

Leave No Voter Behind: Seeking 100 Percent Voter Registration and Effective Civic Education

BY ROBERT RICHIE

In a well-functioning democracy, voting should be protected as a fundamental citizenship right and responsibility. Accurately registering every eligible voter to vote is a necessary step toward protecting this right, yet nearly three in ten eligible American voters are not registered and many people are registered inaccurately or more than once. When voter rolls are error-ridden and a quarter of eligible voters cannot vote, registration laws are not only failing their primary function of ensuring that voters are qualified to vote but also acting as barriers to participation. Our low voter registration rate, combined with rapidly dropping participation in elections for primary nominations and municipal government, also spotlights a troubling disconnect between citizens and their representative democracy—one due at least in part to a lack of widely shared public understanding of government, elections, and citizen power.

To address these deficiencies, we need programs designed to systematically register every eligible voter in America and give them information about voting mechanics and electoral choices. Such universal voter registration and civic education should begin with high school students as they reach voting age and continue with similar programs for new citizens as well as distribution of voter guides about voting and voters' election choice to all households. Here are specific proposed policies to achieve these goals: (1) a uniform age of sixteen for advance voter registration; (2) registration of high school students during civics classes and Constitution Day assemblies; (3) classes that explain voting mechanics and the powers of local, state, and federal elected offices and dispel common myths (such as the belief that not registering keeps people from being called for jury duty); (4) similar registration and civics pro-

grams for people becoming U.S. citizens; (5) automatic registration of citizens obtaining driver's licenses and learner's permits and filing postal forms to change addresses; (6) student poll workers, starting with stints for middle school students; (7) print and online voter guides; and (8) television and radio time devoted to election information.

Mutual Responsibility of Individuals and Government

As a fundamental right of citizenship, voting certainly deserves greater protection than we often give it, starting with an unambiguous guarantee in the U.S. Constitution. But it is also true that voting is a responsibility. American libertarianism is a powerful force, and efforts seen as coercing participation are sure to be looked on with skepticism. If a citizen chooses not to register, so the logic goes, it is a sign of that person's lack of readiness to be an informed voter; thus, it is argued, they are better left off the rolls. Indeed, simply registering more people will have limited impact on turnout. Registration and easy access to voting alone do not determine participation, as can be easily demonstrated by comparing turnout rates of registered voters by kind of election. More than four in five registered voters participated in the 2004 presidential race, yet fewer than one in six voted in the 2006 congressional primary elections and fewer than one in ten now vote in many key city elections.

Seeking 100 percent voter registration and education therefore is not a mandate for the uninformed and uninterested to cast ballots. But government should accept its obligation to lay the table for participation by furnishing full and accurate voter rolls, preparing to administer high-turnout elections, and ensuring eligible voters receive substantive

information about government, voting mechanics, and upcoming elections. It is time to replace our current opt-in approach to voting, founded on a default expectation of nonparticipation, with an opt-out approach founded participation. Voter registration therefore should be more than simply available to citizens once they get a driver's license; rather, it should happen automatically unless the citizen actively chooses not to register. Information about the mechanics of elections and voter choices should not just be something an enterprising citizen can find; rather, it should be afforded to all registered voters in the form of mailed and online voter guides and dedicated radio and television time.

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A Logical Starting Point

As a concrete first step toward these goals, there is no better place to challenge the expectation of nonparticipation than in our high schools. Nearly every citizen enters high school too young to vote in our elections and leaves eligible to vote. Yet in this institutional setting, most students leave school without registering to vote or obtaining even rudimentary information about how to vote in their community and the powers of the range of offices they can elect; those who do get registered tend to reflect the socioeconomic advantages of their parents. Our proposals for changing this reality are designed to be systematic, wide-reaching, and enduring. When young people become eligible to vote, we should register all of them and introduce them to voting. There is strong evidence that

direct experience with the mechanics of voting boosts turnout among first-time eligible voters, and that after a citizen has voted once, he or she is more likely to vote in the future.

Having full registration of newly eligible voters will also significantly reduce duplications and omissions in the voter rolls and help create a system that balances the concerns of election accessibility and voter fraud. Facilitated by simple statewide policy changes, such as allowing young adults to register to vote at a uniform age well before the eighteen-year-old voting age and requiring schools to include information about voting in their Constitution Day activities, there is no reason school districts cannot take the lead in preparing young people for active participation in their democracy.

Problems with Youth Registration and Turnout

The conventional wisdom that young people will not turn out to vote in numbers comparable to other age groups has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Campaigns rarely do more than pay lip service to the concerns of young adults, and young people's participation is generally low. Among eligible voters under twenty-five, barely half are registered to vote, and only 17 percent voted in the 2002 midterm elections for congress and most of the governors.

Many factors and inconsistencies in our voting processes contribute to low turnout. New to thinking about the impact of government on their lives, many young people are skeptical about a political process they have experienced primarily through off-putting television attack ads and entertainment media mocking politicians' sincerity. Given the general weakening of identification with political parties and overall civic duty, young people are less likely to feel as obligated to vote as older generations were on reaching voting age. But three clear obstacles can be removed through straightforward changes in policy: ensure that all newly eligible vot-

ers are registered, let them know about the mechanics of how to vote in person or by mail in their community, and give them regular and substantive information about upcoming elections.

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Private Voter Registration Efforts

Currently, the burden of registration is on the voter, not the government, and the result is that the activities of private entities must often trigger it. But young Americans are typically heavily mobilized to register to vote only in particular years and places, with partisans focusing on certain states or areas with tightly contested races in an election year, especially for the presidency. Current registration drives run by private, nonprofit organizations are sporadic and not regulated to be nonpartisan, and the form filling can be rushed and incomplete. The educational atmosphere typically is restricted to issues pertaining to the group's mission, if not entirely absent. There were massive voter registration efforts in 2004, for example, but thanks to our electoral college system they were targeted primarily at people in the steadily declining number of swing states. Though higher than in 2000, voter turnout for eighteen to twenty-four year olds was a dismal 41 percent, compared to 58 percent of the general population and 71 percent of sixty-five to seventy-four year olds, and youth turnout among eligible voters under thirty was fully 17 percent higher in the ten most closely contested states. In 2005 and 2006, expenditures of personnel and financial resources for registration typically were not sustained at anything close to 2004 levels.

Skewed Targeting of Youths

Those who are newly eligible to vote should not be mobilized primarily through last-minute, partisan, and sometimes desperate efforts but ideally through a solid foundation of voter education and integration. Because most elections in the United States are not hotly contested, efforts driven by partisans are targeted to specific potential voters in a few competitive races, instead of engaging all citizens to cast a meaningful vote. Furthermore, most targeted efforts toward young eligible voters are aimed at college students, which skews the electorate toward better-educated and wealthier citizens, exacerbating a trend begun with teenagers and their likelihood of registration. Young people who are not in college, who are of color, or who live in a rural area are often entirely ignored. The combination of having electoral rules that limit choice (such as the electoral college and winner-take-all plurality rules that leave most elections effectively uncontested or limit credible choices to two candidates) and nonvoting tending to become a lifetime habit after just two or three missed elections means we have opt-in registration methods fostering a culture of nonparticipation skewed heavily against those without a college education and those living in states with fewer competitive elections.

Registration Rush

Registering young people systematically and accurately also decreases the registration rush before a deadline during an election year and reduces the administrative burden such periodic overload can cause. Having all young people register through the same systematic process reduces the chance of duplicate registration, and presenting instructions in the classroom permits much better voter education than traditional methods relying on hurried conversation on the sidewalks or in a shopping center. These improvements can reduce the number of forms that are returned incomplete and incorrectly filled out, and ultimately thrown away. At the least, any mechanism that continually puts registration forms in

front of students and urges an informed decision before they graduate is an improvement over our current methods.

Concrete Proposals

Voter Registration in High Schools

The fact that nearly every young citizen in the nation enters high school points to a straightforward solution to young people's underparticipation and underregistration: systematic voter registration and voter education of students. High-school-based voter registration programs can take place every year instead of only during election years, and in every county and state, not just those targeted by partisans. They can be in the form of "voter's ed" classes and in high school assemblies, perhaps focused on democratic processes on Constitution Day that include students learning to fill out voter registration forms. High schools also present an already existing infrastructure for quality election and general civic education that reaches everyone, regardless of socioeconomic differences or whether a school today has an enterprising teacher or relationship with an active civic organization. Such voter registration programs ideally would be mandatory, as is the case in most other well-established democracies. Citizens could opt out for religious or other reasons; noncitizens should be sure to indicate on their form that their citizenship status keeps them from registering, but forms should be filled out and returned anyway.

Short of mandates, schools could make voter registration count toward existing community service requirements, encourage voter registration among opportunities for students to elect the student seat on a local school board (as done in many communities), make registration a requirement of high school graduation, or pursue other means to have nearly all students fill out registration forms. Such procedures of course boost youth registration when students reach voting age, but they also better equip young people to learn how to keep their registration

up-to-date when they move, which is what many of them do soon after reaching eighteen—often moving several times before settling into a more enduring residence.

A Uniform Age of Sixteen for Starting Voter Registration

There are a number of potential means for systematically integrating voter registration into all students' high school experience and creating more access for young adults no longer in high school. One example is establishing a uniform age for allowing voter registration, which should be no higher than sixteen. Right now, states vary in the age at which they allow voters to submit a registration application. Some states allow it starting at sixteen, while others have a date that is indexed against the next election date. Places using such a floating election date create spotty opportunities for registering youths, whose eligibility to register will vary. Sixteen is a sensible age connected to new responsibilities and opportunities in the adult world, and it is always within two years of the next congressional election. The vast majority of states in fact already allow advance registration, with some states starting with sixteen-year-olds and Puerto Rico with fourteen-year-olds. Statewide voter registration databases already include birth date information, and in all or at least most states establishing a uniform age for advance registration would have no fiscal impact.

Having a national standard of age sixteen for advance registration would increase public consciousness of the chance to register, make nearly all young citizens eligible to register through "motor voter" programs in obtaining their learner's permit, and facilitate programs for sophomore or junior classes in high school. It also would remove ambiguity in states that allow young citizens to register if they will be old enough to vote in the next congressional election; this standard means the age of legal registration is always changing (depending on the year, some sixteen-year-olds can register or none can register). The lack of uniformity creates confusion

and makes it harder to run effective voter registration and education programs in schools and at the motor vehicle office.

Automatic Registration at Motor Vehicle Office and Online Voter Registration

This year, the Minnesota legislature has sent to the governor a bill that would make it the first state to replace opt-in registration procedures at the Minnesota Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) with opt-out ones. Such a law boosts registration of a range of eligible voters, including those moving into state from a place with less effective youth registration policies as well as people of all ages who have changed addresses. Citizens at the DMV are providing all the information necessary for registration, and the proposed bill in Minnesota would mean that those getting a driver's license would be systematically and automatically added to the rolls unless they indicate they choose not to be added. State election officials report that the procedure for carrying out this program will be based on already-existing procedures that are part of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA, or "motor voter"). States such as Arizona, Rhode Island, and Washington are pioneering provisions for registering to vote online, while California's community colleges allow students to submit a registration form online that is then submitted to election officials, who send out a copy for students to sign and return. Done carefully to avoid fraud, such policies should boost registration and go well with establishing sixteen as a uniform advance voter registration age.

Civic Education in High Schools and Constitution Day

Voter registration may be a necessary first step for going to the polls, but voter education is the key to engaging young people in a lifelong habit of civic participation. An underlying explanation of young people's low registration rate is a general lack of knowledge and interest concerning the intricacies of our electoral system. A high school student typically hears, "When you're eighteen, you can vote," without further clarification of what is required of

them. Many believe in myths such as voter registration being tied to jury duty (something that generally is not true and ideally would never be true) and can feel embarrassed or intimidated about asking election officials and poll workers questions about voting.

Complementing a high school's existing curriculum on American government, then, schools should establish a brief but required voting education component for all enrolled students. Ideally this should be done early enough that eventual dropouts participate and perhaps be followed up with a short refresher class before graduation. The range of topics can be decided at the school district level, but states should fund these initiatives and evaluate them to ensure all schools run effective programs. The curriculum in civics class or even a gradewide plenary session would involve an overview of the electoral process, culminating in completing a registration form that is turned in for advance registration. The instruction could elaborate on the lessons of a civics course and include topics such as registration laws and deadlines, absentee ballots and regulations, provisional ballots, the functions of polls and poll workers, primary procedures and schedules, familiarity with registration cards, instructions and requirements for address changes, voter machinery and technology updates, history of voting and its role in our democracy, which offices are elected in one's community, and which issues are affected by these elected offices. One particularly good opportunity to engage in such civic education is Constitution Day. The federal government has mandated that schools honor the U.S. Constitution on September 17[AF1], and this year Maryland passed a new law to urge high schools to participate in activities focused on the federal and state constitutions and promote high school voter registration.

Exposing students to the role of elections in our democracy and the mechanics of voting can play a critical role in increasing young people's comfort

level with a voting process that might be entirely new to them. Civic education should feature basic mechanics but ideally go deeper into explaining the powers and impact of elected offices, particularly local and state offices that often receive less attention in the media. Being more engaged in such elections and learning how to contact elected officials between elections could easily result in these elected officeholders showing more responsiveness to issues of concern to young voters, which could start to break the current vicious cycle of low youth participation leading to most politicians' lack of attentiveness to youth issues. Turnout and informed participation has great potential to increase with each new wave of young people coming out of the system with more knowledge of the process and their role.

Creating Incentives for Young People to Be Poll Workers and Election Technology Aides

High school has traditionally emphasized service to the community through organizations active in schools. Service in an election could be required or at least facilitated for certain eligible groups in high school, furthering their familiarity with the electoral process. Working at a poll on Election Day, or being deputized to register other members of the community such as the elderly, is a great experience for understanding the process. The median age of poll workers in the United States is estimated to be approximately seventy, and diversifying the age of poll workers has additional benefits. It can make polls a more welcoming place for young voters and increase the chances of poll workers being able to handle new technologies and solve problems that might develop on Election Day.

A number of states and counties have implemented programs for young poll workers. Montgomery County, Maryland, even allows students starting in sixth grade to sign up for four-hour stints as poll worker assistants, with both the training and the time in the polls counting toward community service requirements.

Similar Education and Registration Programs for All Newly Eligible Voters

Many of these programs to engage in systematic voter registration and civic education could be applied for other "entry" voters reaching eligibility to vote while in an institutional setting. Immigrants on a certain path to citizenship are one example, as are citizens who are regaining voting rights after incarceration. Every eligible voter in America should be welcomed to the opportunity to vote through voter registration and voter education.

Voter Guides and Election Information

Today fewer and fewer Americans, particularly young adults, read a daily newspaper or watch television news. They may receive political information from friends, family, organizations, and entertainment media, but in a haphazard and typically limited way that inhibits their ability to participate effectively or even at all. With policies designed to expand the franchise, some worry that candidates will have to spend more money to reach a larger pool of voters that includes more who could be easily swayed by those with abundant money.

Most established democracies and some states see it as a public responsibility to offer information about voting and electoral choices to all potential voters. One approach pursued by several western states is state-financed voter guides that are mailed to all households having a registered voter, and ideally put online in more interactive formats. Voter guides are designed to ensure that every voter receives statements from candidates and from advocates and opponents of ballot initiatives. In this way, expanded voter participation programs can be created without imposing new campaign finance burdens. In contrast to some public financing programs that give candidates public money focused only on subsets of likely voters, state-financed voter guides grant candidates more equal access to reach all potential voters with their message. They can be especially useful for jurisdictions facing a large number of complicated ballot measures, where voter education efforts are often limited.

Voter guides can inform citizens about the mechanics of the election process, ensuring that voters know how to vote by mail or at their polling place, the timing for notifying election officials about changes in address, and so on. Including a sample ballot can save time and confusion at the polls, particularly when some states limit the amount of time voters can spend in a voting booth. The guide can urge voters to fill out this sample ballot at home, with the guide assisting the voter in analyzing their choices about candidates and ballot measures, and then brought by the voter to the polls so that they can efficiently vote in person.

Many nations go further than voter guides by favoring public service announcements about voting mechanics and the importance of voting on television and radio airwaves and giving candidates (and advocates and opponents of ballot measures) meaningful access to free air time. Such efforts have been promoted heavily in the United States with some success, but Congress should go further if ready to live up to its responsibilities of laying the table for informed participation by eligible voters.

Conclusion

Representative democracy will never be fully realized in the United States if so many of its citizens choose not to participate in electing their leaders and deciding ballot measures. In an era of increasing complexity and multinational institutions that are only indirectly linked to citizen participation and voting, government is the most obvious institution where all of us can and should feel a connection to the power all citizens have under the constitution. Our intent of course should not be to force citizens to cast a ballot, or to promote a particular ideology within democracy. But we should make voting

accessible; iron out wrinkles in our patchwork, state-by-state election systems; and teach our citizens the value of voting.

Under a fully realized vision of this program, all young people will leave high school registered to vote, aware of how to vote, and understanding the role of voting in our democracy. All other newly eligible voters will also be prepared to participate. Voter guides and voter information on television and radio airwaves will boost informed participation without adding to candidates' campaign finance burdens. Such policies have a particular benefit for young people, who have the greatest stake in the future; they are the heirs to this country and should be encouraged at any cost by the government and society to make their voice heard. A better-informed and engaged electorate will have lasting effects for decades on policy and participation.

Our society already espouses the virtues of democracy and voting. To hold true to this ideal, we must take action. We may never achieve our ambitious goal of full participation, particularly without reforms such as proportional voting and instant runoff voting that are designed to give people more motivation to vote; but we have an obligation to remove obstacles to participation. The proposals laid out in this essay are designed to achieve universal voter registration, systematic voter education, and ongoing distribution of information about elections; they are significant steps that are eminently achievable. Political caution is far more of an obstacle than resources.

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