

The Reluctant Voter: Is Same Day Registration the Skeleton Key?

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“In Minnesota, we not only believe citizenship is an American right, it is also an American responsibility. We go out of our way to make sure every single Minnesotan exercises his or her duty and is allowed to vote. For the past 34 years, Election Day Registration has guaranteed them that right—fairly and freely. It’s a right that all Americans should share.”

U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN)ⁱ

November 2010 marks a monumental month for elected leadership in the United States. While 2010 is not a presidential election and thus has escaped the attention of most worldwide, the outcomes nonetheless have far-reaching implications. Many of the elections for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives as well as governors are incredibly close. Party control of the Senate and House hangs in the balance of a mere 39 seats. In addition, an unprecedented 37 of 50 gubernatorial races are being decided on one day. In light of this month’s U.S. elections, thoughts of American voters come to mind: in particular, the challenges voters face in making their voices heard. A paramount barrier is the inflexible policies regarding of voter registration. Most U.S. states require voters to register far in advance of any election (often at least 30 days prior). Same Day Registration, or SDR, may hold the skeleton key to unlocking the voices of those reluctant voters.

What is SDR?

SDR (also known as Election Day Registration, or EDR) allows eligible voters to register and vote on the same day, usually by showing valid identification to a polling station staffer, who checks the identification, consults the registration list, and, if they are not registered, registers them on the spot. Currently, the District of Columbia and nine states have some form of SDR: Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Maine, Minnesota and Wisconsin adopted SDR in the 1970s, while Idaho, New Hampshire and Wyoming enacted SDR two decades later. More recently, Montana implemented SDR in 2006, North Carolina in 2007 and Iowa enacted SDR in 2007. The District of Columbia, the newest SDR jurisdiction, is implementing SDR in the 2010 election cycle.ⁱⁱ

What are the Advantages of SDR?

By counteracting arbitrary voter registration deadlines, SDR greatly enhances the opportunity for a wide variety of Americans to participate in the electoral process. First and foremost, SDR increases voter turnout. Demos, a non-partisan public policy group headquartered in New York City, indicated that states with SDR have historically boasted turnout rates 10 to 12 percentage points higher than states that do not offer SDR

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In addition, the top five voter turnout states in 2008 were all SDR states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Maine, New Hampshire and Iowa). More than 1 million individuals used SDR to register and vote in the 2008 general election. This bloc of voters is larger than the entire population of the State of Rhode Island.ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, SDR enfranchises geographically mobile and lower income Americans. Census data show that almost 35 million people moved between 2007 and 2008, and over 45 percent of those moving during that period had annual incomes less than \$25,000 per year.^{iv} As such, in the states without SDR many Americans who have recently moved are unable to register and vote in time for elections. With SDR, they can register on Election Day in their new locale and cast a ballot.

Third, SDR assists young voters. Young Americans move frequently, making it harder to keep voter registrations current. Although voter turnout among 18-29 year olds reached 51 percent in the 2008 presidential election, the third-highest rate since the vote was extended to 18 year-olds in 1972, it still lagged behind the overall turnout rate in that election.^v SDR is a powerful tool that can be used to ensure that young people are able to register and vote. Research indicates that allowing young people to register to vote on Election Day could increase youth turnout in presidential elections by as much as 14 percentage points.^{vi} Iowans between the ages of 18 and 24 comprised almost 35 percent of the voters who used SDR to cast a ballot in the 2008 presidential election.^{vii}

Fourth, SDR is more cost-effective and easier for election officials to administer than provisional ballots. A recent study indicated that elections are no more expensive to administer in SDR states than elsewhere.^{viii} After an election, officials must spend time verifying voter registration records and determine whether a provisional voter had actually registered and whether her ballot should be counted. This process can take days or weeks. SDR saves time by sparing election officials from these efforts and ensures that voters can cast ballots that will be counted. For example, provisional balloting dropped off sharply in Iowa in the 2008 presidential elections, the first in which SDR was available. In fact, two-thirds fewer provisional ballots were cast in Iowa in 2008 than in 2004.^{ix}

Lastly, SDR would potentially result in more educated and informed voters, as voter registration deadlines close before the media and the public fully focus on elections. The University of Wisconsin found that over 40 percent of election news stories were aired in the final week before the 2006 election in seven Midwest media markets.^x A 2000 election poll found that the percentage of people giving “quite a lot” of thought to the election rose significantly as Election Day approached, from 59 percent in September to 75 percent in the first week of November.^{xi} An unregistered voter who had decided to participate in the historic 2008 presidential and congressional elections in the final week of the campaign would have been ineligible to vote in 40 states.

Why the Hesitation to Implement SDR?

After understanding the myriad of potentially valuable advantages SDR allows, one might wonder why many other states have not yet followed suit. A major concern is that allowing voters to cast ballots on the same day they register fails to provide adequate scrutiny of credentials or potentially allows double voting by permitting someone who might have cast an absentee ballot or voted at another polling place the ability to do so again.

However, a bi-partisan team of consultants to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission reported widespread agreement that very little evidence existed of voter impersonation at the polls.^{xii} In addition, a recent analysis of 2002-2005 data from SDR states also found very little evidence of voter fraud.^{xiii} The great majority of local elections officials participating in a 2007 survey in SDR states rated current fraud-prevention measures sufficient to protect the integrity of elections.^{xiv}

Yet, other critics caution that voter interest and motivation, not SDR, are crucial to increasing turnout. This argument does stand to reason. While these factors may indeed play a role in voter registration, why not remove all barriers possible? At present, a reluctant voter who becomes interested and motivated a week before elections has simply lost his or her chance. Would it not be better to provide the opportunity for the most individuals possible to fulfill their civic responsibility?

ⁱ Demos. (2010). *Voters win with same day registration*. Retrieved from: <http://www.demos.org>.

ⁱⁱ Electionline. (2007). *Election day registration: A case study*. Retrieved from: <http://www.electionline.org>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Demos. (2010). *Voters win with same day registration*. Retrieved from: <http://www.demos.org>.

^{iv} U.S. Census Bureau. (2008). *Geographical mobility 2007-2008*, Tables 1 and 5, available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/migrate/cps2008.html>.

^v See Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/State_law_and_youth_turnout_Final.pdf.

^{vi} Fitzgerald, M. (2003). Easier voting methods boost youth turnout. Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>.

^{vii} Email from Linda Langenberg, Iowa Deputy Secretary of State, (Jan. 15, 2010) , as reported in *Voters win with same day registration*. Retrieved from: <http://www.demos.org>.

^{viii} Alvarez, M., Ansolabehere, S., and Wilson, C. (2002). *Election day voter registration in the United States: How ne-step voting can change the composition of the American electorate*, Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project.

^{ix} Demos. (2010). *Voters win with same day registration*. Retrieved from: <http://www.demos.org>.

^x University of Wisconsin NewsLab. (2006) Retrieved from <http://www.mni.wisc.edu/pdfs/MNI%202%20Release%20FINAL.pdf>.

^{xi} The Gallup Poll. (2001). *The nine weeks of election 2000*. Retrieved from <http://www.galluppoll.com>.

^{xii} U.S. Election Assistance Commission. (2006). *Status report to the voter fraud-voter intimidation research project*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/news/pdf/2006-10-11-election-report.pdf>.

^{xiii} Minnite, L. (2007). *Election day registration: A study of voter fraud and findings on voter roll security*. Retrieved from <http://www.demos.org/pubs/EDRVF.pdf>.

^{xiv} *Election day registration: A ground level vie.* (2007). Retrieved from http://www.demos.org/pubs/EDR_Clerks.pdf.