TWO WEEKS OF BALLOT PREPROCESSING: A Small Change that Brings a Huge Benefit to Voters and Clerks

The Michigan Legislature must extend the ballot counting and processing period to at least 14 days before Election Day.

BACKGROUND

Michigan voters deserve quicker absentee ballot counting and processing. Three days after the 2020 presidential election, as Michigan voters still awaited results, a software update issue in Antrim County set off a wildfire of misinformation. Human error by Antrim’s county clerk, who had worked long hours since the election tabulating absentee ballots, caused erroneous reporting of unofficial results.

This report was then used to fuel false claims while the official results of the election were still being compiled. It did not have to be this way. Current infrastructure did not allow ballots to be counted quickly in 2020, causing:

- **UNNECESSARY CHALLENGES FOR CLERKS**
- **LONGER WAIT TIMES FOR RESULTS**
- **DISINFORMATION**

A long counting period, stemming from the tabulation of absentee ballots, which in many cases arrived long before Election Day, risks avoidable fatigue and mistakes.
PROPOSAL

Legislators must allow local clerks to process and count absentee ballots for at least two weeks before Election Day, rather than forcing them to wait until Election Day is almost upon them.

Michigan currently lags behind the seven-day minimum suggested period that nonpartisan experts like the Bipartisan Policy Center recommend, allowing preprocessing only 10 hours before Election Day. This is not an adequate amount of time for the clerks, especially when they are busy preparing for Election Day itself during this time period. The Michigan Legislature has the power to make a small tweak to our election system that pays big dividends and changes the conditions that led to a tortured tabulation process in 2020.

Michigan can learn from states that preprocessed absentee ballots and delivered speedy elections results last year. Florida, which allows up to 22 days of preprocessing before Election Day, was able to quickly deliver results in 2020. Florida elections officials can process and check ballots for errors, before running the ballot through a tabulator which counts the vote. Results are sensibly not released prior to Election Day.
Legislators put the local clerks who run elections in a no win situation:

“(W)e weren’t ready for the onslaught of early and mail-in votes. And there were big bonuses of absentee ballots that couldn’t be processed in time because I wouldn’t allow them to process them early.”

Michigan Senate Majority Leader, Mike Shirkey

Michigan clerks and voters deserve a similar system. Before the 2020 election, a group of 17 clerks from communities across Michigan sent a letter asking the legislature to allow ballot preprocessing, and warning of pending disaster under the current restrictions. The letter detailed that:

“While even one day of preprocessing before Election Day would provide some help, many clerks are busy preparing for the logistics of the next day’s in-person voting. We believe that allowing clerks to have seven days of preprocessing before Election Day is the wisest policy and would give overwhelmed jurisdictions the ability to conduct the election in the most safe and secure manner possible.”

Asking for seven days of preprocessing was reasonable to try and avert a disaster before the election. Lawmakers can act now to make lasting change to the system. At least two weeks of preprocessing would properly allow clerks to balance all of their duties while effectively serving voters.

**THE LEGISLATURE CAN’T REPEAT THE SAME MISTAKES OF THE LAST ELECTION**

Voters and clerks deserve a well run election administration system free from needless restrictions. But currently, the legislature isn’t advancing serious proposals to fix this flaw and allow two weeks of preprocessing. SB 283, for example, would simply extend the same flawed process Michigan used last election, and not allow clerks to actually tabulate results.