



AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION: USING DRIVERS LICENSES AND TAX DATABASES FOR AUTOMATIC REGISTRATION

The Problem. Recent elections underscore the importance of improving the way we register citizens to vote. Our voter rolls are not complete enough, with nearly a third of eligible Californians -- about 6.7 million people -- not registered, a lower percentage than in 2001.¹ This lack of civic participation is a threat to good governance and a healthy democracy. Current state law limits valuable opportunities for engaging more Californians in the electoral process.

California, like the rest of the United States, is one of the few democracies where the government does not take responsibility for registering its voters. The international norm is an orderly process of government-mandated automatic voter registration of every citizen who reaches voting age. Ironically, Iraq has a higher share of its adult citizens registered to vote than the United States because the Iraqi government and the American authorities sponsored automatic voter registration of Iraqi citizens. It's time to establish automatic, universal voter registration that ensures every Californian's ability to vote.

Automatic Voter Registration. The way forward is to establish universal voter registration as a mutual responsibility of citizens and their government that is conducted through an automatic registration process. Registration would occur on a steady rolling basis instead of in spurts tied to any specific election. Each voter receives a unique identifier that ensures she or he does not vote more than once. Not only does such an orderly process provide nearly 100 percent voter registration, but it leads to much cleaner voter rolls and less voter fraud.

Current law and practices. California law currently establishes three conditions for voting eligibility and registration: an

individual must be a U.S. citizen; a resident of California; and at least 18 years of age before the next election. Eligible voters must take the initiative to register by signing a legal affidavit swearing that she or he is a citizen and has reached the required age. Since passage of the federal Help America Vote Act, first-time voters in federal elections must show proof of residency (photo ID, current utility bill, bank statement or government document) either at the time of registration or when they show up at the polls for the first time. Registration forms are available at government web sites and offices. In addition, many voters are provided registration forms by political parties or advocacy groups.

The Solution: using driver's license and tax databases for automatic registration.

The all-voluntary basis for voter registration has proven to be ineffective at producing complete or clean voter rolls. California should enact a law directing the Department of Motor Vehicles and the California Franchise Tax Board to send to the Secretary of State's office the names and addresses of every person who would be 18 by the next election. The Secretary of State would automatically register those people to vote, enter them into the statewide voter database, and notify these new voters about their registration. This would add millions of eligible Californians to the voter rolls.

Ensuring against fraud. Under new rules for gaining a Social Security card, applicants now must show proof of U.S. citizenship or immigration status.² California law now requires every applicant for a driver's license to show

proof of legal presence within the United States, verification of birth date and a Social Security number.³ The California Franchise Tax Board also requires a Social Security number for U.S. citizens or an individual tax identification number (ITIN) issued by the IRS for noncitizens to file a California state income tax form. Thus these two databases already include information for new drivers and tax filers necessary for voter registration, including citizenship status, place of residence and age. California authorities could add automatically to the voter rolls any new recipients of a driver's license or tax filers. Over time, as more new drivers and tax filers are added automatically to the rolls, California would approach universal voter registration.

The downside of this plan is that it would miss eligible voters who don't pay taxes AND who don't own cars. But this would be a small number of people compared to the millions of Californians who would be added to the voter rolls by this method. Also any person who moves without updating their driver's license information (i.e. a person who moves from southern California to northern California) could temporarily become unregistered.

Other ways to boost registration:
Preregistration of high school students.

Young people are more negatively impacted by our voter registration system than other demographic groups. In 2004, a presidential election year, just over half of eligible Californians between 18 and 24 years of age were registered to vote, and in nonpresidential elections that rate is even lower.⁴ California's diverse population is especially apparent in high schools today. Because students in effect are a "captive audience," high schools are an ideal place for engaging young people and incorporating them into our democracy.

A state or county should have high schools pre-register to vote all their students who are 16 years of age or older. This data would be entered into the voter database like any other voter registrant, but this registration would be coded with her or his birth date. As each pre-

registrant turns 18, the database would automatically activate that voter registration. The newly registered voter would receive a letter alerting her or him about their eligibility, the date of the next election, and their responsibilities when changing addresses. In addition, each student in their junior or senior year would be enrolled in a "voter's ed" curriculum for high schoolers, just as many have "driver's ed" now. This would introduce more young people to the importance of civic engagement.

The cost of this program would be minimal. Current voter registration methods are not affected, only the legal age for voter registration would be changed. County and state databases will require minimal change to accommodate this practice. In fact, California already has a "birthday card" program where voter registration cards are mailed to approximately 30,000 18-year-olds each month on their 18th birthday who have previously "registered" and been entered into the voter database. According to the Secretary of State's office, it would be a straightforward matter to convert that program to one of actual preregistration.

¹ Voter registration information from the web site of the Secretary of State of California, http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/ror/154_2006/hist_reg_stats.pdf

² For new rules to obtain a Social Security card and number, see <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/pubs/10120.html>

³ For California's requirements for obtaining a driver's license, see http://www.dmv.ca.gov/dl/dl_info.htm#2500

⁴ In 2004, 54.4% of eligible Californians 18-24 years old were registered and 44.9% actually voted. In 2002, 39.2% of eligible 18-24 year olds were registered and 18.8% voted. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.