

## Voter Registration System Needs to Be Modernized

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As the elected officials responsible for safeguarding the most valuable asset in any election — the right of all eligible voters to cast ballots for the candidates of their choice — we were proud to see the nation's election system rise to the challenge of historic voter participation on Nov. 4. Now, as lawmakers gather to consider changes to our election system, we must evaluate what lessons we can learn from 2008 to make our election system even better for the next cycle.

One key area where improvements are necessary, and possible, is the modernization of our voter registration system. We're pleased to see that the Senate Rules and Administration Committee is holding a hearing Wednesday on our voter registration system, and we encourage the committee, in a bipartisan way, to consider the challenges of our system and ways in which its efficiency, accuracy and cost effectiveness can be improved.

The 2008 elections made it clear that our system relies too heavily on outside groups to register voters and places considerable burdens on individuals seeking to register or update their registration. This can lead to concerns about invalid registrations clogging the system or voter rolls plagued by duplicate and inaccurate information.

Consider, for instance, the case of the high school civics teacher who decided to help her students by collecting their voter registration cards and turning them in. A lovely sentiment, but come Election Day the students found out the hard way that the teacher forgot to submit the cards by the registration deadline. Or reports from jurisdictions all over the country, including our states, that local election officials were slammed at the last minute with huge stacks of registration forms from groups registering voters. Such a last-minute rush is probably inevitable given human nature and the political process, but it leads to tremendous pressures on election workers, leading to delays and errors, despite everyone's best efforts.

To be fair, outside registration efforts are as much a symptom as they are a problem. Some eligible voters have a difficult time navigating the system on their own, and even those who have properly dotted every "i" and crossed every "t" can show up at their polling place on Election Day to find they're not on the rolls. Indeed, the nonpartisan Election Protection coalition said that almost 40 percent of all the complaints they received in 2008 were related to voter registration issues.

We must significantly streamline voter registration and make greater use of technology to weed out inefficiencies. Right now, many voters have no convenient way of verifying that they're on the rolls, or that their information is accurate, leading them to submit duplicate registrations to ensure their right to vote is secure. If voters move between states or within a state, or even more simply change their name, their old, outdated registration record often remains for several years. Simplifying and automating the process could help save time and money and, most importantly, protect voters.

While the National Voter Registration Act, or Motor Voter Act, was supposed to solve many of these problems, we know all too well that while some localities do a great job of complying with the act — offering opportunities to register at all governmental agencies — many do not. If we could harness the power of technology, we could better serve the goals of the Motor Voter law, rendering its mandates nearly obsolete while at the same time reducing the need for outside groups to assist in voter registration.

There must be a better way to make sure that all eligible voters have easy access to the system while ensuring that only eligible voters have such access. We should embrace opportunities to research and study technological innovations to the voter registration system, which could help election officials do their jobs more efficiently, using fewer resources, while improving upon the system's accuracy. Most importantly, technology and policy innovations could help us better serve our "customers" — the voters.

We have been fortunate to work with those, such as the Pew Center on the States and others, who share our vision of more accurate and efficient elections, and better service to voters, and who have been promoting research and pioneering new solutions. Though this most recent election is over, we will not stop working across state and party lines to ensure that we have the voter registration system our voters deserve.

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