



How States Can Strengthen America's Voting Systems

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Americans want fair elections. They want to know that all valid votes are counted correctly, and that voting lists and election procedures empower every eligible voter to vote – and no one who is ineligible. Americans agree: no side should be able to cheat, and no one should take away their right to vote. To achieve these goals, many states are taking popular, bipartisan steps to modernize and secure election systems. University researchers suggest several common-sense methods that can help.

Method 1: Modernize Voter Registration

Many states are replacing their outdated registration systems. Modern systems ensure that registration lists are comprehensive, accurate, and secure.

Streamline voter registration: The Voter Registration Act of 1993 – often called “Motor Voter” – requires states to allow voter registration at motor vehicle agencies and state benefit offices, and to let people send in voter registration forms by mail. Twenty-six years later, this law is less reflective of the American experience. Fewer people travel to states offices, and people send far less mail, too. Automatic voter registration systems use secure, low cost systems to create comprehensive, up-to-date voter registration lists. When citizens engage with their government to get services, pay taxes, and update licenses and motor vehicle records, state systems instantly update addresses and voter information. Moreover, eligible citizens not already registered to vote are registered automatically – with the option to opt out if they wish. States with automatic voter registration can participate in ERIC, a data exchange between states that can help automatically update registrations when registered voters move between states. Specifically, this system helps add registration data in the voter’s new state and marks the old record for deletion in their previous state.

Consider adopting online voter registration: A large number of states have established online voter registration to minimize data entry errors and reduce administrative costs.

Encourage new apps: The bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration noted that officials can encourage civic nonprofits, schools, tech start-ups, and major corporations to create new apps to help voters find polling places, request absentee ballots, update their registration information, and check on the status of provisional ballots.

Restore voting rights to former prisoners: Some 2.5 million U.S. citizens are barred from voting due to felony convictions. The notion that a person who has served their sentence should be permanently barred for voting contradicts American ideals of justice and redemption. Some states allow former felons to vote in theory, but in practice these rules present a maze of bureaucratic hurdles. States can instead consider fully restoring voting rights, so that former felons can register and vote in the same ways as other citizens. On Election Day 2018, over 60 percent of Florida voters in Florida backed a state constitutional amendment to restore voting rights to over one million people.

Method 2: Prevent Election Day Problems

Set up secure, convenient ways to vote: People should not have to travel far or stand in lines for hours to vote. Many states save money and reduce voting lines by mailing ballots directly to citizens to let them vote at home. Other states ensure that there are sufficient numbers of voting machines and poll workers. Polls are best located in places where people live and work, such as transportation nodes, city and town centers, libraries, and colleges.

Vote on paper: In all cases, voting on paper ballots is considered the best-in-class standard for an accurate count. Random audits are a best practice to ensure the integrity of the count.

Allow registrations and corrections on Election Day: Over twenty states, including Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire and Wyoming, allow election day registration for eligible citizens. Many states also allow registered voters who have moved within their state to update their addresses on Election Day. These reforms increase voter participation and reduce the use of provisional ballots, which create administrative headaches for election officials and are often not counted.

Set registration deadlines close to Election Day: Registration deadlines vary widely. States that choose not to pursue Election Day registration can set cut-offs close to Election Day.

Method 3: Innovate

Hold fewer elections: Among democracies, the United States and Switzerland hold the most frequent elections – and have the lowest average turnout. Compared to midterm and presidential elections, off-year local elections see a drop in voter turnout as much as 40 percent. Evidence shows that low turnout favors special interests. States as varied as California and Oklahoma have moved to synchronize local contests with even-year November elections to reduce costs and increase participation.

Allow voting on weekends and evenings: Early voting works best when weekend and evening hours are offered close to Election Day at properly staffed voting centers.

Celebrate voting and freedom: Local governments, schools, universities, and businesses can do their part to strengthen America's elections. They can work together to support modernizing elections, as outlined above; create plans to ensure that all eligible citizens are accurately registered; and hold Election Day celebrations to honor the precious freedoms that Americans share and cherish.

For a list of scholars consulted, citations or further information, please contact Avi Green at avi@scholars.org.