



How Progressives Saved Election Day Voter Registration in Maine

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The state of Maine has a proud tradition of high voter turnout, in the top three of all U.S. states along with Minnesota and Wisconsin. One factor boosting participation is the right to register to vote on Election Day – first established in 1973 by a noncontroversial, bipartisan vote of the Maine legislature. In 2008 and 2010, a combined total of nearly 70,000 Maine citizens took advantage of this convenience and registered at the polls.

Alas, even well-established voting practices have recently come under attack. In Maine as in many other U.S. states, a conservative Republican governor and legislators elected in 2010 introduced measures to safeguard the “integrity of the vote” against unsubstantiated “voter fraud.” In June 2011, with all Democrats opposed, Maine’s GOP-led legislature voted overwhelmingly to end election day registration.

But the story did not end there. On the very same day that Governor Paul LePage signed the controversial law, the Protect Maine Votes (PMV) coalition started gathering more than 70,000 signatures to force a “People’s Veto” referendum to overturn it. Fighting to defend the law, Maine Republicans raised substantial outside resources, including a \$250,000 contribution from a group with ties to the Koch brothers. Nevertheless, the effort to restore Maine’s election day voter registration prevailed in November 2011 by a remarkable 20-point margin (60% to 40%), with majorities in every state legislative district.

Steps in a Successful Campaign

To secure a referendum, thousands of signatures had to be gathered from registered voters, and this could not be done the easy way at the polls, because no election was imminent. Once the referendum was scheduled, PMV had to respond to accusations and false charges and get people to the polls. Here is how the campaign succeeded:

- The coalition was fast off the mark, building upon efforts to oppose the law before it passed. With the Maine League of Women Voters and the Maine Civil Liberties Union in the lead, PMV started with 18 groups and grew to include 23 (listed at the end of this brief).
- Coordinated through a board. PMV raised more money than the opposition and used professional techniques and leaders with authority to hold press conferences, respond to opponents, place advertisements, and coordinate grassroots campaigns.
- A tactically smart decision about the goal was made at the start. The Maine Town and City Clerks Association had testified against ending election day registration, but had supported a cut-off of early voting several days before election day. PMV decided to focus only on restoring election day registration, so they could point to the clerks’ support.
- A division of labor melded diverse organizational resources. To gather more than the required 57,277 referendum signatures, over 1,000 volunteers and staff were deployed by organizations with community roots like the Maine People’s Alliance, Opportunity Maine, Equality Maine, and the labor unions. Other groups contributed knowledge about the correct process and organized the petitions by town so they could be quickly certified. Engage Maine, which links progressive groups, provided some key leadership staff.
- Although PMV groups were well-aware of the nationwide conservative push to narrow access to the vote, after internal discussion they decided to avoid national references and focus on their own state. Maine people were used in ads and appeals, and the core message invoked bipartisan state traditions: same day voter registration has worked for more than thirty years, the message said. By making it easier to vote, this practice has helped Maine achieve remarkably high turnout. Taking it away would

make voting harder for people with jobs and family responsibilities – and there is no reason to change.

Broader Lessons

The 2011 Maine campaign to restore election day registration had features specific to the state and its voting rights challenge, but progressives fighting against undemocratic measures can learn from the underlying principles:

- Build organizational infrastructure continuously, including groups with strong local and community roots. Long-term investments in such groups and collaborations are worthwhile.
- For a particular campaign, build a broad coalition that links organizations with different resources and capacities, including community-based groups and professionally run organizations. When possible, include groups with a nonpartisan public reputation.
- Raise money locally and nationally, but control how it is used locally.
- In a sustained campaign, combine paid media ads with grassroots mobilization.
- Create lean coordinating structures with leaders who have the authority to make rapid decisions, so the campaign can make adjustments, and respond to opponents and take advantage of their missteps.
- Answer false claims with clear evidence to build credibility with the public and press.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate leadership, campaign metrics, and division of labor.
- Devise a focused, consistent message built around the experiences of real people and themes that resonate in local culture.

PMV partners were: Engage Maine, Maine People's Alliance, Maine Civil Liberties Union, Maine League of Conservation Voters, League of Women Voters of Maine, Maine League of Young Voters, Opportunity Maine, Maine Equal Justice Partners, EqualityMaine, Maine Women's Lobby, Maine Education Association, MSEA-SEIU, Speaking Up for Us, Disability Rights Center, Preble Street Resource Center, Homeless Voices for Justice, Maine AFL-CIO, Maine Chapter of the Sierra Club, AARP Maine, Teamsters Local 340, NAACP of Maine, OneMaine, and Planned Parenthood of Northern New England.