

ELECTION DAY REALITY:

No Registration = No Vote *(in most states)*

By Shirley Tabata Ponomareff and Jeanette Senecal

Why is registering voters just as important as getting voters to the polls on Election Day? Because on Election Day in the majority of states, “no registration” is equivalent to “no vote.” Admittedly, there are seven states (Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming) that allow Election Day (same-day) registration, and

there is one state, North Dakota, where no registration is required. But, for the vast majority of eligible voters, voter registration in advance of Election Day is essential.

There is an additional reason why it’s crucial to get eligible voters registered: In the three previous presidential elections, more than 80 percent of all registered voters went to the polls on Election Day!

Eligible Voter Turnout vs. Registered Voter Turnout

Voter turnout can be calculated in two ways: (1) based on total number of eligible voters—defined as 18 or older, U.S. citizens and, depending on state law, nonfelons—or (2) based on total number of registered voters.

When discussing the importance of getting-out-the-vote, experts often emphasize low voter turnout statistics, citing a voter turnout percentage based on the number of eligible voters. The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, reports that in the three previous presidential elections—2004, 2000 and 1996—the percentage of voter turnout (based on eligible voters 18 and older) was 63.8 percent, 59.5 percent and 58.4 percent, respectively. More than 50 percent—but not by much.

On the other hand, the voter turnout for those same years, based on the number of registered voters, is 88.5 percent, 85.5 percent and 82.3 percent as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. This method of calculation shows a 25 percent greater turnout! It shows that most people who are registered to vote actually do vote on Election Day.

Simply put, the problem is that in 2004, 2000 and 1996, 27.9 percent, 30.5 percent and 29.1 percent of eligible voters were not registered to vote. If these eligible voters were registered to vote, would they vote at the same 80–90 percent rate of registered voters as in the past three presidential elections? A reasonable assumption, it seems. This means 44–49 million more people would have voted in 2004. Let's get them registered!

Voter Registration at Naturalization Ceremonies

Some Leagues, other organizations and local registrars regularly attend naturalization ceremonies and register new voters. However, there are many parts of the country where these ceremonies take place with no opportunity for the new citizens to register to vote. Given this need, the League is seeking to expand the number of local Leagues providing this service and has published *Engaging New Citizens as New Voters: A Guide to Naturalization Ceremonies*. The guide covers the specifics of naturalization ceremonies, regulations about voter registration at the ceremonies, steps Leagues can take prior to the ceremonies, as well as contact information for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Community Liaison Officers in the various regions of the country. The guide is available online: <http://store.lwv.org/>.



Seattle's Vote Mobile: (l-r) Dean Logan, director of elections; Cathy Allen, president and owner of Connections Group and a Seattle League member; and Nancy Eitrem, past president of the LWV of Seattle.

Who's Registering Voters?

The 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), a federal law, requires states to offer voter registration services to all clients at their departments of motor vehicles and public assistance agencies. The NVRA was designed to make it easier for more people to register to vote, and it helped register 2.6 million low-income people in the first two years.

In the ensuing years, however, many states have not lived up to the requirements of the NVRA. In fact, litigation is either proceeding or being contemplated in some states (see "Compliance with the NVRA: Not Optional" in the February

2008 *National Voter*, pp. 10–13). In those states where concerned organizations have worked with local authorities to provide better services to their clients, registration numbers have increased—proof positive that progress can be made when government agencies comply with the NVRA.

Given states' noncompliance with NVRA directives, voter registration drives fill a critical need. Furthermore, registration drives especially serve those people who have trouble obtaining a registration form, filling it out properly and delivering it to the proper authorities. This is where the League and other organizations have played and continue to play such a vital role.

Want to Organize a Registration Drive?

Registration drives are run by various organizations, including religious groups, ethnic groups, and public policy-oriented groups. Many state and local Leagues regularly organize registration drives (see "Step Up" on p. 7).

Registration drives can take a number of different forms. For example, some

registration drives target a specific segment of the population (students at local high schools and community colleges or new citizens). Other drives are directed toward small audiences (e.g., outdoor markets, the local library or grocery store) or large audiences (e.g., at a special fair or other special community event). A number of Leagues use the opportunity of naturalization swearing-in ceremonies to register new citizens (see sidebar on p. 5).

Organizations may work alone or in concert with other organizations in the community. The latter can increase visibility and reach because of size and number of volunteers.

Steps to a Successful Voter Registration Drive

When a League decides to run a voter registration drive there are some first steps that will lay the groundwork, e.g., setting goals, learning about the laws/regulations and working with your local elections officials. Then, it's time to form a coalition, if feasible; select a target; recruit, train, and assign volunteers; and advertise.

Goals: Set an achievable numerical goal from the beginning, to inspire volunteers and serve as a guide for evaluation. Select a time period, target a group, pick sites, etc. Focus on groups of citizens most likely to need help with voter registration, such as those who are newly eligible to vote, have low incomes or are minorities.

Know the law: Become familiar with the federal, state and local laws that govern voter registration in your community. Voter registration practices—methods, deadlines, permissible sites, and the role of volunteers—differ from state to state and may vary among local jurisdictions in the same state. States have different regulations for registration drives so it is critical to obtain the rules and the registration forms from the authorities. Seek legal assistance if you believe that state or local registration practices violate citizens' voting rights.

Work with elections officials: Check in with your local elections officials and make sure they know about your plans. In



How to Empower Newly Registered Voters

Registering voters isn't enough to turn them into active voters. People are more likely to vote if you provide them with voter education materials or direct them to online resources like the League's VOTE411.org Web site, where they can learn about the candidates running for office in their community and find additional election information.

Inform voters of what identification, if any, will be required of them at the polls. Check your state's page on VOTE411.org or with the chief elections official in your state for this information. To be safe, you should suggest that all voters bring their driver's license, pay check or a utility bill that includes their name and street address.

Empower these newly registered voters so they feel connected to the election process right from the start by challenging them to:

- Register five people to vote.
- Take five people to the polls on Election Day.
- Attend or watch a candidate debate.

some places, you will need their help to get voter registration forms, to register voters at special sites or to train and deputize volunteer registrars. In other jurisdictions, only official registrars may be allowed to register voters. If you will need large numbers of forms or deputy registrars, inform elections officials as early as possible and in writing, so they can make necessary arrangements.

Form a coalition: Coordinate your effort with other organizations and share information about scheduled activities to avoid duplication. Take advantage of each organization's special strengths.

Select sites: Site selection and careful timing are critical to an effective registration drive. Use your resources efficiently by providing voter registration opportunities where there are large numbers of unregistered citizens who have the time to sign up. Consider festivals, fairs, sporting events, schools, colleges, public transit stops, public assistance offices, highly populated downtown areas and shopping centers. Make the best use of volunteers and schedule them for peak attendance times. Visit sites ahead of time, and select the most visible and accessible places to station volunteers. Consider the needs of disabled people. Get whatever permission is necessary to register at a privately owned site.

Recruit, train and assign volunteers: Emphasize volunteers' responsibility to protect the right to vote of the citizens they are registering by filling out the forms correctly and returning them promptly to elections officials. Include training in techniques for approaching potential registrants and in messages that will motivate citizens to register.

Advertise: Use the media—editorials, articles, talk shows, and public service announcements—to promote voter registration. Provide information about registration deadlines and requirements. Advertise your voter registration drive, including the sites and times where voter registration will take place. Stage an event—a celebrity appearance, band concert or remote broadcast—to attract a crowd. Don't be afraid to get out from behind a table and work the crowd.

During the Registration Drive

It's extremely important to help "would be" voters register properly. During the registration drive, make sure you're using the current state or federal mail-in registration form since registration forms are regularly updated.

Review each application: Review the new applications to make sure people have properly filled out the forms. Voters who submit incomplete forms will likely not appear on the voter rolls on Election Day so be especially sure voters:

- Check the box affirming they are over 18 years of age;
- Check the box affirming they are U.S. citizens;
- Provide the required identification number, usually their driver's license number or the last four digits of their social security number; and
- Sign and date the form.

Keep good records: Where permissible by law, volunteers should keep track of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of everyone they register by using tally sheets or photocopying registration cards. This information will help if forms are lost or there are other problems. It may also be used for voter education and get-out-the-vote activities.

After the Registration Drive

Follow up with the new voters: Organizers can reach out to the newly registered with important Election Day reminders and information (the League's VOTE411.org Web site for polling place information, for

example). Before Election Day, contact the new registrants—by mail, phone or at their homes—and remind them to vote. Find out if they need information or assistance. Getting those registered voters to show up at the polls is a critical final follow-up activity to all voter registration drives.

Follow up on the registration forms:

Once the registration forms are filed with the local elections officials, there must be follow-up there, too. The state voter registration database should be checked to make sure the registered voters, indeed, were added to the database. If they are missing, local elections officials should be notified and further follow-up will be necessary to make sure the voters are included in the database.

Publicize your success and celebrate:

Show the world that your voter registration drive made a difference. Public officials and candidates will take note. Volunteers will feel positive about their hard work. And, a well-timed expression of appreciation will help persuade your volunteers to work on

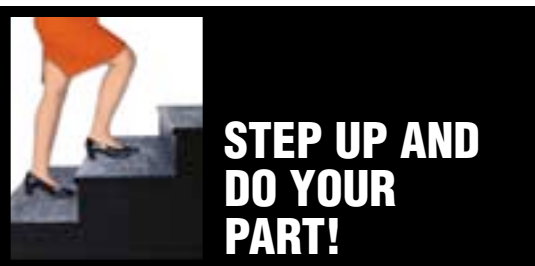
the get-out-the-vote effort and to volunteer for the next registration drive.

Evaluate: Evaluate your efforts, and decide what worked best. Keep this information, with the names and phone numbers of your volunteers, for your next voter registration drive.

Still Time to Organize Registration Drives

This presidential election season, the need for Leagues and other organizations to help people get registered is greater than ever. And there's still lots of time to do this important work. The work is two-fold: We need to register eligible voters, and we need to get those registered voters out to vote on Election Day. See what two Leagues are already doing as reported in the "Step Up" box below. The League's work is cut out for us! ■

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Help Make Democracy Work by Registering Voters

Registering new Voters is one of the most immediately rewarding activities we do in the Seattle League. There is a special "League" sense of satisfaction that comes with direct contact with individuals eager to participate in their government through voting for the first time. I still smile when I remember the excited eighteen-year-old who handed me a camera to photograph her wearing the "Today I registered to vote" sticker.

We partnered with our local King County Elections department to staff a Vote Mobile,* registering 2,500 people in a two-week period. We staff booths at festivals, farmers markets, and special events at the opera, our local universities, community colleges and high school civics classes. Our voter registration teams respond to requests to visit hospitals, the Department of Health and Social Services, and Head Start. Our intrepid volunteers have even registered citizens waiting in line for ferries or sunbathing on the beach.

—Denise Smith, LWV of Seattle (WA) president

Registering to vote is the first link in the chain of democracy. While many organizations focus on voter registration once every four years for presidential elections, the League is there every year—for primary and general elections—encouraging everyone to register AND vote. The most unique League experience I had with voter registration was when a group of us went to a WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) event and worked the crowd waiting to get in. There we were, among the painted faces of wrestling enthusiasts, talking about why it's important to vote and asking them to fill out voter registration forms while they waited in line. I'm not sure how big an impact I had on that crowd, but they certainly had an impact on me. I realized that we need to be willing to take the step to go where we've never gone before to engage folks who perhaps wouldn't hear the message otherwise.

—Andrea Mulrine, LWV of Pennsylvania president

The LWVs of Pennsylvania and Seattle (WA), and other state and local League members have stepped up to register voters. They urge you to join in this rewarding endeavor. Whether or not you have ever engaged in this activity, you are needed even more today because public service agencies in many states are failing to meet NVRA requirements. (See Seattle's Vote Mobile on p. 5.)*