

## HOW STATES CAN MODERNIZE VOTER REGISTRATION AND BOOST ELECTION TURNOUT

*by Avi Green, Scholars Strategy Network*

On August 14, 2012 Wisconsin held a primary election and Governor Scott Walker brought his son to the polls to register to vote and cast his ballot. Months later, Walker announced his intention to eliminate the very same Election Day Registration system his son had used. But his proposal sparked an avalanche of opposition – from election administrators, the League of Women Voters and civil rights groups, and Wisconsinites of all party persuasions – prompting the normally resolute Walker to drop the idea.

Walker's retreat was astute. During 2011 and 2012, voters in Maine and Minnesota resoundingly rejected moves to curtail the option their citizens have to register on Election Day, even as governors in other states signed Election Day Registration into law. This practice is very popular, and once it is in place people count on the convenience of being able to register and vote at the same place and time.

### Outmoded Voter Registration Systems

Voter participation in the United States is lower than in almost all other advanced democracies, and cumbersome, outmoded registration systems are a major contributing cause. States run voter registration and many of their systems are outdated and inaccurate. It may be the electronic era, but most Americans still have to register to vote using paper forms that are filled out by hand and submitted to election administrators who keep track of them at public expense. Every time a voter moves, he or she has to register again – even if the move is across the hall in a college dorm or into another apartment in the same complex.

Reduced and unequal voter participation is the predictable result. According to the Pew Center on the States, about one-quarter of all eligible U.S. citizens, some 51 million people, are not registered. Minorities, low-income people, young people, and citizens who rent rather than own homes are especially affected. In addition, one of every eight voters has an out-of-date registration that is no longer valid or contains inaccuracies that help to cause long lines and confusion on Election Day.

Improving voter registration systems would help to level the electoral playing field for all citizens, and it would also make voter lists more accurate, allowing political campaigns and civic organizations to reach out to voters. It is no coincidence that America's lowest levels of voter participation are found in states like Texas and Mississippi that have especially ineffective voter registration along with high levels of poverty and low levels of education.

### Four Ways States Can Boost Registration

States that want to maximize voter participation can ease registration in four ways:

***Allow Online Registration.*** According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 17 states either allow voters to register online or are about to do so. Voters like online registration, and it eliminates the need for election officials to enter data by hand. Signatures for many voters can be transferred from motor vehicle offices automatically. Unlike paper forms, online systems immediately tell the applicant if he or she is submitting incomplete information or making an error. The applicant can correct things at once or understand why he or she is not eligible to vote.

***Add Electronic Motor Voter Registration.*** The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 – popularly known as “Motor Voter” – mandated that states let citizens register to vote as they conduct transactions with motor vehicle registration centers or welfare offices. Unfortunately, most states still require citizens to come to a state office in person if they want to register to vote. As more government services go online, the effectiveness of Motor Voter wanes. The obvious solution is to incorporate online voter registration options into all state services. When citizens conduct online transactions with motor vehicle departments or state tax agencies or social benefit offices, their addresses and basic voter information should be automatically updated – or, if they are not registered, they should be given an immediate online opportunity to do so.

***Move the Registration Deadline Closer to Election Day.*** Some states in effect reduce voter participation by setting deadlines for registration far in advance of election days. Why does this matter? Most news media focus on coverage of candidates and issues in the weeks and days just before the election, and that is when candidates and parties and civic groups ramp up their efforts. Citizens who start paying attention when the drama heats up can find themselves ineligible to vote if the registration deadline passed weeks earlier.

***Best of All -- Institute Election Day Registration.*** Although online registration, electronic registration at state agencies, and a registration deadline close to Election Day are all good ways to increase the accuracy of the rolls and expand the number of people who can register easily and correctly, no system is perfect. There will still be a small number of people who want to vote on Election Day and discover they are not registered or learn that their record contains errors. That is why the gold standard for protecting the right to vote is Election Day Registration, already offered by eleven states and the District of Columbia. To register – or re-register – on the spot, citizens not on the voting lists can arrive at the polling place, show proof of residence, and sign an affidavit affirming their citizenship and eligibility. Election Day Registration has a 40-year track record of success in states like Maine, Minnesota and Wisconsin, where poll workers set up a separate table so that citizens with registration problems can fix them, while letting other citizens go ahead. Election Day Registration requires only one or two additional poll workers per precinct and has no upfront costs beyond printing forms and training.

### **Democracy Wins When Every Citizen Can Vote**

From the perspective of administrators, the best system combines an overall registration deadline close to Election Day to allow them to get the lists updated, with the back-up of same-day registration to ensure that no eligible citizen is denied the opportunity to vote. For citizens, Election Day Registration is truly a boon, and it boosts voter participation by four to eight percent. States as diverse as Montana, Iowa, Connecticut, and California have instituted same day registration in recent years, and additional states are sure to follow. There are few better ways for lawmakers to build an honorable legacy than by passing laws to ensure the right to vote for all Americans.