200 respondents who indicated they were 18 years or older and registered to vote in Pennsylvania. The survey was conducted from May 16 - 21, 2020. Quotas were designed to reflect the demographic and geographic distribution of likely 2020 voters in Pennsylvania. The data were weighted by gender, age, race, party registration, TargetSmart High School Only Score, TargetSmart Presidential General Turnout Score, and region by county to ensure an accurate reflection of the population.

The credibility interval for this survey, the theoretical margin of error for a blended-methodology poll that relies partially on telephone-based probability sampling, and partially on non-probability based online panel sampling, is  $\pm 2.8\%$ . The credibility interval for subgroups is larger and varies. Some frequencies may not add to up 100% and some differences and value combinations may appear to be off by 1-2 percentage points -- both of which are due to rounding.

A base sample of 1,200 respondents was augmented by an oversample of 100 African American voters in Pennsylvania, all conducted via professional live telephone agents. Oversample respondents screened into the survey and were only fielded the democracy battery (Q.25) and demographics. The oversample respondents are reflective of the demographic and geographic distribution of African American likely 2020 voters in Pennsylvania. The oversample data were not weighted. The margin of error for the African American oversample is  $\pm 9.8\%$ .

## Appendix B: Messaging

Q.13 Next, I am going to read you a series of statements about health care and the coronavirus pandemic. Please tell whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

A. Americans infected with coronavirus should be guaranteed comprehensive testing and treatment without any out of pocket costs regardless of whether they are insured or not.

B. (SPLIT A) Americans should have widespread access to free testing to determine if they have been infected with coronavirus.

C. (SPLIT B) Americans should have widespread access to free testing to determine if they have been infected with coronavirus and once a vaccine for coronavirus is approved by the FDA, Americans should have access to it at no cost.

D. (SPLIT A) State government should impose penalties on local governments and businesses that refuse to comply with social distancing recommendations made by doctors and other public health officials.

E. (SPLIT B) Governor Wolf should impose penalties on local governments and businesses that refuse to comply with social distancing recommendations made by doctors and other public health officials.

F. (SPLIT A) The federal government was unprepared to handle a public health crisis like the coronavirus pandemic.

G. (SPLIT B) State and local governments in Pennsylvania were unprepared to handle a public health crisis like the coronavirus pandemic.

H. The federal government is not doing enough to provide doctors, nurses, and health care providers on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic with the resources and protective gear they need to protect themselves and their patients.

Q.14 Okay, now I am going to read you a series of statements about the economy and the coronavirus pandemic. Please tell whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

A. Pennsylvania state government should suspend and forgive mortgage and rent payments for Pennsylvanians to relieve some of the economic burdens families are facing during the coronavirus pandemic.

B. (SPLIT A) Pennsylvania state government should create a relief package for small businesses throughout the state that can no longer operate during the pandemic and are at financial risk.

C. (SPLIT B) Pennsylvania state government should create a relief package for small businesses throughout the state that can no longer operate during the pandemic and are at financial risk, but small businesses should only be able to get government financial assistance if they continue paying all of their staff and pledge to avoid layoffs.

D. Pennsylvania state government should expand unemployment benefits throughout the state so more people qualify for benefits if they became unemployed in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

E. Corporations and big businesses should be spending their bailout money and the big tax cuts they received from President Trump's tax bill on their workers in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, not on stock buybacks and big bonuses for top level executives.



Q.16 Next I am going to read you several arguments some people have made about raising the minimum wage in Pennsylvania. After each argument, I'd like you to tell me if you find it to be a very convincing, somewhat convincing, a little convincing, or not at all convincing reason to raise the minimum wage in Pennsylvania.

A. (SPLIT A) Pennsylvania's minimum wage of just seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hour means Pennsylvanians making the minimum wage who work forty hours a week make just fifteen thousand dollars a year and live under the poverty line, meaning they are eligible for government assistance. Raising the minimum wage will lift people out of poverty and save taxpayers money.

B. (SPLIT B) Pennsylvania's minimum wage of just seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hour means Pennsylvanians making the minimum wage must work two or three jobs just to make ends meet. People who already work hard for forty to fifty hours a week should not have to take on additional jobs to pay for essentials like food, housing, and medicine.

C. Many of the courageous and essential front-line workers who are helping Pennsylvania families deal with the coronavirus crisis -- like janitors, hospital, grocery store, and pharmacy workers - are paid the minimum wage of just seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hour. If they didn't deserve a raise before the pandemic, they definitely deserve one today as they keep the public fed and healthy through the crisis.

Q.22 Next, I am going to read you some potential outcomes that are likely to happen if Pennsylvania's public school districts do not receive emergency funding from the state. Please tell me whether each outcome would be very concerning, somewhat concerning, a little concerning, or not concerning at all to you.

A. Public school districts being forced to cut all elective classes like music and art.

B. Public school districts being forced to cut all extracurricular activities including all sports.

C. Public school districts being forced to lay off roughly 20 percent of their teachers in addition to thousands of janitors, school nurses, and school safety personnel.

D. Public school districts being forced to cut custodial and janitorial staff members, resulting in inadequate sanitation in our children's schools.

E. Public school districts being forced to raise school property taxes to the highest legally permissible level.

F. Public school districts being forced to dramatically increase class sizes to as many as fifty students in a single class.

G. Public school districts being forced to cut access to technology for low income students, those who need it the most during the pandemic when remote learning is essential.

H. (ASK IF TSMART\_URBANICITY=U5 OR U6) Historically underfunded urban school districts with high percentages of students of color being forced to slash their budgets even more.

I. (ASK IF TSMART\_URBANICITY=R1 OR R2) Rural school districts being forced to consolidate or close schools altogether.

Q.25 Switching gears a bit, I'm going to read you some statements about democracy, politics, and elections in Pennsylvania. Please rate each statement on a scale from zero to ten in which ten means you AGREE, and zero means you DISAGREE. The higher the number, the more you AGREE with the statement, the lower the number the more you DISAGREE with it. The number five means you neither agree nor disagree. So again, to be clear, six through ten means you agree and zero through four means you disagree.

A. We should invest in new election technology, conduct ongoing mandatory audits, and have a hard copy record as back up to protect against hacking and election tampering.

B. Pennsylvania state government should create a voter registration program that automatically adds all verified and eligible voters to the voting rolls and adds an additional level of verification to our current voter registration system.

C. Pennsylvania state government should send mail-in ballot applications to all registered voters so everyone has the option to safely cast their ballots from home during the coronavirus pandemic.

D. Pennsylvania state government should require and fund county boards of elections to provide community vote centers and designated places for curbside ballot drop-off.

E. Due to the large number of voters applying for ballots near the deadline to vote by mail, all ballots post-marked on or before Election Day should be counted up until seven days after the election.

F. Pennsylvania state government should provide prepaid postage to all Pennsylvanians who want to vote by mail.