



ELECTION ADMINISTRATION REFORMS: A MATTER OF FAITH

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

The United States has one of the lowest voter turnout rates among developed nations, nearly a quarter of all eligible voters are not even registered.¹ We are the only major democracy in the world that requires individual citizens to bear the full responsibility of registering and then re-registering to vote.² Our elections take place within a patchwork system of rules that can create unequal access to the ballot. What's worse, states and local jurisdictions often depend on outdated election administration systems and rules that perpetuate unjust voting access (like limited voting hours, restrictions on ballot drop offs and limiting use of absentee ballots). Outdated systems also expose our elections to security vulnerabilities and create unnecessary barriers to voting.

Even with all of these identified areas of improvement, there has been no clear unified strategy to strengthen and improve our nation's election administration. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 (after the chaos of the 2001 election) was a first step in federal guidance to states, but the law failed to set standards and did not mandate compliance. This means many jurisdictions continue to have chronically under-resourced and challenging election systems. Despite these challenges, the 2020 election saw the highest voter turn-out in a century and was found time-and-again to be free, fair, and accurate. This success was largely due to the determination and tireless work of committed civil servants, volunteers, and voters.

THE VALUES OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY

As people of faith, we hold shared values of equity, fairness and inclusion. We believe all Americans, regardless of background, geographic location, physical abilities or resources should have equal access to meaningfully engage in civil society. An effective election system that ensures voters have access to the ballot affirms the dignity of each person.

The right to vote is preservative of all other rights because it gives voters a voice in choosing leadership and influencing outcomes for themselves and for future generations. Ensuring equal access to the democratic process empowers people to participate in building a better world, beginning with their own community. The ability to vote should not be determined by where a voter lives, which all too often is the case now. A modernized election administration system that is accessible for all voters enables their participation in shaping a better future.

THE DISTORTION OF OUR DEMOCRACY

The news would have you believe that voting issues generally come from ill intent from the voters themselves. But data consistently shows that voting problems are usually the result of arcane election systems or ill intent from partisan lawmakers.

Problems with record-keeping and flawed voter rolls can slow down voter processing, create longer lines at polling places, and keep eligible voters from participating in elections. Every election cycle, millions of eligible voters face barriers at the polling place due to registration errors. Discrepancies in voter registration rolls can cause confusing delays at the polls and discourage voters. Where there is intent to suppress the votes in certain areas or by voters of color, minor flaws in voter lists are even used to turn voters away.

Voter registration data is often inconsistent and disconnected from other state administrative systems with no clear process to correct discrepancies. Voter roll purges are misguided attempts to “clean-up” record-keeping. Officials with partisan motives may choose to systematically discard voting records or ballots due to minor issues, such as missing information, rather than following up with the voter to rectify them.³ Purges that mistakenly remove eligible voters’ names have been shown to disproportionately disenfranchise Black and brown voters.⁴ This is how outdated voting practices and systems are often used as a back-door method to suppress the vote.

In the 2020 election, the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing protocols highlighted these shortfalls. The recent election also revealed vast inequality in access to systems like vote-by-mail, voter registration, early in-person voting, and basic digitization for updating and correcting voter records. These same discrepancies in our election systems were exploited to undermine public trust in our elections. Confusion, deliberate misinformation, and frightening pandemic conditions during the 2020 election threatened the foundation of our democracy. Even after the election, trust in our systems continues to be undermined with false claims of voter fraud.

“As a community organizer trying to give voters accurate and up to date information on where and how to cast their ballot, one of the greatest challenges I face is the patchwork system we have for voting in Wisconsin. Each town sets its own rules about early voting. Polling locations change from one election to the next, especially during the pandemic. A city clerk in one location makes a statement on what is allowed, only to have it contradicted by the legislature or the election commission. **We need some consistency across jurisdictions and one equitable set of rules that makes voting accessible for everyone.**”

- Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Exec. Dir.
Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice and
volunteer poll-worker.

THE FAITHFUL RESPONSE

Thanks to the leadership of some states and jurisdictions we know how to improve election administration and voter access. National baseline standards for security, accessibility and service would ensure a voter could expect a similar level of access to the ballot wherever they live. Generous early voting windows, same-day and online registration, and options to vote by mail (VBM) can help ensure access for all eligible voters. Automatic voter registration (AVR) systems regularly update and fix voter roll data, thus improving election administration, saving money, and boosting voter turnout.⁵

The For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1) includes these practical solutions to long-standing problems in our election systems. The bill sets across-the-board standards based on known best practices, it includes support for election administrators to implement them and provides resources for jurisdictions to modernize their election systems. Such measures, when applied comprehensively, decrease election administration costs, increase voter participation, bolster voter security, and ensure database accuracy.

¹ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/annotated-guide-people-act-2021>

² <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/expanding-democracy-voter-registration-around-world>.

³ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/congress-must-pass-people-act>

⁴ <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/7/8/eabe4498>

⁵ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-happened-when-2-2-million-people-were-automatically-registered-to-vote/>

