



100% Youth Voter Registration

www.fairvote.org

contact: Ryan Griffin (301) 270-4616 / rgriffin@fairvote.org

A high school-based voter registration and education system would resolve a number of problems with our current voter registration system and create an effective means of engaging new generations of young people in our political process.

What are the problems with our voter registration system?

Millions of eligible young American voters fail to turnout for elections and participate in our democracy, with many of these citizens not even registered to vote. The problem of low voter turnout in the United States is not a new one; in fact, there has been only one presidential election since 1972 in which more than 60% of the voting age population went to the polls. Turnout rates among those reaching voting age in recent elections suggest that this problem will only be exacerbated in years to come. Only 17% of 18-24 year-olds voted in the 2002 midterm elections – less than half the rate of the voting age population as a whole. Even in the hotly contested 2004 presidential election, barely 40% of eligible 18-24 year-olds turned out to vote. One of the most basic reasons is voter registration – only seven out of ten eligible voters in the United States are registered to vote. This rate is even lower for young adults, with less than 50% of eligible voters under 25 being registered to vote.

Many groups address the problem of low youth voter participation with varying degrees of success, but even the most effective efforts have had significant limitations. First, these voter registration initiatives alone are incapable of achieving 100% registration, because by leaving the root causes of under-participation intact, they require constant mobilization of personnel and financial resources every election cycle. Second, many voter registration and mobilizations efforts are partisan and therefore overtly exclude a major percentage of the population – all prospective voters in areas that are not competitive and voters in their targeted areas that quite plausibly vote against their party of choice. Third, although nonpartisan efforts will not avoid registering voters regardless of political leanings, they typically seek to maximize their influence by following the partisan model of focusing on targeted districts and states, thereby similarly ignoring large regions of the country. Fourth, these registration and mobilization efforts generally take place only in elections years – with large-scale efforts only every four years in presidential election years – and thus can miss those reaching voting age in the years between elections. Finally, many youth registration and mobilizations efforts focus on mobilizing those deemed most likely to vote, meaning they do not spend the time and resources necessary to educate and engage those voters who now are most significantly underrepresented in the political process.

The end result of our ad-hoc, patchwork voter registration system is the creation of a process that encourages misconduct and results in vote rolls that are both incomplete and inaccurate. In Nevada and Wisconsin in 2004, for example, private registration organizations were found responsible for failing to submit valid registration forms and creating false names and addresses to boost their registration numbers. Although some laws have been passed to limit these fraudulent activities, these are only topical remedies that do nothing to prevent the opportunities or incentives for indiscretion. Apart from these malicious problems, the current registration system often results in a backlog of registrations turned in close to registration deadlines, resulting in innocent mistakes when attempting to add these registrants to the voter rolls. These voter rolls increase the likelihood that citizens will either not be allowed to vote at all on election day or will need to cast a provisional ballot, the counting of which has been notoriously problematic in recent elections.

How can we improve our registration system?

The governments of the vast majority of modern nations provide a clear model for reform, as they see registering citizens to vote as one of their critical roles and therefore automatically register their citizens. The fact that this dismal voter registration rate puts the United States far outside the international norm is clearly tied to the fact that our voter registration processes themselves are completely outside the international norm. In contrast to the global norm, within the United States the default setting of society is to assume non-participation in our civic process, and citizens, either through the work of NGO's or by themselves, must opt-in to our election systems. America's voter participation crises cannot rely wholly on charitable groups or partisan groups as the solution. Even the National Voter Registration Act (the "motor voter" bill) limits the governments' role in making voter registration more accessible, leaving the responsibility for registration solely to individuals. Through a 100% youth voter registration initiative, we can break through this negative perspective on voting and instead create bold and innovative initiatives to bring youths closer to a 100% registration rate.

A 100% youth voter registration rate can only be attained by having the government automatically register young people to vote, or by creating a systematic process, such as making voter registration a graduation requirement. In order to truly treat voting as a fundamental right that deserves full protection, we must advocate policy proposals designed to produce clean and complete voter rolls. Policymakers should create a high school-based system designed to automatically register every young person as they reach voting age regardless of their party inclination, what state they live in or the date of the next major election. This can be done by creating a new graduation requirement, mandating registration to register for classes, or adding voter registration to existing community service requirements. Additionally, state of federal laws should allow voter registration as soon as when people turn 16 years old, as is already the case in Hawaii. The idea is to ensure that these youth registration policies reach as many young people as possible, even those who leave high school before they are old enough to register. Equally importantly, youth voter registration efforts must be combined with an educational component designed to boost voter turnout among newly eligible voters as the first step toward a lifelong practice of civic engagement in local, state and national government.

For more information, visit www.fairvote.org/?page=1453.

