

Dēmos Briefing Paper Series

# CHALLENGES to Fair Elections



## Election Day Registration Works

In the final days of the 2006 campaign, as in any election year, citizen interest is peaking as election news—and debates on the issues—becomes more pervasive in the media. Unfortunately for America's voters, in all but eight states (one of which does not require voter registration)<sup>1</sup>, if you are not already registered to vote in this week's election, it is too late.

There are seven states, however, where eligible voters are not hampered by arbitrary deadlines, no matter when they become engaged by an election, and can register to vote on Election Day itself. Thanks to Election Day Registration (EDR), also known as "same-day registration," eligible citizens can register to vote on Election Day in Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming, each of which offered EDR in the 2004 presidential election. These states boasted, on average, voter turnout that was 12 percentage points higher than in non-EDR states, and reported few problems with fraud, costs, or administrative complexity. Inspired by their example, Montana is implementing a form of EDR this year.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in 2006, 2008 and beyond, one could easily predict where turnout will be consistently higher than the national average—in states that offer Election Day Registration.

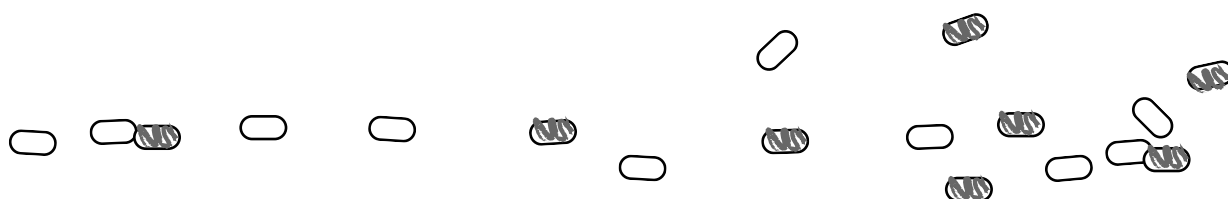
## Where to Watch

### Progress

States with some form of EDR include Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Montana<sup>3</sup>, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

### Problems

Four states—Mississippi, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Tennessee—have the most restrictive voter registration deadlines, falling on October 7 this year, an entire month before the election.<sup>4</sup>



## **Facts**

**EDR helps Americans vote.** In the 2000 election, nearly 3 million people across the country had registration problems that prevented them from voting. Such problems were also widespread during the 2004 election—problems that could have been prevented by EDR.

**EDR allows late-interest voters to participate in democracy.** Twenty-seven states cut off voter registration 25 or more days before Election Day, well before many would-be voters focus on election candidates and campaign issues. The percentage of people giving “quite a lot” of thought to the 2000 election rose significantly as Election Day approached, from 59 percent the week of September 18-24 to 75 percent the week of October 30-November 5.<sup>5</sup> EDR would allow these potential voters to participate at the ballot box.

**EDR increases youth participation in voting.** In one survey, 70 percent of youth aged 18 to 24 said they would be more likely to vote if they were able to register on Election Day.<sup>6</sup> During the 2004 election, the 18-24 age group in EDR states voted at a rate 18 percentage points higher than in non-EDR states.<sup>7</sup>

**EDR enables traditionally disfranchised voters, like people of color, to use their voice at the ballot box.** In the Twin Cities region of Minnesota, nearly one-fifth of Asian/Pacific Islander American voters in a recent election—57,000 voters—used EDR.<sup>8</sup>

**EDR enhances the ability of the disabled to participate in elections.** People with disabilities may find advance registration challenging due to transportation and other access issues. EDR is a convenient one step process that reduces the burdens on Americans with disabilities, allowing them to participate fully in the electoral process.

**EDR helps geographically mobile Americans.** Census data shows that 40.1 million Americans moved between 2002 and 2003.<sup>9</sup> Many individuals who move lose their chance to vote by inadvertently missing the registration deadline in their new election districts. With EDR, they can register in their new district on Election Day.

**Turnout in EDR states is higher.** Census data shows that the average voter turnout in the 2004 election was 75 percent of voting age citizens in EDR states—nearly 12 percentage points higher than in states without EDR. A May 2001 poll showed that nearly two thirds (64 percent) of all non-voters would be more likely to vote if EDR was available.<sup>10</sup>

**EDR is easier for election officials to administer than provisional ballots.** The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) requires all states to offer provisional ballots to voters who claim to be registered but whose names do not appear on registration lists. After an election, officials must spend extra time and effort to check the voter rolls to see if a provisional voter is registered and eligible to vote, and if so count her ballot. If not, the provisional vote is discarded—and in most states, the voter stays unregistered. With EDR, a person whose name is not on the voter roll can re-register immediately and cast a valid ballot. This conserves officials’ time and ensures the voter can cast a ballot that will be counted.

## **Myth v. Reality**

### **Myth: EDR is costly.**

Reality: Election officials in EDR states run elections efficiently and with a minimum of extra expense.

Critics of EDR claim that it is prohibitively costly. However, Election Day registration simply moves the bulk of the pre-election burden of registration tasks to the post-election period; that is, instead of expending resources in the registration period before the election to update databases, most of this work occurs after the election.

The per person cost of voting in an EDR state is comparable to the cost in non-EDR states. In 2000, it cost \$3.30 per person of voting age in Minneapolis and \$3.65 in Milwaukee to run an EDR election. In California, a non-EDR state, Los Angeles County spent \$3.80 per person of voting age, while Orange County spent \$3.06.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Myth: EDR encourages voter fraud.**

Reality: EDR has safeguards in place to prevent voter fraud.

Election officials in EDR states are as vigilant as election officials elsewhere about safeguarding against fraud. Researchers studying EDR in Minnesota and Wisconsin found that election officials made “substantial investments” in eliminating fraud.<sup>12</sup> In an EDR state the voter registers in person, in front of an election official, with identification to verify identity and residence. EDR has taken place in the United States for over thirty years, and election officials are confident that their system is secure.

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### **Myth: EDR leads to partisan advantage.**

Reality: EDR helps voters, not parties.

A common misconception is that EDR will disproportionately advantage the Democratic Party. Both Democratic and Republican election officials support EDR. Dean Heller, Republican Secretary of State of Nevada, speaking in favor of a state EDR bill, observes, “The fact that in Nevada people must register to vote at least 30 days before an election serves as a stumbling block for increasing participation.” EDR benefits all citizens by encouraging everyone to be involved in the democratic process.

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**Election Day Registration is one of the most effective pro-voter reforms available to election administrators today. States without EDR should actively pursue this safe, proven method to increase voter turnout and further the momentum toward a fair, representative democracy in the U.S.**

## References

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- 1 Seven states allow election day registration: Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. North Dakota does not require voter registration
- 2 Montana's EDR bill allows voters to register and vote at the county courthouse.
- 3 Montana will implement a form of EDR this year.
- 4 National Association of Secretaries of State, 2006 Voter Registration Deadlines by State (available at <http://nass.org/Surveys/Voter%20Registration%20Deadlines%202006.pdf>).
- 5 The Gallup Poll, The Nine Weeks of Election 2000.
- 6 Democracy North Carolina, "Youth Voting Survey Conducted by Democracy North Carolina," July 21, 2005 (available at <http://www.democracy-nc.org/whatsnew/2005/YouthSurvey05.pdf>).
- 7 United States Census, "Reported Voting and Registration of the Total Voting-Age Population, by Age, for States: November 2004," May 2005 (available at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/cps2004/tab04b.xls>).
- 8 Testimony of Christine Chen, Executive Director, Asian Pacific Islander American Vote, to the Committee on House Administration, June 22, 2006 (available at <http://cha.house.gov/hearings/Testimony.aspx?TID=940>).
- 9 United States Census, "Geographical Mobility: 2002 to 2003," March 2004 (available at [www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-549.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-549.pdf)).
- 10 Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, "America's No-Shows" (available at <http://www.yvoteonline.org/noshows2000.shtml>).
- 11 Michael Alvarez, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Catherine Wilson, Election Day Voter Registration in the United States: How One-Step Voting Can Change the Composition of the American Electorate, June 2002.
- 12 Ibid.



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