



Statement by
The League of Women Voters of the United States
to the
Presidential Commission on Election Administration

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When President Obama gave his acceptance speech on election night 2012, he pointed to some of the challenges that voters faced when casting their ballot earlier that day, saying "we have to fix that." As one step toward that goal, the President appointed this Commission to examine the problems and propose solutions, particularly those that could be adopted at the state and local levels. While there are many steps that could be taken to improve U.S. elections, there are five key suggestions the League of Women Voters proposes for improving the polling place experience for voters:

- Secure Online Voter Registration
- Permanent and Portable Statewide Voter Registration
- Expanded Early Voting
- Improved Polling Place Management
- Electronic Streamlining

Secure Online Voter Registration: Accurate, up-to-date voter registration lists are key to efficient management of the polls and to ensuring that voters are not faced with confusion, long waiting times and excessive numbers of provisional ballots. In nearly every area of American life, individuals are now able to conduct business accurately and quickly online, including buying tickets, updating information, paying bills and banking. It is time for election systems to join the 21st Century through secure online voter registration.

States should develop online voter registration programs to modernize the registration process and make it more efficient. Online registration can reduce costs for already strapped state and local budgets and can reduce the errors that come when officials have to re-enter information from handwritten forms. The League of Women Voters is encouraged that over 15 states have begun to upgrade their voter registration systems to meet the needs of our modern mobile society. But we also want to ensure that these programs are designed to be available to all eligible citizens.

Unfortunately, many states currently restrict online voter registration to those who have a driver's license, which means that millions of eligible voters, particularly younger citizens who already are disproportionately unregistered, cannot register or update their registrations online. Not only does this limitation substantially reduce the effectiveness of online registration, it also raises concerns about the discriminatory effect.

States sometimes suggest that online registration cannot be extended to non-driver's license holders because the state needs to use the signature on file at the department of motor vehicles for voter registration purposes. We disagree with this approach. Advances have already been made in commerce and the law to accommodate the Internet Age. We can now "sign" contracts online. We can now "sign" credit card invoices to receive merchandise from online vendors. We sign electronic signature pads at the grocery store or the drug store to make our credit and debit cards effective. Nearly every state now recognizes the Uniform Electronic Transaction Act. Indeed, states that now provide for online voter registration use electronic means for the applicant to give legal effect to the statements of eligibility under penalty of perjury required under state and federal law.

States that wish to have a "wet" signature or image of a written signature on file for election administration purposes, as opposed to voter registration purposes, can collect such signatures at the polls when a registrant votes. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) already has safeguards to check the identity of individuals who register to vote by mail and these safeguards can easily be applied to those who register online, or by "electronic mail."

The League urges you to recommend to state officials that they develop secure online voter registration systems that best serve all American voters.

Permanent and Portable Statewide Voter Registration: Another way to streamline the voter registration process and thereby reduce problems at the polls is to make an individual's registration permanent and portable within a state. Nearly 50 percent of Americans move within five years. The Census Bureau reports that nearly 23 million individuals age 16 and over moved within a state between 2011 and 2012, with approximately five million moving from one county to another and 17.5 million moving within a county. From 2005 to 2010, about 65 million individuals age 16 and over moved within the same state, with 16 million of those moving to a different county. Efficient means of updating voter registrations are a practical necessity.

Portable registration means that once a citizen has taken the responsibility to properly register to vote, the registration stays active whenever that person moves within the state. Voters would still be able to update their addresses before Election Day (hopefully by electronic means), but with portable registration, they would also be able to update their addresses when they go to vote. HAVA requires states to maintain voter rolls on a single statewide computerized voter registration list and for that list to serve as the official list for federal elections in the state. With the statewide voter registration list, permanent and portable registration can be a reality.

Portable voter registration would help reduce confusion at polling places. Now, many voters do not realize they need to update their voter registrations when they move, and they show up and wait in line at their new polling place, but then have to be directed to another location or given a

provisional ballot. Allowing address updates at the polling place reduces voter confusion while saving the time and costs associated with provisional ballots. Citizens who have already followed the rules and taken the initiative to register to vote should be able to easily update their addresses and vote and not be penalized for moving.

Expanded Early Voting: Early voting rules vary widely from state to state, with some offering no early voting options at all! Early voting is important not only because it gives us all an additional opportunity to fit the important act of voting into our busy schedules -- it also reduces the crush of voters on Election Day and makes the whole process more efficient. Moreover, the best trained and knowledgeable poll workers and elections staff are often utilized during early voting periods, which improves the voter's experience.

We in the League believe that no voter should have to wait more than one hour to vote (not the three and four hours many voters faced in 2012), and we support early voting because it helps reduce the long lines at the polls. Every state should have in-person early voting, and it should be available at multiple locations outside of traditional business hours, not only in the evening but also on Saturday and Sunday, in order to ensure that all voters can participate.

Improved Polling Place Management: Our hard-working election officials and volunteers aren't getting the resources they need to make all our elections run smoothly. And sometimes the resources that are available -- voting machines, ballots, voter registration lists, polling places and poll workers -- are not allocated properly and fairly. This can result in poorly staffed and equipped polling places and unexpectedly long lines at particular precincts, often those that historically have had lower voter turnout. When there is a particularly exciting election, high new voter registration rates, or population shifts, problems develop. We need to increase the total resources that go toward making our election system work, but we also need to ensure that those resources are distributed fairly and equitably. States need to develop standards or guidelines that aren't just based on the old patterns but take into account all eligible voters. This would improve the experience both for voters and Election Day workers, as well as helping to reduce long lines and increase the efficient use of the resources we do have.

Electronic Streamlining: The bipartisan Help America Vote Act (HAVA) moved the nation forward into the 21st Century by requiring and providing funding for each state to establish a single statewide computerized voter registration list and for that list to serve as the official list for federal elections in each state. The nation is now moving away from paper-based systems that are inherently unreliable and inaccurate. We need to accelerate and broaden that process.

Using electronic systems can streamline the elections process and make it more accurate, less costly and more accessible. Secure online voter registration is one essential form of electronic streamlining, but there are a number of other steps that can be taken to make efficient use of electronic systems to improve the voting experience for American citizens.

One important step is for agencies that collect voter registration information, including motor vehicle and social service offices, to electronically transfer voter registration data to election officials instead of sending completed paper voter registration forms. Moving from paper to electronic voter registration forms reduces transcription errors and increases government

efficiency by reducing duplicative data entry. In addition, jurisdictions that electronically transmit voter information are less likely to have voter registration forms fall through the cracks, which means fewer provisional ballots and less of a post-election administrative burden on election officials and voters alike.

Another critical component of electronic streamlining is the creation of online portals for registered voters to update their information. Providing easy and accessible methods for voter updates is critical to keeping current and accurate voter registration lists. It is also a cost-effective tool for managing voter registration systems. Online portals eliminate the need for voters to print and mail-in new voter registration forms in order to update their records.

Electronic streamlining also includes equipping poll workers with electronic poll books so that they have access to the statewide voter registration database, which every state is now required to have. Electronic poll books enable the transmittal of real-time information, such as address updates and voter check-ins, which can guard against possible multiple voting. Real-time information also enables voters who have moved to show up at their new, correct polling places, update their registration information and vote by a regular, rather than a provisional ballot. It also enables poll workers to easily redirect voters who go to the wrong polling place. Electronic poll books also shorten waiting times and lines on Election Day by enabling all poll workers to process voters and eliminating the need for poll workers to search through pages of paper-based lists to locate a voter's name.

By adopting these electronic practices, government agencies can eliminate costly and time consuming steps in election administration, reduce errors and increase the ease and convenience of the elections process for both their workers and for voters.

The League of Women Voters believes these five important steps would accomplish major improvements in election administration that would let voters know that they are the central actors in our nation's democratic system, just as customers are central to any business enterprise. The polling place experience should not be a barrier to participation, and reforms are needed both before and during Election Day to ensure that voters can vote. We urge this Commission to do all it can to modernize election administration, streamline the voting process, and make it easier for all eligible citizens to become active participants in our electoral process.

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