



Millions to the Polls

PRACTICAL POLICIES
TO FULFILL THE FREEDOM TO VOTE
FOR ALL AMERICANS

SAME DAY REGISTRATION

J. MIJIN CHA & LIZ KENNEDY

SAME DAY REGISTRATION

- Voter registration deadlines present an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy that impedes the freedom to vote.
- Eligible voters should be able to register and vote on the same day.
- Same Day Registration should be made available during any early voting periods up through and including Election Day.



One of the chief impediments to full voter participation is our unnecessarily cumbersome process of voter registration. Barriers are in place from the very beginning of the process, including requiring citizens to actively register to vote and to continually update their registration each time they move. Above and beyond the requirement to register, most states cut off registration to potential voters in the month just before Election Day.¹ This means that eligible voters who do not register under the arbitrarily set deadlines will not be able to vote.

People miss registration deadlines for a number of reasons, including having recently moved or being unaware of the cutoff date. As a result, millions of eligible people are unable to participate in elections. The number of unregistered voters is substantial—in 2012, 25 percent of eligible voters, roughly 51 million Americans, were not registered.^{2,3} Moreover, even those who do register in advance can find themselves left off the rolls on election day because of mistakes in processing or flawed voter purges.

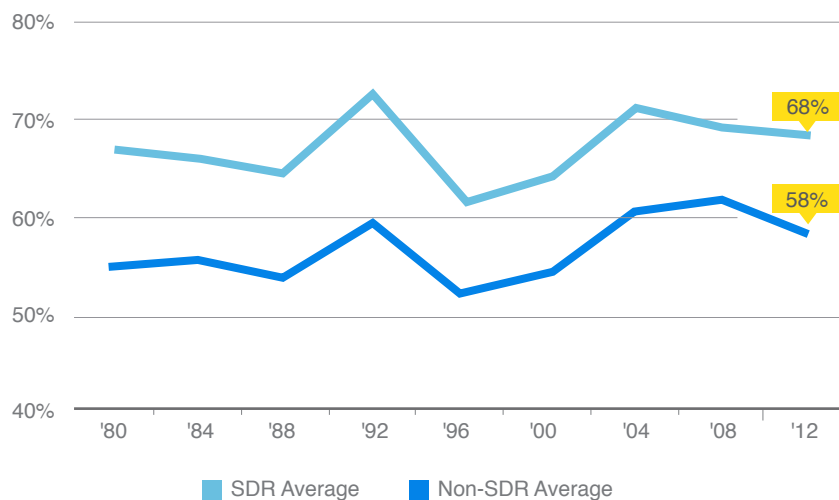
There is a simple solution that can help increase registration rates, and in turn, voting rates. Same Day Registration (SDR) allows eligible voters to register to vote and cast their ballots on the same day, at the same time. SDR reduces voting bureaucracy by eliminating registration deadlines, allows registration issues to be fixed on site, and modernizes our registration process to better serve our the needs of a busy and mobile society.

Far from being an untested idea, SDR is a tried and true method to fix registration issues and increase voter turnout. SDR was pioneered by Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin in the early-to-mid 1970s.⁴ In the last decade, the number of SDR states has more than doubled from six to thirteen, plus the District of Columbia.⁵ In just the last five years, Same Day Registration was

adopted in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Maryland, Montana, North Carolina, and the District of Columbia, though it has recently been repealed in North Carolina.⁶

These states' experience with SDR shows that it works. States with Same Day Registration consistently lead the nation in voter participation and the average voter turnout was over 10 percentage points higher in SDR states than in other states in 2012.⁷ Four out of five of the states with the highest turnout in the 2012 election allowed people to register and vote on the same day – Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and Iowa.⁸ Overall, nearly 1.5 million Americans used Same Day Registration to vote in the 2012 election.⁹

Turnout Rates in SDR vs. Non-SDR States, 1980–2012, Presidential Election Years



Same Day Registration also offers those who have recently moved an opportunity to register and vote with their new address. Geographically mobile voters, who are often lower-income citizens, young voters, and voters of color,¹⁰ are not a small population. Census data shows that over 36 million people in America moved between 2011 and 2012, nearly half of whom had low incomes.¹¹ In addition, young adults of all income levels also move more frequently—for school, for jobs, for family. SDR could increase youth turnout in presidential elections by as much as 14 percentage points.¹² It can also increase voter participation among all voters of color,¹³ as borne out by the experience of North Carolina (see sidebar).

*Reversal of Same Day
Registration in North Carolina;
attacks in Minnesota & Maine
& successful defense.*

Unfortunately, the attack on voting rights has included attempts to dismantle this successful tool for political participation. Conservative political leaders in several states have moved to repeal Same Day Registration in recent years.²⁵ Voters in Maine defeated repeal efforts in 2011. An SDR repeal bill was vetoed by Montana's Governor Schweitzer in 2011, but the legislature has placed an SDR repeal question on the ballot in November 2014.

As part of its recent rollback of voting rights North Carolina ended its highly successful Same Day Registration program, in addition to enacting a strict photo ID requirement (e.g. no student ID), shortening the early voting period, and eliminating pre-registration for 16 and 17-year-olds.²⁶ This was widely seen as an attempt to stymie increased participation by voters of color—41 percent of North Carolinians who used SDR to register and vote in the 2012 elections were African Americans, though blacks represent just 20 percent of the voting age population.²⁷

Same Day Registration also reduces the need and use of provisional ballots. Provisional ballots are offered to citizens who believe they are registered but whose names do not appear on voter rolls. But a provisional ballot frequently does not translate into a ballot that counts. Almost a third of provisional ballots cast in 2012 were rejected for a number of reasons, including voters missing the registration deadline or voting in the wrong precinct—issues that could be fixed at the polling place with SDR.¹⁴

Allowing eligible voters to register and vote on the same day greatly reduces the need for provisional ballots because eligible voters can just re-register if there are any issues. This freedom saves elections officials the time and expense of processing many provisional votes. After SDR was adopted in Iowa, provisional ballots dropped from 15,000 in the 2004 presidential election to less than 5,000 in 2008—a 67 percent decline.¹⁵ North Carolina saw 23,000 fewer provisional ballots after it adopted SDR in 2008.¹⁶

In addition to increasing voter participation and reducing provisional ballots, Same Day Registration is also very cost effective. Iowa and North Carolina reported minimal costs when introducing SDR in the 2008 presidential election.¹⁷ The state of Iowa spent less than \$40,000 to introduce SDR for its 99 counties.¹⁸ North Carolina's counties cited some additional staffing needs at voting sites as the most notable expense associated with Same Day Registration.¹⁹ It is not just newly implemented programs that are cost effective. In a telephone survey conducted by Demos of local election officials in states with the longest experience with SDR- Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming- most respondents described the incremental cost of SDR as “minimal.”²⁰

Whatever costs arose were offset by savings from reducing the number of provisional ballots needed and reducing staff costs associated with last-minute processing of registrations just before the pre-election deadline.²¹

Finally, the use of SDR does not compromise the integrity of our elections. States offering SDR report that existing fraud-prevention measures ensure the integrity of elections,²² and elections officials familiar with SDR strongly endorse it. Mark Ritchie, Minnesota's long-time Secretary of State said, "Election Day Registration is much more secure because you have the person right in front of you—not a postcard in the mail. That is a no brainer. We [Minnesota] have 33 years of doing this"²³ Debbye Lathrop, the County Clerk in Laramie County, Wyoming said, "I think Election Day voter registration gives every citizen the greatest opportunity to participate in the greatest right that they have been provided."²⁴

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize voter participation gains, Same Day Registration should be available at all polling places and should be offered during the early voting period and through Election Day.

States have developed common-sense ways to organize the polling place to accommodate Same Day Registration efficiently and effectively. In particular:

- Polling places should be configured into two separate areas—one for voter registration and one for voting.
- Greeters and prominent signs should direct individuals to the correct areas and lines.
- Each polling place should have at least one staff person who has been trained specifically in conducting registrations on Election Day. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Long Distance Voter, *Voter Registration Deadlines* (2013), available at http://www.longdistancevoter.org/voter_registration_deadlines#.Uo0p7JE1cQ.
2. The Pew Center on the States, *Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient: Evidence That America's Voter Registration System Needs an Upgrade 1-2* (Feb. 14, 2012) available at http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/Pew_Upgrading_Voter_Registration.pdf.
3. Michael McDonald, *2012 General Election Turnout Rates*, United States Elections Project (last updated July 22, 2013), available at http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2012G.html.
4. National Conference of State Legislatures, *Same Day Voter Registration*, (2013) available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-registration.aspx>.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Estelle S. Rogers & Steven Carbo, *Same Day Registration* (July 2013), available at <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/SameDayRegistration-Explainer.pdf>.
10. United States Dept. of Commerce, United States Census Bureau, *General Mobility, by Race and Hispanic Origin Region Age, Relationship to Householder, Educational Attainment, Marital Status, Nativity, Tenure, and Poverty Status: 2011 to 2012*, Table 1 (2013), available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/migration/files/cps/cps2012/tab01-01.xls>.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mary Fitzgerald, *Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout* (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement ed. Feb. 2003), available at <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>.
13. E.g., R. Michael Alvarez & Jonathan Nagler, *Election Day Voter Registration in California* (2011), available at http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/CA_EDR_Report-Demos.pdf; R. Michael Alvarez & Jonathan Nagler, *Same Day Voter Registration in Maryland* (2010), available at http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/SameDayRegistration_Maryland_Demos.pdf; R. Michael Alvarez & Jonathan Nagler, *Election Day Voter Registration in Massachusetts* (2008), available at <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/mass.pdf>.
14. United States Election Assistance Commission, *2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey: A Summary of Key Findings 13* (Sept. 2013), available at http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Page/990050%20EAC%20VoterSurvey_508Compliant.pdf.
15. NCSL, *Same Day Voter Registration*.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. Laura Rokoff & Emma Stokking, *Small Investments, High Yields: Cost Study of Same Day Registration in IA and NC 3* (Feb. 2012), available at <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/SDR-CostStudy-Final.pdf>.
20. Dēmos, *Election Day Registration: A Ground-Level View 3* (Nov. 2007), available at <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/EDR%20-%20A%20Ground%20Level%20View.pdf>.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Cristina Vasile & Regina Eaton, *Election Day Registration Best Practices: An Implementation Guide 25* (July 2010), available at <http://www.demos.org/publication/election-day-registration-best-practices-implementation-guide>.
23. Steven Carbo & Brenda Wright, *The Promise and Practice of Election Day Registration*, *America Votes! A Guide to Modern Election Law and Voting Rights* Ch. 5 (Chicago: ABA Publishing ed. 2008), available at <http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/The-Promise-and-Practice-of-Election-Day-Registration-copy.pdf>.
24. Dēmos, *Election Day Registration*.
25. Brennan Center for Justice, *Voting Laws Roundup 2012*, (Nov. 2013) available at <http://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/election-2012-voting-laws-roundup>.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Democracy North Carolina, *2008 Recap: The year of the Voter*. (Feb. 19, 2009), available at <http://www.democracy-nc.org/reports/researchreports/WrapUp.pdf>.

ABOUT DĒMOS

Dēmos is a public policy organization working for an America where we all have an equal say in our democracy and an equal chance in our economy. Dēmos is supported by a variety of sources including foundations, labor organizations and individual funders.

CONTACT

Elektra Gray
egray@demos.org
P: 212.633.1405

ENGAGE

www.demos.org
@demos_org