

....about Universal Voter Registration

Voter turnout in the United States is disturbingly low. One reason is simple: nearly a third of eligible voters are not registered to vote.

The international norm is universal registration. Our government should share in the responsibility for achieving full and accurate voter rolls.

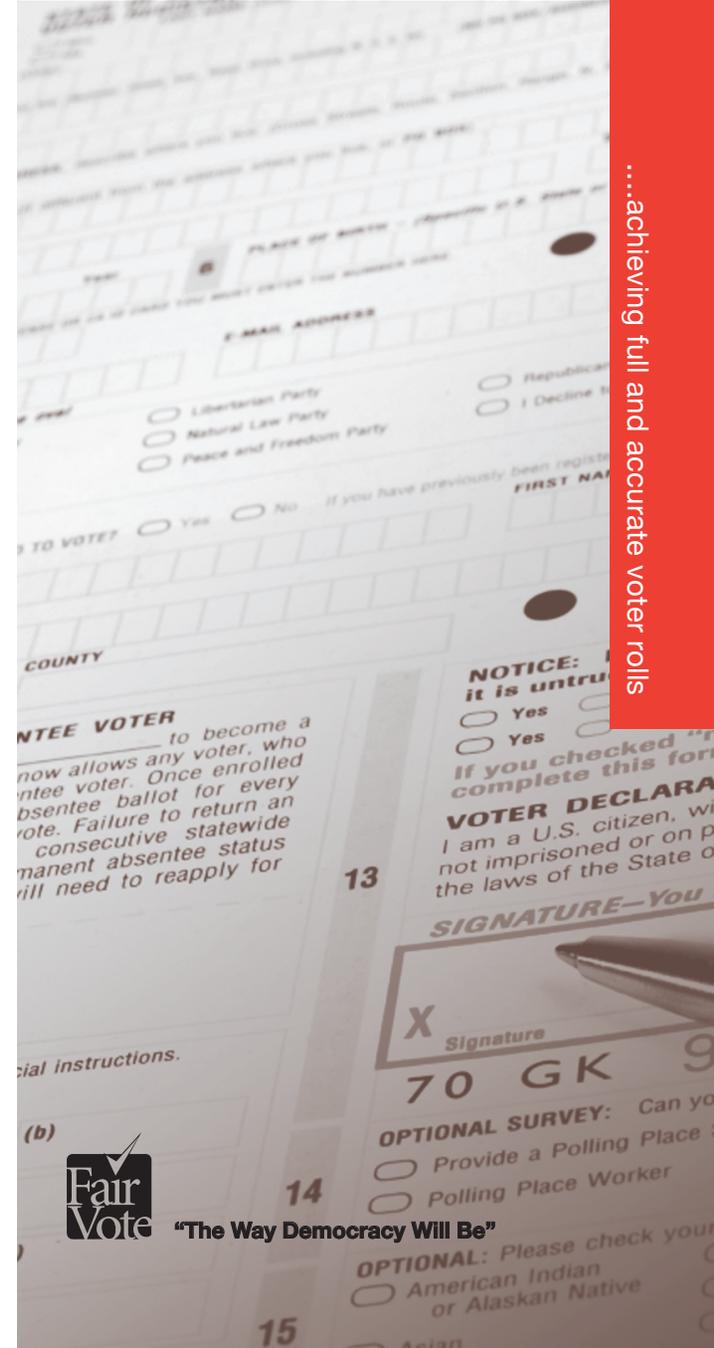
“The Way Democracy Will Be”
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VOTE



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UNIVERSAL VOTER REGISTRATION



....achieving full and accurate voter rolls



“The Way Democracy Will Be”

UNIVERSAL

In the United States, current voter registration policies assume citizens' non-participation, with the burden on individuals to opt in to participate. Voter registration is often left to political parties and interest groups who focus on registering only those sympathetic to their causes and candidates in the states and districts that matter to them. Our ad hoc, gap-filled voter registration process fails to register tens of millions of voters.

In contrast, universal registration recognizes that government and citizens have a mutual responsibility for fair elections. It would dramatically improve our remarkably low 71% rate of registration among eligible voters, reduce duplications and omissions in voter rolls and better balance the concerns of election accessibility and reliable rolls. It would avoid the inevitable crush of registrations that immediately precedes big elections and often contributes to election problems like long lines and voter confusion. It would make it all the easier to provide a list for sending out voter guides and other information to help inform voters.



“The best way to curb fraud by voter-registration and voter-mobilization groups is for the United States to follow many other democracies and adopt universal voter registration.”

Prof. Spencer Overton,
George Washington University Law School,
*Stealing Democracy: The New Politics of
Voter Suppression* (2006).

STEPS TO ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL VOTER REGISTRATION

Automatic Registration

All eligible citizens would automatically be registered to vote, through a system linked to existing government databases. Less ambitious automatic registration laws might treat voter registration like car insurance and mandate that all citizens register to vote or affirmatively opt out. Existing laws like the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA, or “motor voter”) could be modified to automatically register citizens as they obtain driver’s licenses and deal with government agencies.

Streamline Voter Registration

Various technical reforms to our registration processes would facilitate universal registration. For example, the U.S. Postal Service could submit all “change of address” forms to the State Board of Elections so that voter registration addresses are automatically updated. By establishing a uniform advance voter registration age of 16, “motor voter” laws and high school registration programs could more easily lead to universal registration of young people as they become eligible to vote.

Systematic Voter Registration in High Schools

With their low rates of voter participation, young Americans provide a natural starting point for universal registration and introduction to voting mechanics. Making voter registration a graduation requirement or giving students community service hours for registering are policy options. Schools could have all students fill out voter registration forms as part of a civics curriculum and systematically register voters at assemblies like ones celebrating Constitution Day on September 17th.

HOW FAIRVOTE HAS AN IMPACT

Distributing Policy Ideas |

FairVote develops and disseminates models for universal registration to officials, organizations and advocates. Inspired by FairVote, the Minnesota Secretary of State (a Democrat) and the Michigan Secretary of State (a Republican) are advancing universal registration proposals in their states. In 2007, several state legislators for the first time introduced bills to allow advance voter registration for young adults.

Advancing Pilot Projects |

FairVote is implementing systematic youth registration and civic education policies in communities in Maryland. We helped build support for a new law for a state Constitution Day celebration that would include civic education and voter registration opportunities in Maryland schools.

Expert Testimony & Assistance |

FairVote provides expert assistance to civic leaders and elected officials interested in boosting voter registration. Our testimony in state legislatures and advocacy for universal registration policies, better civics curriculum and uniform advance registration helped advance legislation in states like Rhode Island and Maryland.

For more information, contact:

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Based in Takoma Park, MD, FairVote is a leading national non-partisan, non-profit pro-democracy organization. We pursue an innovative, solution-oriented agenda that focuses on systemic change and increasing political participation.