

ROLL CALL

Congress Can Better Voter Registration

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As Congress reconvenes, it faces a daunting portfolio of critical issues to attend to with 2009 drawing to a close. The headlines will be dominated by partisan maneuvering on the big-ticket items of health care, the financial system and energy. But Congress can and should in a bipartisan manner address another critical issue that is often overlooked outside of an election year: how to make our election system work for all eligible Americans. Right now it doesn't, and the core culprit is the way that we register voters. Each year, our outdated voter registration system wastes hundreds of millions of dollars, frustrates eligible voters and leads to the involvement of third-party organizations in the process.

For years, the two of us have dedicated our careers to political campaigns. We have always worked for opposing candidates, but our common campaign experience has led us to the firm agreement that the inefficiencies of the election administration system require commonsense upgrades. To aid us in that effort, we have formed the Committee to Modernize Voter Registration, a national, bipartisan group of individuals with vast and varied experience in elections.

We are joined by former Sens. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) and John Danforth (R-Mo.), former Reps. Susan Molinari (R-N.Y.) and Harold Ford Jr. (D-Tenn.), state and local election officials, and political scientists. All of us share a commitment to update the way that we register voters so it is more efficient, costs less, provides adequate safeguards against fraud and ensures that all eligible Americans can participate in the process.

Voter registration seems easy, and for many Americans it is — they just fill out a form when they get their drivers license. However, not everyone is registered this way, and even many who are will discover their names never made it to the registration list at their local polling place. There are two problems: First, our system is based almost exclusively on paper voter-registration forms, and second, too many forms are submitted in the last weeks before voter registration deadlines. The result is a chaotic environment in which election officials are forced to develop complex, costly systems of data entry and quality control to decipher millions of handwritten forms in the lead-up to a major election. Millions of eligible Americans each election cycle are blocked from the polls as a result.

But there is a solution.

States should use an automated system to add voters to the registration rolls when they become eligible, and that registration should move with the voters when they change residences. If we do this, we can get rid of the paper, free up resources for state and local governments, provide strict protections against voter registration fraud and eliminate many of the frustrating problems that voters face on Election Day.

We need only look to the Selective Service Administration to find a guidepost. Using other government databases, the agency is able to register 95 percent of those eligible.

Congress made modernizing the voter registration system possible in the wake of the 2000 presidential election debacle. Many of the problems in that election were caused by the failure of local jurisdictions in a single state to harmonize their voter registration lists. Not only did different jurisdictions have different requirements of who to register when, but there was no single database that determined where an individual was registered within the state. As a result, Congress provided each state with the tools to create unified, statewide voter registration databases. The logical next step is to help states integrate the voter registration database with other lists the state maintains that have all the information election administrators need to determine whether someone is eligible to vote.

Some states are already modernizing and seeing it pay dividends. When Arizona began to get rid of paper registration forms by allowing citizens to register online, Maricopa County saw the cost to process registrations fall from 83 cents for a paper form to just 3 cents for an online registration. When Delaware implemented a paperless system of voter registration through its Department of Motor Vehicles, it nearly instantly saw its labor costs fall by \$200,000 annually.

We have come together because, despite our differences of opinion on policy issues, we all agree that our democracy deserves

better. Progress on reforming election administration is often elusive because of partisan divisions. As the Committee to Modernize Voter Registration demonstrates, in the area of voter registration, there is a bipartisan chorus calling for reform. Unfortunately, the closer we get to an election, the more likely partisanship will drown out our unified voices on this critical issue. Implementing the reforms will take time, but the moment to act legislatively is now.

If we wait, we will continue to see elections that block eligible voters, waste critical resources and open the question of registration fraud. On this issue it is time to check partisan gamesmanship at the door and work together to better serve our representative democracy.

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