OBAMA-BIDEN TRANSITION PROJECT

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ELECTION PROTECTION YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE

2008 Election:
The Case for Automatic and Permanent Registration

What Happened This Year

The strength of our democracy must be measured by its inclusiveness of all Americans who are eligible and want to participate. Unfortunately, on that score, our current system is in need of a major upgrade. The 2008 General Election inspired millions of new voters from across the country. These new voters can ignite a lasting interest in politics and public policy for generations to come, but only if they can make their voices heard through the ballot box. Unfortunately, this year showed that high turnout exposes big cracks in our elections system. Election officials across the country were inspired to respond to this wave of enthusiasm but were tragically under resourced. Registered voters were purged from the rolls, absentee ballots were never sent, and voters were forced to stand in line for hours to cast a ballot. All of these problems presented barriers to voting for eligible Americans across the country in the weeks leading up to and on Election Day. Military service members, the elderly, voters of color, people with disabilities, students and new citizens were disproportionately affected by these problems.

Our current system simply can't handle the weight of full participation. Ours is a fundamentally strong model, but we need to modernize it to adapt to increasing participation. Without reforms, hundreds of thousands of eligible voters could be disenfranchised in every future election. Those reforms must start now, as legislators establish their priorities and before electoral races politicize the issue. Our passionate, politically engaged electorate deserves a system that is efficient, fair and accurate.

The Role of Election Protection

Election Protection, the nation's largest nonpartisan voter protection coalition, received over 200,000 calls from voters from all 50 states to its 1-866-OUR-VOTE hotline during this election cycle, including nearly 100,000 calls on Election Day alone. A network of over 10,000 volunteers fanned out across the country to work for nearly a year engaging election officials, working with community partners and educating voters. The coalition's database – Our Vote Live – collected the data from this unprecedented effort and paints the most comprehensive picture available of the obstacles Americans face as they head to the polls. The results clearly illustrate an overburdened system and a frustrated electorate. Polling location problems, deceptive practices and the administration of absentee ballots were among the most prevalent problems reported. However, the data demonstrates that the single largest challenge starts before Election Day, when voters and election officials are forced to navigate an antiquated registration system that prevents many eligible voters from participating in the process. Nearly 40% of all problems entered into the Our Vote Lice Database were caused by the registration system.

This election cycle, a last-minute deluge of registration applications overwhelmed election officials across the country, forcing them to make tough decisions about which problems to address and which would go unresolved. These untenable choices inevitably disenfranchised eligible voters. In some cases, officials chose to use their limited time and resources processing registration applications instead of distributing absentee ballots – a choice that no election official should ever be forced to make. In other cases, the weight of new registrants caused confusion on Election Day as eligible voters were left off of registration lists at the polls because of backlogs of applications.

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Why We Need Reform Now

Unfortunately, Election administration is often entangled with partisan interests in the heat of a campaign season. Dedicated voters across the country deserve a process that is free from political motivations. Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle have the obligation now to improve our election process. Action should be taken early – outside of the rancor of an election season – to address the problems voters face and provide needed resources and relief to the nation's dedicated election officials. A system of automatic and permanent registration will do just that. It will eliminate the biggest obstacle eligible Americans face when trying to exercise their right to vote – an antiquated voter registration system – and take the enormous strain of processing last minute registration applications off of election officials.

This reform will allow election officials to concentrate more on the other significant problems voters face including, challenges with poll worker recruitment, training and retention, Election Day resource allocation issues, absentee ballots that never show up, and long lines. With a few changes, we can modernize the existing system to be more reliable and encourage the participation of all eligible voters, without creating large new bureaucracies.

Based on the 2008 Election Protection data and analysis, and drawing from previous years' work, Election Protection recommends automatic and permanent voter registration as the first and most essential step towards creating an efficient, fair and accurate system that honors the civic commitment of our citizens.

Start with Automatic and Permanent Registration

Updating the voter registration system to one that is **Automatic, Permanent**, and allows for **Election Day Correction** will provide eligible voters with assurances that they can cast a ballot. At the same time it will stop the flood of last minute registrations that complicate administration in the critical weeks before an election.

Automatic Registration: Automatic registration shifts the burden of registration from voters to the government. In addition to providing more opportunities for eligible citizens to participate, automatic registration will eliminate the need to rely on independent voter registration organizations to sign up voters. Such a registration system will help states efficiently identify eligible voters from other government databases and add those names to their registration rolls. Voters can opt out if they prefer to not be registered, but for those who want to be included on the rolls, this system will continually update the names of eligible voters, eliminating the last minute deluge of registration applications just before registration deadlines.

Permanent Registration: Every year, one in 6 Americans move, most within the state. Millions more change their names. Unfortunately, the way the registration system is currently designed, the process for updating registrations is cumbersome, increasing the possibility for administrative mistakes. Moreover, many voters do not realize that they must clear this hurdle to remain eligible. Voters should be able to update their registration when they their circumstances change such as when they fill out a change of address form with the postal service. This will lessen the administrative burden on election officials and make it more likely these voters will not face problem at the polls.

Election Day Correction: Making registration automatic and permanent will go a long way to overcoming the obstacles that our current registration system creates. No system, however, is perfect. Voters who are not automatically added to the rolls, those who change names or who move and have not updated their registration, or those voters who show up and find their information on the voting rolls is incorrect should be able to update that information up to, and on, Election Day. A modern, sophisticated system of automatic and permanent registration will make this fail-safe rare, but no eligible voter should be turned away at the polls because her name is not on the list.