

REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Underfunding of voter registration: a guarantee that 25 percent or more of Americans won't participate

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Sept. 13, 2012 — While recent “voter ID” measures have received considerable press attention, and though structural barriers to voter registration have long been noted, less attention has been paid to why voter registration under the existing patchwork of state-based registration systems invariably falls so far short of the number of eligible voters. It’s an important question: according to the Census Bureau, even during presidential election years, at least a quarter of the eligible electorate has been unregistered in the period from 1980 through 2008.

Voter registration efforts, of course, do exist, including those conducted by the national non-partisan organizations Project Vote, Rock the Vote, and the League of Women Voters. Remapping Debate spoke with representatives from these and other organizations, as well as with observers of the registration process, to find out if current registration efforts match the need, and, if not, why not.

It turns out to be abundantly clear that need far exceeds current efforts. Especially because many registration drives necessarily rely on one-to-one, in-person contacts, the process of converting potential registrants into actual registrants is highly labor-intensive. And voter registration organizations get nowhere close to the funding they require to fundamentally alter the size of the unregistered population.

U.S. LAGS IN VOTER REGISTRATION

Many nations have higher voter registration rates than the United States. The following countries are those identified in [“Expanding Democracy: Voter Registration Around the World,”](#) a 2009 report from the Brennan Center for Justice.

Each country’s primary registration method is one of four types. In a civil registries (CR) system, authorities cross-reference existing government lists to add eligible citizens to the voter rolls automatically. In a data-sharing (DS) system, a variety of public agencies provide updated information on citizens to election administrators. An enumerations (E) system involves election administrators affirmatively reaching out to eligible voters by mail or in person to provide registration materials. Voter-initiated (VI) registration describes the U.S. system: voters are responsible for getting themselves registered and re-registered.

Comparative Voter Registration

Countries	Registration Method	Registration Rates	Year Data Collected
Argentina*	CR	100%	2007
Belize	VI	97%	2008
Great Britain	E	97%	2008
Mexico	VI	95%	2005
Peru*	CR	95%	2006
Sweden	CR	95%	2006
Belgium*	CR	94%	2007
Indonesia	E	94%	2004
Austria	CR	93%	2008
Canada	DS	93%	2008
Germany	CR	93%	2005
Australia*	DS	92%	2008
Burundi	VI	91%	2005
France	DS	91%	2007
South Africa	VI	77%	2009
Bahamas	VI	75%	2007
United States	VI	68%	2006

*Indicates mandatory voting

Not making it easy

Rob Richie, the executive director of FairVote, a think tank focused on how to improve elections and democratic involvement, explained that the current system of voter registration in the U.S. is defined principally by the fact that it is an “opt-in” approach as opposed to an ‘opt-out’ approach.” That is, in contrast to many other comparable democracies, where citizens are registered and stay registered automatically unless they actively decide not to participate (an “opt-out” system), U.S. citizens must affirmatively and individually register (“opt-in”) before being allowed to participate.

“I don’t see any sorts of funding that would allow a coalition of organizations working together to get...registration to the level that we need” — Michael Slater, Project Vote

It is true, as Donald P. Green, a professor of political science at Columbia University explained, that “it is much easier to register now than it was 30 years ago,” in large measure because of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, commonly known as the “Motor Voter Act.” The legislation, required state offices, like departments of motor vehicles and social service agencies, to offer citizens the opportunity to register when they interact with the agencies for other services.

Nevertheless, as Tova Andrea Wang, senior democracy fellow at the progressive policy research and advocacy group, Demos, told Remapping Debate, “I don’t think that the number of people who are not registered to vote because of structural obstacles is small.” Most states, she pointed out, require registration well in advance of elections, meaning that just as campaigns enter their final weeks, newly-interested voters cannot register.

Though some states have implemented registration reforms like online registration, election-day (“same-day”) registration, and, starting this year in Washington State, registration via Facebook, these states are far outnumbered by those who haven’t lowered barriers to registration: 36 states still do not permit online registration, and 42 do not permit same-day registration.

And other states are actively making registration — and registration drives — more difficult. According to a [report](#) released last month by the Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy and law institute at the New York University School of Law, “In 2011 and 2012 alone, bills were introduced in at least eight states — California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, North Carolina, and South Carolina — to restrict registration drives.”

Voter registration need not matched by the effort

So what to do until more citizen-friendly systems are in place? Tova Andrea Wang, of Demos, said that non-partisan voter registration groups “are indispensable...so as long as we have a system in the United States where it is...on the citizen to proactively register to vote and the government really does very little to facilitate that process, groups such as those are literally indispensable to making our democracy work.”

During the 2004 election cycle, for example, of the 49.6 million registration applications submitted across the country, fully 20 percent — from 10 million citizens — came via non-profit voter registration efforts.

Non-partisan voter registration organizations, while proud of their efforts, are conscious of their limited ability to reach the still-large unregistered population. They say that a critical problem they face in doing their work is a lack of available money. According to Michael Slater, executive director of Project Vote, a national organization that submitted 1.3 million registration applications, “I don’t see any sorts of funding that would allow a coalition of organizations working together to get...registration to the level that we need. I mean could we really boost registration in Ohio working together? Absolutely. But [all] across the country? No. No one’s in that position.”

Caitlin Baggott, the executive director of the Bus Project Foundation, a smaller non-partisan group that seeks to engage young people in politics, and whose work includes registering young voters in Oregon, described “non-profit organizations and community groups [as] scrap[ing] together meager funds to register what truly ends up being a drop in the bucket [among younger] voters each election cycle, while literally millions of Americans are eligible to vote but don’t know how, where, or when to register or vote in an election.” That system, she said, “is fundamentally broken and unsustainable for the health of our democracy.”

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While important, that is “not a solution; that’s maintenance work.” — Caitlin Baggott, Bus Project Foundation

More concretely, among the Bus Project Foundation’s target audience in Oregon (those under age 35), Baggott calculated that there are between 400,000 and 500,000 unregistered voters in the state, of which the organization will hope to register 15,000 before the election in November. She estimated that “with our partners and coalitions in the state, we might get 67,000 [registered] which means that we have an impact on about 15 percent of the problem.” While that is an important effort, Baggott said, that is still “not a solution; that’s maintenance work.”

When Remapping Debate asked what it would take to register double that figure — registering 100,000 young voters in the state — Baggott replied quickly: “a million dollars.” Such money, she said, is seldom forthcoming. Generally, “there is no money for it.”

Baggott’s experience with the difficulty in raising money is not unique. Project Vote, the large national voter registration organization, commanded a budget of \$18 million for voter registration during the 2008 election cycle. For the current election, Project Vote’s director, Michael Slater, said that far less funding was now available, and that the organization expected to spend just \$2 million on voter registration: “We are not doing very much field registration this year. I would like to be doing a lot more.”

Project Vote had relied on ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) to carry out much of its registration in 2008. ACORN, now defunct, met its end in 2010 when donors and the federal government withdrew funding after a conservative activist produced a video that seemed to show wrongdoing by low-level ACORN staff members. Slater argued to Remapping Debate that the Project Vote's previous relationship with ACORN did not scare away donors from Project Vote, but the demise of ACORN "took out what had been a widely trusted vehicle to do voter registration on a large scale."

Rock the Vote, an organization that encourages young Americans to register to vote and participate in civic life, has faced similar, if less dramatic, reductions since 2008. For that election, Rock the Vote registered 2.25 million young people, but for the 2012 election cycle it has reduced its goals to 1.5 million new registrants. Chrissy Faessen, Rock the Vote's vice-president of marketing and communication, said that the organization was able to spend only \$3.5 million this year. In contrast, tax filings show Rock the Vote spent over \$5.2 million in 2008.

Who are the unregistered? Why?

Rates of registration vary considerably among different segments of American society. Being young or having recently moved are the two most common characteristics of unregistered voters. These factors make it easy to slip through the cracks in the current registration system. Educational attainment, family income, and race also reveal variations in registration.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's "[Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008](#)," a report issued this July and drawn from its Current Population Survey, 58.5 percent of 18-24 year olds were registered, a figure lower than all other age groups (those older than 75 had a registration rate of 76.5). 72 percent of whites and 69 percent of African-Americans reported being registered, compared with 55.3 percent of Asians and 59.4 percent of Latinos. 85 percent of those with advanced degrees (beyond a four-year college degree) were registered, compared to 50.5 of those who had not completed high school. Those with family income of over \$100,000 reported 84.8 percent registration, compared to 63.7 among those families earning less than \$20,000.

The Census Bureau asked respondents to choose the reason they were unregistered, and found that 46 percent were "not interested in the election/not involved in politics," 14 percent "did not meet registration deadlines," and 8.6 percent were "not eligible to vote."

By contrast, a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey conducted in 2006 and released in "[Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why](#)," reported a substantially lower percentage of people claiming a lack of interest in politics than did the Census Bureau. After asking unregistered voters why they had not registered in an open-ended question format, the Center found that "no single dominant reason emerges." Top answers included, "no time or just haven't done it" (19 percent), "recently moved" (17 percent), and "don't care about politics" (14 percent).

Faesson said that Rock the Vote hoped to exceed its goal of 1.5 million new registrants, “but it does come down to resources in terms of how many people we can register...There is the reality that it is not exactly the same budget.”

Face-to-face registration: “It is truly a slog; it’s the least efficient way we can possibly create a democracy. But that’s the system we have right now.”

— Caitlin Baggott

The League of Women Voters, a volunteer driven organization, does not face budget problems of a similar scope, but as Jeanette Senecal, senior director of elections at the League told Remapping Debate, the League’s efforts are constrained by the need to find and train an adequate number of volunteers and to “have the staff capacity at the national office to then motivate and manage and work with the volunteers across the country.”

I reached out to two large foundations that have funded voter registration efforts in the past: the Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation. Open Society confirmed that it was not funding any voter registration work in this election cycle. It did not answer the question of why it stopped this funding, writing only in an emailed statement that “we have put more funds into nonpartisan voter education and engagement.”

The Ford Foundation did not provide a representative to interview in response to Remapping Debate’s request, but said in an emailed statement attributed to Cristóbal Alex, a program officer for the initiative that promotes electoral reform and democratic participation, that Ford sees “voter registration as the key that unlocks the door to democratic participation.” Overall, data on Ford’s website shows that the foundation has spent approximately \$10.43 million this year on “promoting electoral reform and democratic participation,” including at least one grant of \$750,000 (to Voto Latino) specifically for voter registration. A follow-up email asking the foundation to set forth the amounts spent specifically for voter registration in each of several recent election years went unanswered.

Costs and benefits of face-to-face registration efforts

The voter registration drives conducted by the Bus Project in Oregon and by community organizations trained and funded by Project Vote are done through face-to-face interactions between canvassers and people on the street. Baggott explained how it works: “A organizer can go out in the field and pretty predictably in the course of an hour get four registration cards...That is just as inefficient as it sounds, but that’s the way the work happens. And so we’ll send somebody out in the field for five hours and we hope they come back with 15 to 20 registration cards, and we then meticulously process and track and turn [them] into the county elections office. It is truly a slog; it’s the least efficient way we can possibly create a democracy. But that’s the system we have right now.”

Though Baggott suggested that the “more efficient thing to do is to change public policy” to eliminate structural barriers to participation, in the context of the current system, face-to-face voter registration is still “what we have found to be the most effective and the most cost effective way to do this work...I have not discovered and abandoned a more efficient method.”

Slater, too, agreed that face-to-face registration is the most advantageous for his organization, with its goals of registering marginalized groups, who may be more alienated from the process. Face-to-face registration is especially helpful in registering people who have not sought to do so at the Department of Motor Vehicles, by visiting the local board of elections, or by registering online (where available), and “do not think that not being registered is a problem that they should take action on their own to solve.”

Would universal registration mean universal participation?

In 2008, roughly eight out of nine registered voters went to the polls. But extrapolating the potential impact of universal registration from that fact, according to Donald P. Green, a political scientist at Columbia University, would be a serious mistake, akin to the “sort of logic that says you can grow taller by joining the basketball team.” A newly registered voter who remains unconnected to politics is still less likely to go to the polls than those already registered. Green estimated that “if we were to snap our finger and make an unregistered person registered,” it would result in “roughly a third to a half of a vote per additional registration.” Nevertheless, Green noted, generating those additional voters would represent a sizable increase over the current status quo.

States with election-day registration (EDR) confirm the measurable gains in voter turnout from reducing the registration barriers. Eight states currently offer EDR, meaning that residents can register at the same time they cast their ballot. One recent study suggests that this boosted voting in Wisconsin by 3 percent, while other estimates have placed the increase in turnout as high as 7 percent. In fact, five out of the top six states in voter turnout in the 2008 election were states that had implemented EDR.

To Rob Richie, at FairVote, the long-term strategy for engaging people in politics and drawing them to the polls will require, in addition to enacting universal registration procedures, a series of steps that make the prospect of participating in an election more attractive to more voters. As the system exists, he told Remapping Debate, “it is not irrational for some people to feel frustrated and not represented by the candidates” running for office at all levels. FairVote supports a variety of policies for combating this sentiment — including popularly electing the president, implementing proportional representation for congressional seats as a means to increase the diversity of candidates and ideas represented, and devoting more resources towards educating high school students on the importance of politics and participation. These proposals, Richie argued, would make “elections more interesting” and generate “the rules that create the motivation.”

When Remapping Debate asked whether a sidewalk table labeled “voter registration,” or a mobile voter truck along the lines of an ice cream or food truck might be more efficient than walking the street with a clipboard, Slater replied that ice cream is something people know they want, whereas, with the “product” of registering to vote, “what we are trying to do is to say, ‘Hey, I know you may not want to buy this product, but it is a really important product for you to have and here’s why, don’t you agree?’”

Donald Green, the political scientist, made a similar analogy to why face-to-face interaction helps in registering: “It is a little like a party, not a political party, but a social party. You often need an invitation to get people to come. For many people who are sort of on the periphery of the political system, unless someone comes to talk to them about the election, it is not going to be a priority.”

Alternatives to Face-to-Face

Another strategy for voter registration currently in use that is much cheaper is direct mail. Using the techniques and data collected by commercial firms, the Voter Participation Center (VPC) uses algorithms to identify likely unregistered voters and send them registration forms. The target is principally “Rising American Electorate,” composed of unmarried women; those other than white, non-Latinos; and citizens under 30. Using the visual, as well as methodological, techniques of commercial direct mail — with a quasi-official looking “final notice” written on the envelope — these efforts are much cheaper on a per-letter basis than face-to-face communications. Moreover, according to VPC’s chief operating officer, Gail Leftwich Kitch, using the mail is effective because of its “universal availability.”

But Slater pointed out, although mail registration is “very efficient, very cost effective,” the fact is “you’ll simply never get the [necessary] number of people to open the mail and respond.” VPC claims a response rate of over 8 percent — very good compared to commercial direct mail — but that still means that the overwhelming number of those contacted do not respond. If, for example, one wanted to reach 2 million unregistered African Americans, Slater observed, “you’d have to put out 20 million pieces of mail. There aren’t 20 million unregistered African Americans out there,” thus making it unlikely to reach the goal. Direct mail and face-to-face registrations are not mutually exclusive, he said, but they do have different benefits and costs.

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Rock the Vote, meanwhile, has perhaps been the most successful organization in recent years in using mass media and new media to reach unregistered voters. Starting in the early 1990s with its public service announcement featuring Madonna wrapped in a large American flag, the organization has used celebrities to help convince young people to register and turnout to vote. At the same time, Rock the Vote combines media appeals and an internet presence with face-to-face interactions, as it will this fall when it holds concert events on college campuses as part of its “Road Trip 2012” tour.

A surprising lack of data

Part of the difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of various voter registration methods lies in the fact that little research on the relative merits of different techniques or on the overall impact of voter registration by political scientists that is available in the public domain. Donald Green told Remapping Debate, “The funny thing is that almost all of our experiments are on turnout, not registration.”

Moreover, what data has been collected is frequently not publicly available, as organizations are trying to hold onto what Green called the “secret sauce,” of which methods work for them in reaching their target audience.

THE ROLE OF VOTER ID LAWS

Within this election cycle voter registration organizations also face the task of alerting new registrants to the requirements of state voter identification laws, measures that, according to Lee Rowland, represent “hoop[s] that we are asking voters to jump through.”

Rock the Vote, for example, is addressing these hoops by making them the central theme in the media messages it propagates this fall. Calling its campaign “We Will,” it features slogans like, “They want us to be silent, we will be heard,” and “they want us to back down, we will be brave.”

According to Chrissy Faessen, Rock the Vote’s media campaign will highlight the argument that “there are attempts out there to keep young people away” in order to “make sure they are aware of that.”

Michael Slater of Project Vote agreed with Green that “there is certainly a set of proprietary data out there,” and, when asked whether Project Vote collected that kind of data, did not answer directly (he said only that the organization “does a lot of work to try and understand how to make our program effective.”).

Rock the Vote does post some “best practices” about reaching young voters on its website, but also, said Chrissy Faessen, collects data to answer questions such as what type of interactions used by the organization are most effective and what percentage of those it registers actually turn out to vote. Those data, Faessen said, are shared with community partners and other voter registration organizations, but not necessarily with the public.

Some organizations simply don’t have adequate data. Jeanette Senecal, at the League of Women Voters, said the League still targets unregistered Americans at naturalization ceremonies and at high schools — places where “we still *know* there are large numbers of unregistered people” — because a lack of data has prevented the organization from identifying additional targets for registration.

Is it really all about the money?

“Voter registration drives,” according to Lee Rowland, counsel for the Brennan Center’s Democracy Program, “are a necessary part of that [reaching out to voters], but they are not sufficient.” She suggested to Remapping Debate that while, “we need them out there,” it was also important to have “government policies that help us capture more of those voters.”

Indeed, most everyone Remapping Debate spoke with said that the elimination of structural barriers was of crucial importance. But when challenged on how to make the current structure work better for more people, they agreed that underfunding was the single greatest problem.

There are, however, additional challenges facing voter registration groups. Michael Slater, of Project Vote, said that groups doing voter registration are faced with the problem of not only how much money they have access to, but when they receive it. “There is a tendency to invest a lot of resources in an election year and then find that there’s not as much money left after the election...What we’re talking about is how philanthropic dollars are being used.”

For newly registered voters, Slater said, “The best thing to do after an election is invest money...to help them channel their interest in voting into getting outcomes.” After elections take place, Slater pointed out, “The real battle is fought...when legislation has to get passed and budgets are developed.”

But the fall-off in funding in non-election years, Slater continued, means that, after an election, groups “don’t continue to invest in building the capacity and expertise of those voters who have come out in response to their election year programs.”

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Editor’s note: An important and obvious question — unfortunately beyond the scope of this story — concerns the role of *partisan* registration drives. Historically, political parties played a central role in registering voters, but that role has generally declined. We hope to address this issue in a future article.

On Sept. 13, 2012, this article was corrected by clarifying the meaning of the paragraph concerning the Bus Project Foundation’s target audience.

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