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## PSL Opinion Paper: Voter Registration Reform

Voting turnout among eligible citizens in America has been declining over time. Also America's voter turnout is quite low compared to other Western democracies. This decline may be caused by a multitude of factors such as gerrymandering causing elections to be uncompetitive or a feeling among Americans that their vote doesn't matter. Perhaps the main reason why voter turnout has become so low is growing barriers to voting registration. Some states have tried to make it as hard as possible for citizens to register. This issue is very important because states use the registration process to silence certain communities. America's democracy is undermined when large portions of eligible citizens are not expressing their views through voting. There are solutions to this problem that would make voter registration much more accessible to eligible voters. However, the problem at hand is not seen as a priority for most politicians. This can change if citizens reach out to their representatives and voice their concern on this issue.

In the United States voter turnout is low. Out of all eligible citizens in the United States, about half turned out to vote in 2016. Compared to other countries America's voting turnout is very low. In fact, out of 32 democratic countries studied, the USA ranked 26th in terms of voter turnout.<sup>1</sup> Despite new technological developments and a more educated populace, voter turnout has not increased in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from:  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

There are several theories for why voter turnout is not improving, but perhaps the main reason is that there are barriers that people need to overcome in order to vote. One such barrier that can be easily remedied by the government is the registration process. Although there are national agencies that promote registering, some states try their hardest to keep people from becoming registered. Voter registration drives serve to ease the registration process for citizens. To curb the drives, some states will make volunteering for them as difficult as possible. National agencies don't allow states to purge eligible voters unless it is for a good reason such as a criminal conviction. But some states find minute and negligible reasons to take away a citizens' ability to vote. In Georgia, for example, voters were purged because their name on other governmental records was not exactly the same.<sup>2</sup> Recently, some states have begun to require voters to give proof of their citizenship in order to register. This policy discriminates against certain groups of people who may have a hard time obtaining proof of citizenship. In some states, naturalized citizens need to go through extra steps to register compared to everyone else. Many naturalized citizens refrain from registering when they learn how difficult it is for them.

This issue is important because it threatens the integrity of America's democracy. Low voter turnout, while less than ideal, may not be a big threat to democracy if one's income, level of educational attainment, and ethnic identity didn't affect one's ability to vote. However this is not the case. The older and wealthier a person becomes, the more likely they are to vote. Citizens with higher education levels turn out to vote at higher

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from:  
[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human\\_rights\\_magazine\\_home/voting-rights/-use-it-or-lose-it---the-problem-of-purges-from-the-registration/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/voting-rights/-use-it-or-lose-it---the-problem-of-purges-from-the-registration/)

rates. Finally, communities of color vote at much lower rates compared to white voters. If specific communities are barred from expressing their views through voting, then democracy cannot function properly. When race, education, and wealth affects a citizens ability to vote as much as it does in America, the government functions more like a plutocracy than a democracy. So this problem needs to be solved so that the government can be more democratic and the citizens more free.

The main barrier that is keeping some communities from voting is the flawed registration system. As written about earlier, some states enact laws and regulations that target certain groups' ability to register to vote. Also statistics show that once registered, the disparity between communities of color and white voters is lessened. So to solve the problem, the voter registration system must be changed and modernized. One policy that would improve voter registration is same day registration (SDR). SDR allows citizens to register to vote on the same day that they actually vote. Some states have adopted this policy but most states have a deadline to register before voting days. This antiquated deadline system serves as a barrier to voting for citizens who miss the deadline or become more interested in an election after the deadline has passed. Another solution that would help voter registration is online voter registration (OVR). OVR allows citizens to register on the internet instead of through the mail. Online registration makes it more convenient for all people to vote but especially young people who have consistently low voter turnout. Also, for citizens who's first language is not English, an online registration option can help with language assistance. Most states

have begun to offer OVR but some still do not. This registration reform should be offered nationally.

Perhaps the most promising registration reform is automatic voter registration (AVR). With AVR citizens opt-out of registration rather than opt-in. Eligible citizens are automatically registered when they are filed in any government agency. For example, all eligible citizens with a driver's license would be automatically registered to vote. When a government agency receives information on a person it is sent electronically to voter officials who register the voter if he/she is eligible. The government is responsible for registering voters rather than the individual people. 16 states have adopted AVR or some close variation of it. Where established, AVR has been very successful. Studies show that states that have adopted AVR have increased their registration rates.<sup>3</sup> Size and partisan makeup don't matter; the increase in voter registration is consistent across all types of states that adopt AVR.<sup>4</sup>

Voter registration is a serious issue but politicians tend to put it on the back-burner. Most politicians either don't see current voter registration methods as flawed or actively pass legislation to make voter registration even harder for certain groups. Action must be taken at a grass roots level. Citizens should look further into voter registration laws in their own states. Some states still have antiquated voter registration laws or have unnecessary barriers to registration. If a citizen finds themselves in a state like this then they should reach out to their local and national

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from:

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/avr-impact-state-voter-registration>

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from:

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representatives and express their concern for the issue. Also, voters should let their friends and family know about the issue as many people don't know about voter registration reform.

Voter registration reform is a serious issue that deserves more attention. In America, voter turnout is very low compared to other Western countries. This is due to a flawed voter registration system that discriminates against certain communities. There are easily enacted solutions to solve the problem but only a handful of states have adopted these reforms. For those states and politicians who continue to ignore voter registration problems, it is up to the citizens to voice their concern for and spread awareness for the problem.