GOVERNMENT MATTERS

E-NEWS OF NOTE FROM GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Questions About Questions?

How do questions for voters get on a ballot?

Every state has some form of the legislative process which allows the government to place issues on the ballot. Citizen-led initiatives get on the ballot when proponents of a proposed law or constitutional amendment gather the required number of signatures from registered voters to bring the issue to a public vote.

Citizens can petition to place initiatives on the statewide ballot in 26 states. Depending on the state, citizens may use initiatives to propose statutes or constitutional amendments. Statewide initiatives may be direct or indirect. Direct initiatives are placed on the ballot directly after signature petitions are certified. Indirect initiatives must go before the state legislature following signature verification, and the legislature may choose to either enact the initiative or send the issue to the ballot.

Proponents of ordinances or charter amendments can also collect signatures to put local initiatives on the ballot in certain cities, counties, districts, and other local jurisdictions throughout the country.

The process of getting an initiative on the ballot varies by state, and there is no federal law that addresses the state initiative process. While each state requires people to collect signatures, the number of signatures, geographic distribution of signatures, and collection timeframe vary.

Here are four questions that will appear on the Pennsylvania ballot in May.

All Pennsylvania voters — yes, that includes independents and minor-party members — will be asked to consider four ballot questions on May 18. Two of them are about as non-controversial as possible. The other two? A different story.

Question 1 is a statewide referendum (as opposed to a constitutional amendment) that would allow municipal fire departments or companies with paid personnel, as well as EMS companies, to apply for a loan through an existing state-run program for volunteer companies. The money can be used to modernize or purchase equipment.   The measure passed the legislature with unanimous support from Democrats and Republicans. The Pennsylvania Fire Emergency Services Institute is urging a "yes" vote, as is the Pennsylvania Career Fire Chiefs Association.

Question 2 is a proposed constitutional amendment that would allow a majority of lawmakers to terminate a disaster declaration at any time, without the governor's consent. Currently, only Pennsylvania's governor can end a disaster declaration, like the one the state is currently under to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. State law gives the General Assembly the option to pass a resolution to terminate the declaration, though the state Supreme Court ruled last year the governor still gets the final say. The legislature can overturn a governor's veto with support from two-thirds of members. This proposal, borne out of a contentious response to the Wolf administration's approach to the pandemic, has been championed by the House and Senate Republican caucuses, with support from a few Democrats. The Pennsylvania chapter of the conservative political group Americans for Prosperity has also launched a campaign to urge a "yes" vote on the question. Most Democrats including Gov. Tom Wolf are urging Pennsylvanians to vote "no," as is the grassroots Democratic group Turn PA Blue.

Question 3 asks voters to amend the Pennsylvania Constitution to limit a disaster declaration to 21 days. It could only then be continued with the consent of the legislature. At the moment, a disaster declaration lasts 90 days and can be renewed as many times as deemed necessary by the governor. The measure would also prevent the governor from issuing a new disaster declaration based on the same or similar facts. Who is in favor? Who is opposed? The same parties as question 2.

Question 4 amends the Pennsylvania Constitution to enshrine discrimination protections to Pennsylvanians based on race and ethnicity. This amendment is supported by Democratic and Republican lawmakers.