



As candidates vie for voters' affections, concerned citizens are finding ways to **iron out the kinks** in our electoral system, from malfunctioning machines and miscounts to disenfranchised or disillusioned (would-be) voters. By fixing our system's flaws, we can **fulfill Election Day's promise**, ensuring that every eligible voter can vote and every valid vote is counted.

Democratic participation may be the greatest right of Americans — sharing opinions through newspapers, TV, and blogs; joining community decision-making in town hall and at school board meetings; and, crucially, registering to vote and casting a ballot. Yet since 2000, questions about the mechanisms of American elections, and concerns about the status of ballots cast, have become disturbingly common.

For millions of eligible Americans, a patchwork of arcane guidelines and registration rules that vary precinct by precinct create unnecessary difficulties in voting — not to mention confusion.

In response to the crisis of the 2000 elections, Congress overwhelmingly passed 2002's Help America Vote Act (HAVA), authorizing \$3.9 billion for election improvements. This money was to be spent by states and localities to update and improve election machinery and processes, with guidance from the newly created Elections Assistance Commission (EAC).

The to-do list was long, topped by requirements that states computerize voter lists, provide greater access to the disabled, and supply provisional ballots, aka "fail safe" ballots, which ensure that registered voters can vote should their names not appear on the election roster.

Unfortunately, the 2004 and 2006 elections proved that problems persist: long lines, equipment malfunctions, a paucity of machines, poorly trained poll workers, and security and reliability problems with new voting technology. In 2004, one-third of 2 million provisional ballots — the allegedly "fail safe" ballots — were not counted. And we now know that the EAC is largely toothless.

With the 2008 elections on the horizon, the charge to strengthen our electoral system looms large.

Make Your State a Same-Day State

Most states require pre-registration, leaving many would-be voters all but locked out of the process. Election Day Registration (EDR), also known as same-day registration, has proved itself an effective remedy by allowing citizens to show up on Election Day, register on the spot, and vote. In the seven states that have previously passed this pro-voter reform, average turnout is 10 to 12 percentage points higher than in states without EDR. EDR helps, in particular, young voters, recently naturalized citizens, people who have moved since they last voted, and racial minorities.



Abolish Photo ID Mandates

On the flip side, the move toward strict photo identification requirements at the polls remains a dangerous and anti-democratic trend. Many voters simply cannot afford such IDs or are unable to travel to the places where they are issued.

These measures are cast as a means of stopping “voter fraud” and have a veneer of common sense about them. Voter fraud, however, is largely a myth, and voter ID laws instead serve as a barrier to voting for the poor, elderly, or disabled — a kind of modern-day poll tax. The US Department of Justice reports that while 200 million votes were cast in federal elections since October 2002, only 86 individuals have been convicted of federal voter fraud. Indeed, the types of fraud that are discovered would rarely be stopped by voter ID. Instead, for 20 million or more Americans without photo ID, such laws are little more than tools of disenfranchisement.

Help Poll Workers Help Voters

People who run elections in America are, by and large, hard-working, honest, and serious about the integrity of their responsibilities. The full-time election workers are supplemented

by millions of short-term poll workers. But all is not well.

At many election sites, there simply aren’t enough poll workers. As many as a third of registered poll workers don’t show up, overtaxing those who do. Paltry pay — many earn less at the polls than they would at McDonald’s — provides little inducement to would-be workers. Among those who do show up, far too many do not receive adequate training. Computerized elections create an even greater need for well-trained, tech-savvy poll workers who can help voters navigate new systems.

After the 2006 primaries, for instance, more than half of Ohio poll workers said they had received inadequate training. Around the US, we need better training and wages for poll workers. In addition, civic-minded Americans would serve the country well by signing up as poll workers and election monitors.

Support Paper Trails

New voting technology presents great promise for elections. It can make voting easier, especially for disabled and non-English-speaking voters.

In 2006 alone, however, direct-recording electronic voting systems resulted in multiple failures. Voters in numerous precincts faced delayed openings and long lines, discouraging many. Technological hurdles included “jumping screens” and lost votes; paper trail jams and false paper trails; inaccessibility for disabled voters; machine failures in retrieving results; and extensive security concerns about the recording of votes.

All of us need to insist on the highest standards for our voting machines. Of all our options, the most promising are paper ballots, including those counted by an optical-scan system or by hand, and marked by hand or by a ballot-marking device. No wireless technology should be used. And vote tallies should regularly be audited, to ensure reliability.

Restore Faith in Democracy and Government

Finally, to make our elections work, we must restore the ability of government to meet the needs and earn the trust of the people. As citizens of such a society, our job is to ensure the representation of its people through fair, inclusive elections. We’ve got our work cut out for us. >

This article is the first in a series exploring voting in the United States, created to educate and mobilize readers in preparation for the 2008 elections.