

Testimony of Steven Hill in favor of AB 2371

The history of voting in the United States has been an epic journey. In his magisterial history, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, political scientist Alex Keyssar shows that the struggle to extend the franchise to the poor, women, and slaves was hard-fought, with retreats as well as advances. Writes Keyssar, "Some Americans who had been enfranchised in 1800 were barred from the polls by mid-century. Change was neither linear nor uncontested." He tracks the ebbs and flows across the centuries, showing that political elites shifted opinion, sometimes thinking of voting as a right, other times as a privilege.

Much of what we know today as our "voter registration laws" is a product of these times, where certain special interests had the goal of keeping certain people from exercising the franchise. Lest we think this attitude was a product of a distant time, let us recall what President Richard Nixon said to John Erlichman in the confessional of the Oval Office. Said Nixon: "You gotta remember, the smartest thing the [Founders] did was to limit the voters in this country. Out of 3.5 to 4 million people, 200,000 voted. And that was true for a helluva long time, and the republic would have never survived if all the dummies had voted along with the intelligent people. Now . . . you got people voting now-blacks, whites, Mexicans, and the rest-that shouldn't have anything to say about government; mainly because they don't have the brains to know."

Nixon, let us recall, was a Californian, and that is certainly part of our legacy in California. Unlike in the US and California, the international norm for voter registration is to make it universal - that is, 100 percent - and to make it automatic. In the United States and in California, we have gotten rid of most of the worst methods of disenfranchisement such as poll taxes, grandfather clauses and such, and then we enacted Motor Voter, and all of those have been a step in the right direction. But they have not proven very effective toward the goal of 100 percent registration because they are not AUTOMATIC. In California, we currently have SEVEN MILLION eligible unregistered voters, nearly as many as the NINE MILLION who voted in 2006. The job is nowhere near complete of overcoming our historical legacy that has left so many voters behind.

The bill before you, AB 2371 is about taking the next step toward fully enfranchising California voters. By using existing procedures at the Dept of Motor Vehicles and the California Franchise Tax Board, we can automatically register a good chunk of those 7 million voters. This is a smart and efficient way to go, for minimal cost.

Not only does automatic voter registration lead to more complete voter rolls, but it also leads to less voter fraud. When we take a proactive, ongoing role, registration occurs in an orderly manner on a steady, rolling basis, instead of tied to voter registration drives right before major elections where each side has incentives to get their voters on the rolls and keep the other side's voters off. The current approach invites electoral shenanigans.

Automatic voter registration also ensures a more efficient election process and makes the job of election administration easier. That's because the lack of an orderly, ongoing,

automatic registration process also creates problems for election administrators. Major voter registration drives result in a surge of registrations right before an election that must be quickly processed, which can cause confusion. AB 2371 would help to make voter registration a more orderly and efficient process.

Automatic voter registration offers the promise of both clean and complete voter rolls. With full registration, there is no longer a question about who is or is not registered- everyone is registered. It provides a coherent system that ensures all of us can vote, but none of us can vote more than once. I urge your support of AB 2371.