
RESTORING POWER TO THE PEOPLE: PROBLEMS WITH VOTER REGISTRATION AND IDEAS FOR A MORE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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Over the last several decades, political scientists have become more and more interested in analyzing the reasons behind why some people vote and some do not. The largest factor helping to explain why many American citizens who meet the necessary voting qualifications do not vote is simple: they are not registered to vote. Alarming as this may sound, there are various non-monetary costs of voting incurred during the electoral campaign and voting process that are often great enough to keep a person from going to the polls on election day. This paper addresses some of these costs in light of the current lack of voter registration and explores the attempts to increase registration over the past fifteen years. Finally, this paper offers a variety of solutions that may help increase voter registration and mobilize more voters, including a drastic shift that would require shaking the country's democratic foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, political scientists have vehemently debated the critical question of whether or not American democracy is in serious jeopardy. We cannot discount the potentially deleterious effects that increasingly reduced levels of voter turnout can have on our political system. Scholars argue that the costs of voting are too high and rational voters attempting to maximize their utility fail to reach the polls because the costs do not outweigh the benefits from casting a ballot. While examining these various voting costs, a serious question warranting investigation is: How do voter registration laws function as substantial impediments on an individual wishing to exercise his or her right to vote, and what reforms have been or are being implemented to reduce these obstacles and allow for easier registration? Importantly, voter registration

represents the single most substantial barrier prohibiting citizens from going to the polls. Registration information is often too obscure and onerous to access, making it difficult for the poor or uneducated to overcome these registration costs. Consequently, unacceptable inequalities within the voting process are created. Although past registration reforms, such as the 1993 National Voter Registration Act and its “motor voter” proposal, have increased registration by reducing voting costs, their successes have been limited because they still place the burden of registration on the individual rather than the government and remain less accessible to the poor. Imperatively, the government must take increased responsibility in registering voters to successfully overcome the costs hindering voter registration in order to increase turnout.

THE COSTS OF VOTING

The costs of voting have long been studied by political scientists and researchers attempting to understand voting behavior. These studies have intensified over the past four decades as voter turnout began its nose dive in the 1960’s and rapidly approached disconcertingly low levels. A plethora of variables—such as figuring out where candidates stand on the issues, determining where the voter stands, taking the time off from work or chores to go and vote, etcetera—constitute barriers for citizens desiring to exercise their right to vote. In addition, certain people possess the capabilities to better overcome these costs than others. However, the biggest cost of voting is the simple, yet important, act of registering to vote. In their 1978 voting study, Steven Rosenstone and Raymond Wolfinger stated, “registration is often more difficult than voting. It may require a longer journey, at a less convenient hour, to complete a more complicated procedure—and at a time when interest in the campaign is far from its peak.”¹ While the act of registering is a necessary component of voting costs an individual must incur, its importance and subsequent impact often goes overlooked. Simply stated, without registering, you will not be eligible to vote.

Voter registration laws function as roadblocks to the ballot box and therefore result in reduced voter turnout. People attempting to register and participate in an election for the first time face the costs of figuring out how and where to register, when they have to register by, and which party they should register for. When barriers such as these exist weeks before the actual ballot casting, many voters, especially newer and uneducated ones, are unaware of these aspects; consequently, they lose the franchise to vote because they fail to register in a timely manner.

1 Steven Rosenstone and Raymond Wolfinger, “The Effect of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout,” *American Political Science Review* 72 (1978): 22.

These registration costs are obviously capable of being overcome since millions of people register or re-register every year. However, research has definitively demonstrated that certain groups of individuals possess the capacity to better overcome the obstacles of registration than others. In their study on participatory democracy and voter mobilization, Rosenstone and John Hansen acknowledge that “people with abundant money, time, skill, knowledge, and self-confidence devote more resources to politics, not because politics gives them more in return, but because they can more easily afford it.”² The affluent and middle classes have greater ability to take the time to discover information pertaining to registration deadlines and how to go about registering. They also possess the resources, such as having a car which allows them to drive to the registration location or a computer to register online, needed to overcome the very real costs of registration laws. Those who are well educated and part of the middle or upper classes also have the requisite resources to help overcome the barriers that voter registration laws present. Rosenstone and Hansen explain that “those with many years of formal schooling are more likely to read newspapers, follow the news, and be politically informed.”³ Educated citizens know how to find the phone number of their local registration place, properly fill in necessary information of the registration form, and go about verifying whether or not they successfully registered before it is too late. They are also typically part of extensive social networks through their jobs, neighborhoods, and organizations they belong to that can remind members about electoral information, including the registration process. While the more affluent and educated upper and middle classes retain the ability to overcome the costs of voter registration, the impoverished and uneducated are not so fortunate.

Those who are poor or lacking some semblance of an education are usually embattled in a daily struggle just to make ends meet. When a person is forced to work two jobs to support his family, taking the requisite time to inform him or herself about voter registration procedures is as impractical as it is impossible. Citizens comprising the lower socioeconomic levels of society do not share the advantages that the wealthy and educated have when attempting to overcome costs to vote. These people are not typically members of the social networks that reduce political information costs and confer material and selective benefits for proper political compliance.⁴ No one will socially ostracize them for not registering to vote because they have already been marginalized to the fringes of society. The notion that poorer citizens face extreme difficulty in surmounting registration costs is highly correlated

2 Steven Rosenstone and John Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democratization in America* (New York: Longman, 1993), 12.

3 *Ibid*, 14.

4 *Ibid*, 16.

to the discovery that over 75 percent of citizens in households earning more than \$75,000 are registered to vote, but fully less than half of citizens in households earning under \$15,000 are registered.⁵ This is an abjectly shameful result because people must not be precluded from participating in the electoral process simply because they comprise the lower classes of society. Crucially, the aspect of increasing registration among poorer citizens, who arguably need to participate most in the electoral process in hopes of improving their lives, must be addressed when policies are formulated to increase numbers of registered voters and extend voter turnout to encompass all or most American citizens. Socioeconomic status should not be the determining factor whether or not someone will have the ability to exercise a constitutionally protected right.

CURRENT VOTER REGISTRATION OR LACK THEREOF

One of the chief principles the United States was founded on was that its government would be one created by the people, for the people. While this tenet has not always held true to form, any citizen today aged 18 and older who is not a convicted felon can register to vote. Deplorably, it has been determined that roughly one-third of eligible American voters—over 60 million people—are not even registered to exercise their democratic right.⁶ This information, coupled with the fact that registered voter turnout rates have generally fallen in the 50 to 60 percent range over the last several decades (with even lower rates for non-presidential elections), means that smaller groups of citizens are making decisions for the entire nation. Though disinterest in the electoral process and declining social capital are plausible explanations to explain these alarming statistics, voting costs, specifically registration, are the primary culprits for people failing to exercise their right to enfranchisement. Concomitantly, these voting registration costs enable a disproportionate number of middle and upper class Americans to participate in the election process. The voice of our nation's poorer citizens is increasingly ignored because many are unable to vote for candidates in the first place since they cannot surmount the costs of registration.

Published information pertaining to the 2004 presidential election reveals that of the 189 million U.S. citizens aged 18 and older who were eligible

5 Andrew Fleischmann, "Protecting Poor People's Rights to Vote: Fully Implementing Public Assistance Provisions of the National Voter Registration Act," *National Civic Review* 93, no. 3 (2004): 67.

6 Rob Richie and Steven Hill, "Getting a New Goalpost: 100 Percent Voter Registration," *National Civic Review* 94, no. 4 (2005): 44.

to register to vote, only 125.7 million (63.8 percent) actually registered.⁷ This figure is both quite disturbing and embarrassing as over 71.3 million of our nation's eligible citizens were unable to participate in the election solely due to lack of registration. Of this number, the U.S. Census Bureau determined that 22 percent of the people who reported that they were not registered to vote failed to do so because they simply missed the registration deadline or did not know where or how to register.⁸ It is conceivable that a fair amount of these citizens would have ventured to the polls had they been registered to vote, since the report also shows that nearly 90 percent of registered voters turned out. Adding these voters could have pushed the percentage of registered voters into the 70th percentile. Although these potential voters were unable to voice their opinions, data reveals that overcoming the registration challenge seems the key to getting people to the polls.

Once voters are registered, the dismal picture begins to brighten. A study conducted by Piven and Cloward found that "people vote if they are registered. Nonvoting is almost entirely concentrated among those who are not registered. This is *prima facie* evidence of the deterrent impact of registration procedures on voting."⁹ Voting figures from the 2004 election complement their findings. Of those who were actually registered to vote, 88.5 percent of the 142 million registered voters made it to the polls to cast a ballot.¹⁰ Figures such as these have placed renewed interest in reforming registration guidelines because it seems evident that so long as an individual is registered, he or she is very likely to vote. The determinant factor, then, is not trying to determine whether one party will do a better job than the other or which candidate offers better policy proposals, but simply overcoming the costs of registering to vote. Implementing new procedures to reduce or eliminate registration costs will allow increased levels of registration and turnout, concomitantly, will rise.

ATTEMPTS TO INCREASE REGISTRATION

A plethora of reforms have been attempted over the past few decades in hopes of increasing the percentages of those registered, thus increasing voter turnout. Overwhelming evidence exists showing that a "key to increasing turnout, above what it would be otherwise, is lowering the preliminary hurdle

7 U.S. Census Bureau, *Election of November 2004*, (Washington, DC:GPO, 2006), 3.

8 *Ibid.*, 11.

9 Francis Piven and Richard Cloward, "Government Statistics and Conflicting Explanations of Nonvoting," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22, no. 3 (1989): 578.

10 U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of 2004*, 3.

of registration.”¹¹ Although none of the major reform policies enacted have fully eliminated the costs associated with registration, they have succeeded in reducing them. The 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) was the culmination of legislative efforts “to establish procedures that will increase the number of eligible citizens who register to vote in elections for Federal office.”¹² Legislators hoped that its enactment would combat the findings of studies like Rosenstone and Wolfinger’s which found the act of registration to be more difficult than voting. Congressional leaders realized that increasing difficulties in the registration process were partially responsible for the concurrent reduction in voter turnout rates since the 1960 presidential election. The Act mandated that all states without election-day voter registration must establish mail-in and agency-based voter registration programs as well as removing policies to purge registrants for non-voting.¹³ Reformers hoped increasing the ways and agencies through which one could register would reduce registration costs by increasing the methods and locations in which one could register. It is much easier to request a voter registration packet via mail, fill it out in the comfort of one’s home, and then return it instead of driving to a party headquarters or office to complete voter registration information. Using these new routes of registration helped eliminate some obstacles for voters and accounted for increased registration. Some scholars had feared that new registrants under NVRA would fail to show up at the polls unlike other voters who used more traditional channels. However, 82 percent of all new registrants voted, signifying that the successful increase in registration resulted in increased turnout at the polls.¹⁴

The centerpiece of the National Voter Registration Act was the so-called “motor voter” provision requiring that “each state shall include a voter registration application form for elections for federal office as part of an application for state motor vehicle driver’s license.”¹⁵ Some forms made things even simpler by designating a check box for the person to indicate whether they wanted their renewal application to double as a form for registration information. Since a substantially higher portion of American citizens are registered to drive than to vote, many felt this provision would easily increase registration rates as people have to renew their licenses every five or so years.

11 Robert Jackson, “A Reassessment of Voter Mobilization,” *Political Research* 49, no. 2 (1996): 345.

12 Steven Knack, “Does ‘Motor-Voter’ Work? Evidence from State-Level Data,” *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 3 (1995): 798.

13 U.S. House of Representatives, *National Voter Registration Act of 1999*, 103rd Cong., 1st sess., 1993.

14 Raymond Wolfinger and Jonathan Hoffman, “Registering and Voting with MotorVoter,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 89.

15 Knack, “Does Motor Voter Work?,” 796.

By providing potentially millions of people with easier registration access, reformers hoped that it would lower registration costs enough to entice people to register to vote. Although comprehensive and specific studies examining the full effects of the NVRA and “motor voter” are not yet available, they clearly appear to be increasing registration levels in at least some demographic areas. Millions of individuals used the various methods provided in the NVRA to register with over three-fourths registering through Department of Motor Vehicle records.¹⁶ Turnout rose substantially for the 2000 election, which was the first election after the legislation was able to complete through a full cycle since its 1995 implementation (scholars explained that it would take time to see the effects of “motor voter” since licenses are renewed at different times in different states) and dispelled claims from the 1996 election that the legislation had failed. For all intensive purposes, the “motor-voter” campaign is helping, but as of 2004, the number of unregistered voters was still deplorable, signifying the need for further action.

Although the National Voting Registration Act successfully reduced the costs of registration and subsequently increased turnout, the reform was ripe with problems. The ambitious quests to register voters often failed to account for the discrepancies existing between the wealthy and middle classes’ abilities to register versus those of the poor. Unlike their higher socioeconomic counterparts, poorer citizens are less likely to be able to afford owning or leasing an automobile; ergo, they are less likely to have a driver’s license and would be omitted from any attempt at registering additional voters by sending them registration applications through the “motor-voter” method of utilizing DMV records. Not only does this fact contradict the primary goal of the NVRA because of its unfair bias, but stands in direct opposition to the fundamental principles of democratic tradition that all citizens are supposed to have an equal say in selecting the leaders who govern them. Realizing this potential flaw, Congressional leaders implemented a mechanism to overcome the potential shortfalls of using only DMV records as a way to increase registration. Section 7 of the NVRA required all states to assign various agencies that provide public assistance programs to serve a double function as voter registration agencies.¹⁷ Programs such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Temporary Aid to Needy Families were granted the capacity to provide those applying or reapplying for these programs the ability to simultaneously register to vote. It was widely held that these programs are accessed more frequently by the poor and would serve as the best places to attempt registering them to vote. Many hoped that adding these registration venues would counteract the more affluent bias of the “motor voter” drive and establish new, equal means for registering.

Initially, this attempt to counteract the potential unfairness presented

16 Wolfinger and Hoffman, “Registering and Voting with Motor Voter,” 85.

17 Fleischmann, “Protecting Poor People’s Rights to Vote,” 66.

by solely using DMV records to increase registration levels worked, as state agencies were diligent in attempting to adhere to the guidelines presented by Section 7 of the NVRA. Unfortunately, a majority of the federal aid agencies that were taking part in implementing registration for poorer citizens were and have been hit hard by budget cuts and program reductions. While registration applications through the various programs represented 11 percent of all new applications in 1995 to 1996, they only accounted for 5.8 percent in 2001 to 2002.¹⁸ The downward trend is likely to continue as monies have been further reduced. While enjoying early success, this aspect of the NVRA has done little to reduce registration costs for those who require the most substantial reduction. Acquiring the time and information to register to vote carries a much higher opportunity cost for poorer citizens compared to the negligible costs that the middle and upper classes enjoy for this same privilege. Poorer citizens need registration and voting costs to be made as minimal as possible in order for them to be able to vote. Although the NVRA failed to achieve its lofty goals, there is another mechanism that can completely eliminate the costs of registering and provide the greatest increases in new voters and turnout on election day.

SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS

The United States is one of a handful of democracies throughout the world that does not impose the responsibility of voter registration on the government, but rather the individual citizen. The easiest way to completely eliminate the costs of registration incurred by voters is to transfer the responsibility of registration elsewhere. By placing the burden of registration on the shoulders of the federal government and removing it from citizens, many of whom lack the resources or abilities to register in the first place, registration costs would disappear. Voters would not have to concern themselves with looking up registration deadlines and taking time out of their schedules weeks before the election to fill in information about their address and party preference. This policy would also help to eradicate the growing class inequalities in the electoral process between the affluent and less affluent. Internationally, a majority of democracies use automatic voter registration procedures for every citizen upon reaching voting age.

Denmark, for example, includes all of its citizens in a national electoral register based on information from the national civil registration system. This system continually conveys basic information about citizens via information from municipal authorities, so when a voter moves, the system is automatically

18 Ibid, 67.

updated and tracks the voter to his or her new location.¹⁹ A week prior to election day, voters are sent a poll card by municipal authorities that contains the voter's name, address, serial number in the electronic register, the location of the polling station, the date of the election, and its hours of operation.²⁰ National advertisements are also run the week prior to the election to both remind people of its approaching date and encourage those who for some reason failed to receive their poll card to complain to the proper officials so they will be able to participate in the election. The government does all the work for its voters. Not surprisingly, the majority of industrialized democracies utilizing this form of registration have turnout rates in the 80th percentiles.²¹ These greatly enhanced turnout rates are due in large part to the simple fact that more citizens are registered to vote since it is automatically done for them. Danish voters invest no time or energy in trying to figure out how and where to vote and simply have to show up to the polls. Scholars have predicted that implementation of automatic registration could increase voter turnout by fourteen percent here in the United States.²² While this figure would still place turnout below the median of European democracies, it would be a positive step in the quest for increased and more egalitarian voter participation.

Clearly, adopting a mechanism in the vein of our European counterparts to place the burden of registration on the government would completely eliminate the registration information costs facing voters. A recent proposal garnering interest is to use statewide mandates (with an eventual push toward more uniform national legislation) that would require school districts to register all students before they graduate from high school.²³ This concept, while still in its infancy, appears promising because it is finally shifting registration responsibility from citizens and placing it fully on the government and its agencies. School districts could hold assemblies for high school seniors or incorporate voting discussions into the curriculums of certain required senior classes to discuss the importance of voting and fulfilling one's democratic responsibility. Some of the various proposals call for making voter registration either a graduation or community service requirement, changing the registration age for the next election to seventeen to ensure all high school seniors will be able to participate, sending out letters to those participating in their first election to remind them of requirements, and having rolling registration times to not over-burden administration with

19 Folketinget, *Parliamentary Elections in Election Administration in Denmark*, <http://www.folketinget.dk/BAGGRUND/00000048/00232623.htm>.

20 Ibid.

21 Arend Lijphart, "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unsolved Dilemma," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 1 (1997): 6.

22 Lijphart, "Unequal Participation," 7.

23 Richie and Hill, "Getting a New Goalpost," 44.

increases in registration.²⁴ High school students would have the opportunity to learn exactly how to vote using the polling machines of their district, how to properly gather information about candidates and their positions, how to go about the mechanics of voting, as well as the potential repercussions of voter apathy. Armed with this information, the hope is young Americans would not only understand the procedures of voting, but realize the importance of exercising their Constitutional right and become lifelong adherers to the process.

While this ambitious concept seems like it would be beneficial to increasing registration and revitalizing a commitment to democratic principles in the younger generations that often drift away from civic participation, its enactment faces widespread difficulties. National budget cuts have unfortunately selected education as one of their primary targets. Schools would not be able to pay teachers to formulate assemblies in order to instruct voting values to students or provide materials needed for incorporating civic instruction into classroom curriculums. It is also unlikely that enough teachers would be willing to devote the extra time necessary to fulfill this registration plan to help engage their students in the democratic process. There is a sparkle of hope, though. Currently, in New York City, all seniors receive a registration card upon their graduation.²⁵ Maybe this simple process could at least serve as a foothold to begin sowing this idea nationwide. Hopefully, when education regains the importance it deserves, money will be available to enact plans akin to New York City's because it places the burden of registration where it belongs and holds the potential to ensure, in a fair manner, that nearly every new person reaching voting age is registered. There is, however, no need to uniformly adopt such a program in every high school in order to receive the reduced information costs that automatic registration can provide. Even though it would provide enhanced civic participation from the young, the critical component is for the government to assume virtually all registration costs.

If the government became responsible for registering all citizens, then the socioeconomic discrepancies inherent in leaving registration up to the individual would disappear. All people regardless of class, wealth, race, religion, political leaning, and any other demographic would be granted the opportunity to express their preferences at the polling place come election day. The necessity to enact automatic registration is buttressed by findings derived from comparisons of voter turnout between states with registration restrictions and states with no restriction that allow for election day registration. States allowing voters to register and vote at the same time had turnout rates up to 15 percentage points higher than those without open-ended registration.²⁶ Our

24 Ibid, 44.

25 Richie and Hill, "Getting a New Goalpost," 45.

26 Lijphart, "Unequal Participation," 7.

government has yet to take on the responsibility of registering citizens to vote and still places the onus upon the shoulders of individuals, despite the fact that it looks to be the most efficient way to remedy our nation's alarmingly low turnout.

As beneficial as these policies appear to be on paper, the likelihood of their immediate implementation approaches zero. Bureaucratic gridlock would instantly halt any such proposal of universal registration for two reasons. First, the issue of money is always a barrier. Such an ambitious program would prove costly and even though it is for the betterment of democracy, its necessity would likely be met with skepticism. Second, and more important, is how automatic registration would alter the face of the electorate. In theory, the elimination of voting costs would increase registration rates among the poor and less educated, bringing a greater number of people into civic participation. A majority of these persons are of minority backgrounds and would be more likely to vote for democratic candidates since minorities generally ascribe to Democratic ideologies. Thus, efforts to increase voter registration have been met with opposition from Republicans as they do not want to face a potentially expanding democratic base.

Moreover, other opponents of universal registration argue that automatically registering these population groups will not increase turnout levels because these people are less likely to vote in an election.²⁷ They contend that the poor cannot bear the still high costs of voting, and, even if automatically registered, they will fail to show up at the polls, so why waste tremendous amounts of money on a plan that increases voter turnout only incrementally, if at all. This sentiment, though, is contradicted by evidence that once someone is registered, 88.5 percent of these newly-registered voters make it to the polls.²⁸ While it is unlikely that the poor would come out in numbers that substantial, having the cost of registration nullified would greatly increase the likelihood of their appearance at the polls. Even if turnout among poor people increased by just half, a universal registration program enables that many more people to exercise the fundamental principle on which our nation is based.

A final mechanism that could easily increase registration would be to increase benefits associated with it and place greater focus on registration during the campaign process. It is widely known that those who do participate in politics tend to get something out of their participation—whether it be tax breaks from their candidate winning, recognition from social networks for

27 Glenn Mitchell and Christopher Wlezien, "The Impact of Legal Restraints on Voter Registration, Turnout, and Composition of the American Electorate," *Political Behavior* 17, no. 2 (1995): 181.

28 U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004*, 3.

voting, or self-pride from fulfilling one's civic duty. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on extending these benefits to the simple act of registering. Social networks need to give positive reinforcement for members when they complete the act of registration. Political campaigns also need to shift their focus. Robert Jackson, a political scientist at Washington State University explains that "most of the information that candidate-centered campaigns provide before closing fates is not geared toward encouraging registration."²⁹ Campaigns serve as a vehicle to provide information about candidates, bash the opposition, and mobilize voters. This mobilization, however, is futile, if people watching the television ads and seeing flyers are unable to participate in the election in the first place. Instead of political parties running negative advertisements and making last minute pushes to get people to go vote, new concentration should be placed on pushing registration months before election coverage begins to intensify. Voter mobilization is important, but voters cannot be mobilized to cast a ballot unless they are registered. Making registration a devout focus could bode well come election time. If enacting these procedures increased registration, turnout, in turn, would also increase since voters who have been paying attention now possess the capability to cast their ballot on election day.

A MORE DRASTIC APPROACH?

Proponents of electoral reform, such as Arend Lijphart, Research Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, opine the necessity to implement more drastic reforms to rectify the abysmal rates of turnout our nation exhibits. One of the primary ways scholars believe that low voter turnout can be overcome is to change our electoral system from plurality to proportional representation (PR). Lijphart contends that our plurality electoral system is too disproportional and the winning party is overrepresented in the number of legislative seats it gets. The cry for implementing PR stems from the fact that its basic aim is "to represent both majorities and minorities and, instead of over-representing or under-representing any parties, to translate votes into seats proportionately."³⁰ Proportional Representation systems provide a more equal representation by giving voters increased choices in who will represent them in government since small minority parties can win office and hold governmental power. Since our plurality system results in the formation of two party systems (Duverger's Law) the options available to voters are often limited to only two

29 Jackson, "A Reassessment of Voter Mobilization," 345.

30 Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 143.

realistic choices. For some people, this limitation can provide enough of a turnoff to abstain from participating in the election or even registering in the first place. Many people already believe that their vote cannot really make a difference, but not having a candidate representative of their personal views is even more disheartening. Even though a plurality system reduces information costs, it limits potential candidates and parties who would address a greater multitude of issues that some voters would have been more inclined to vote for.

A radical switch to PR, however, would be accompanied by its own set of problems, but could entice both non-registered voters to register and vote as well as registered voters to go and vote because it allows for easier translation of an individual's preference into political power. PR successfully incites voter participation because it provides "voters more choices and by eliminating the problem of wasted votes—votes cast for losing candidates or for candidates that win with big majorities—from which single member districts suffer; this makes it more attractive to individuals to cast their votes and for parties to mobilize voters even in areas of the country in which they are weak."³¹ Voters enjoy a government more responsive to the variety of interests existing in society under PR and are more apt to vote because obtaining representation no longer requires a majority outcome. Although it is unlikely that a person's individual vote will be the one that either grants or denies a candidate public office, citizens are given greater stake in the electoral procedure through the PR system; consequently, they will less likely be a casualty of voting costs and actually make it to the polls come election day. This switch is unlikely and will probably never take place though, unless our dominant, two party political system becomes unsuitable for allowing fundamental democratic procedures and the government undertakes some form of immense restructuring as a means to counter the failed system.

CONCLUSION

If we are to safeguard democracy for centuries to come, the first and most important step is registering all eligible citizens to significantly increase participation in the electoral process. Clearly, current voter registration regulations perspicuously compound the major problem of low voter turnout. If we wish to return to the high voter turnouts and citizen involvement of the 1950's and early 1960's, then stronger action must be taken. Ineffectual policies using agencies or methods that continue to place the burden of registration onto the voter, not the government, will not achieve their goals. Different types of citizens have varying degrees of ability to successfully surmount the costs

31 Lijphart, "Unequal Participation," 7.

of voting. Because of these discrepancies, a *sine qua non* exists to place urgent attention on reducing the costs of voting for our less affluent and educated citizens in order to truly capture the political preferences of all people and establish more representative government. The simple act of registering is the primary cost incurred in the voting process and often acts as a catalyst to engage people in the electoral process; once a person is registered, almost nine out of ten voters do make it to the polls. While certain policies may reduce voting costs, having the encumbrance of registration shouldered by our government would completely wipe out the greatest cost and simultaneously eliminate the inequalities inherent in existing registration reforms. As a nation, we must attempt to eliminate registration costs, thus removing the roadblocks so all of our fellow citizens can navigate the highway of democracy.

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