

WHY ARE 51 MILLION ELIGIBLE AMERICANS NOT REGISTERED TO VOTE?

Former U.S. Representative Lincoln Davis, of Tennessee, knows something about elections and government, yet this year when he went to polls in his hometown where he'd been voting since 1995, he was denied the right to vote.

“We walked in and they told me I was not a registered voter. I had been taken off the list . . . These are people who I grew up with. I told them I live here. I went to school about 20 yards away. . . . It's always been this way and today, for some reason, they change it. I had a sense of uneasiness when I was told that I was not allowed to vote. **They didn't offer me a provisional ballot**, or anything, just told me I wasn't registered. . . . He said I would have to re-register, and I told them I'm already registered, I'm not going to re-register. I'm a former member of Congress, state senator, House member, mayor and all my life, I've been involved in the community, coaching Little League, participating in Boy Scouts and serving on boards here, and I'm denied the right to vote. **It just doesn't make sense.**”

Representative Davis had been **improperly “purged” from the voting rolls**. If it can happen to a former Congressman, it can happen to anyone.

All this makes clear that a major focus for increasing citizen participation in elections should be to decrease the bureaucratic barriers to becoming, and remaining, registered to vote. Americans deserve an election system that is much more responsive to their needs, and that facilitates their participation in democratic governance.

1 WHO ISN'T REGISTERED?

- a. Today, approximately **51 million eligible Americans are still not registered to vote**. This represents almost **one in four eligible persons**, disproportionately low-income voters, people of color, and younger Americans. Among eligible voters, some 30 percent of African Americans, 40 percent of Hispanics, 45 percent of Asian Americans, and **41 percent of young adults** (age 18-24), were not registered to vote in the historic 2008 election.
- b. In the 2008 elections, **the voting rate for all eligible persons of voting age was only 64 percent**, while the voting rate for people who were registered to vote was 90 percent – showing that registration is key to turnout.
- c. In many states, pre-election registration deadlines of 25-30 days prior to the election have not been updated for decades; such deadlines may have been adopted long before the age of the Internet or computers, and no longer make sense in today's world.
- d. In the 2008 election, **2 to 3 million registered voters were prevented from voting because of various administrative problems**, and 9 million eligible Americans were not registered because of residency rules or registration deadlines.
- e. The number of people barred from voting in 2008 because of such problems **exceeded the**

popular vote margin of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.

2 WHAT IS SAME-DAY REGISTRATION?

Many states still impose lengthy pre-election voter registration deadlines that may have been established decades ago, despite the proven effect of [such deadlines in dampening voter participation](#).

Many citizens become most interested and engaged with the election in the last few weeks before Election Day, when candidate debates are taking place, just as registration deadlines may be closing in their state. Other voters who are already registered may lose eligibility merely because they move to a different neighborhood or county, or because of clerical errors with their registration, or because of [flawed and erroneous pre-election challenges to a voter's eligibility](#). If they fail to discover the problem prior to Election Day, when the registration deadline has passed, they may be unable to vote.

Eleven states, plus the District of Columbia, have now adopted Same Day Registration in order to ensure that eligible voters are not turned away because of errors with their registrations or failure to register in advance of Election Day. Same Day Registration eliminates arbitrary pre-election deadlines and allows voters to register and vote on the same day, making it a more convenient one-stop process and ensuring that eligible individuals who are not on the lists can register to vote, or correct inaccurate existing registration information. Same Day Registration means that voters no longer are without recourse when faced with registration problems that threaten their right to vote.

[Same Day Registration increases political participation](#), without undue costs or administrative burdens. States that allow Same Day Registration have consistently led the nation in voter participation. Indeed, [the top five states for voter turnout in 2008 all had Same Day Registration](#), and average voter turnout was seven percentage points higher in Same Day Registration

states in the 2008 presidential elections. [North Carolina witnessed the greatest increase in voter turnout over the previous presidential election](#), one year after Same Day Registration was adopted.

Experts have projected substantial voter turnout increases in states that have considered adopting Same Day Registration, with average voting projected to rise by over 4 to nearly 9 percent. Even greater increases are estimated for young people, low-income populations, people of color, newly naturalized citizens, and those who have recently changed residences.

Same Day Registration is so popular with voters that an overwhelming majority of Maine citizens used a so-called "People's Veto" on the November 2011 ballot [to reinstate Same Day Registration](#) after the nearly forty-year old program was repealed by the state legislature.

The convenience and accessibility of Same Day Registration should be available to voters throughout the country. The Voter Empowerment Act of 2012, H.R. 5799, introduced by Rep. John Lewis and 140 co-sponsors, would provide for Same Day Registration throughout the country, along with many other pro-voter reforms.

3 IF I JUST MOVED, AM I STILL ELIGIBLE TO VOTE?

The need to update registration when a person moves is another major source of red tape in our mobile society. [Almost 36.5 million US residents moved between 2011 and 2012](#). Low-income individuals are twice as likely to move as those above the poverty line. Young people, moreover, are more likely to move than any other demographic group; between 2011 and 2012, [21 percent of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 moved](#).

Voter registration should become portable and permanent for persons who move within a state, by automatic updates to registration records as citizens change their address. Because all states now are required to have statewide voter registration databas-

es, there should be no need for persons to register anew each time they move within a state. States such as Colorado and Minnesota have [procedures that help voters keep their registration current when they move](#). Reforms to make voter registration portable and permanent for persons who move within a state also are part of The Voter Empowerment Act of 2012 that is pending in Congress.

4 HOW COULD WE MODERNIZE THE REGISTRATION SYSTEM?

Our current system is archaic and inefficient, and badly needs modernization. It still relies on handwritten, paper forms that that can result in clerical errors and is [needlessly expensive for states to administer](#). It leaves the burden on the citizen to negotiate the registration process and to update her registration again and again each time she moves.

We need policy changes that put the responsibility for registering voters squarely on the government by automating the registration process. Under a modernized voter registration system, eligible citizens interacting with the government will be asked if they consent to being registered to vote, and will be added to the rolls through a paperless process if they do. This shifts the administrative burden off of the individual voter and onto the government to register eligible citizens to vote. Delaware has implemented a version of this by providing for paperless voter registration for persons [interacting with the motor vehicle bureau or public assistance offices](#). ■

This Explainer was compiled from a briefing paper authored by Brenda Wright which can be found at the following web address: <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/FreeTheVote-Brief.pdf>