



How Registration Reforms Can Boost Voter Participation in Georgia

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Amazingly, Americans vote at much lower rates than the citizens of 32 out of 34 of the world's industrialized democracies. According to statistics kept by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, voter turnout averages 70% in the other advanced democracies, but only 48% in the United States. And participation rises to about half of U.S. voters only in presidential election years. In mid-term elections when only Congressional and state and local candidates are on the ballot, U.S. voter turnout plummets to about 35%. Not only is the U.S. record of voter participation worrisome overall, but overwhelming evidence reveals lower than average rates of turnout for minorities, young adults, and people with relatively low incomes and less education. Entire swatches of citizens have very little voice in the political process. Yet all Americans, regardless of background or beliefs, hold to the ideal that our democracy should represent all citizens, not just some. To fulfill this shared ideal, we need to pinpoint causes of low voter participation – and support common-sense reforms to boost engagement.

Hurdles for Voters Contribute to Low Turnout

What causes low turnout? Contrary to what some people suppose, low American voter turnout is not the result of an unusual lack of political interest. Some features of the U.S. election system undercut turnout – such as the fact that we vote annually on workdays and usually must choose one of two candidates in a winner-take-all contest. Putting such issues aside, however, research points to various hurdles that U.S. states choose to put in front of citizens hoping to vote. Across the world, countries rarely require citizens to jump through separate sets of hoops before they vote. But most U.S. states require people to register to vote at a different time and place than they cast ballots; and in all but ten states, new voters, including those removed from the rolls for not voting in a few recent elections, must take special steps to register themselves at least 15 to 30 days prior to an election. In such states, citizens may wake on Election Day and want to vote, but they will not be able to do so if they failed to register – or check their registration status – well in advance of that day.

What effect do these separate registration requirements have on voter turnout in the United States?

- Nationally, a stunning 29% of citizens are not registered – meaning that nearly one-third of Americans cannot just go to the polls and vote on Election Day.
- A number of sophisticated studies have found that separate registration rules lower voter turnout between 2% and 8.7%.
- After a comprehensive survey, political scientist Marjorie Randon Hershey concludes that moving away from requirements that people register thirty days prior to Election Day would increase voter turnout by 3% to 9%.
- Many studies have found that registration hurdles have a disproportionate impact on poor, minority, and less educated citizens, compared to other would-be voters.

Available facts and analyses establish, in short, that separate registration rules do impede voter participation – and establish that much of America's low voter participation record is due to avoidable barriers rather than citizen apathy. Like other citizens, younger and poorer Americans care about political outcomes, but such people face various impediments to voting – including rules about registration and identification on Election Day that disproportionately affect them.

What Can Georgia Do?

How can we apply general knowledge to the current voting situation in Georgia? The state now requires that new voters and residents who have previously not voted go to an office and personally submit a registration application more than 30 days before the election in which they intend to vote. Would-be Georgia voters are required to provide a driver's license number or a number from a state-issued identification document. This requirement may seem fairly straightforward, but to get a driver's license or voter ID in Georgia, the applicant must provide multiple documents to prove both identity and legal residency. These must be presented in person at a Department of Motor Vehicles licensing center, (many of which are inaccessible via public transportation) and requires a two-stage process. Given these existing rules and procedures, some sensible reforms could ease and increase voter participation:

- **Georgia citizens should be allowed to register online.** Online registration was enacted by the legislature in 2012, but has, without legal justification, yet to be implemented by the Secretary of State. This legislated approach cuts administrative costs and allows each citizen's eligibility be confirmed almost instantly. Fully modern online systems can be available on tablets and smartphones as well as laptop or desktop computers.
- **Georgia citizens could remain registered even if they move within the state.** With portable registration, previous voters could show up at the polling place in their new community, show identification, fill out a form, and vote normally. This approach already works in Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Maryland, Ohio, and West Virginia.
- **Election Day registration could bring one-stop participation,** letting Georgia citizens who present the required identification to register and vote at the same time.
- **Georgia could make registration automatic.** As happens with juror lists, officials could take responsibility for maintaining voter lists. Any time a citizen interacts with state or local government, he or she would be automatically registered and placed on the eligible list.

The first measure is already law in Georgia, but not yet available; bills for the last three ideas have been proposed in the legislature. Given our country's poor record of voter participation, it's time to take these first steps.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from charts and figures published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the National Conference of State Legislatures.