



Memo

To: Lily Rothman, Mike Lux, Presidential Transition Team
From: The Student PIRGs
Date: 12/15/2008
Re: The Youth Electorate Post-Election: Voting Rights Reform

Background

U.S. PIRG's New Voters Project – a project of our Student PIRG chapters - is the nation's oldest and largest on the ground, non-partisan young voter mobilization effort. Since 2004, we have registered more than 700,000 young voters and established more than one million get out the vote contacts to urge young voters to the polls. In the 2008 election cycle, our professional staff of 85 paid organizers worked with 100 campuses in 20 states to mobilize young voters, pairing tried and true pavement-pounding techniques with new technologies to reach the increasingly wired world of the young voters.

Due to this work and that of other registration and mobilization efforts across the country, youth turnout increased significantly this year – the third consecutive increase in as many election cycles. Furthermore, initial exit polls indicate that youth share of the vote exceeded that of those Americans 65 and over for the first time in 20 years.

In the coming legislative session, we clear opportunities to build on this unprecedented civic excitement and engagement among young voters, enact important reforms to increase the ability of students to register to vote and increase enforcement of existing voter registration laws.

Voting Rights Priorities

Enact Automatic and Permanent Voter Registration Legislation

The need to physically take the action of registering to vote at your current address before being able to cast a ballot can be disproportionately challenging to students and young voters, as the majority of this population is fairly transient. This election cycle, U.S. PIRG New Voters Project poll-watchers witnessed many of these problems first hand. On Election Day, we encountered many students that were forced to cast provisional ballots because their licenses did not match the address they registered at during an earlier semester.

The best solution to this problem is a system of automatic and permanent registration to ensure that students and others are registered at their current address. Technology changes that resulted from the passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) - including the use of more and different databases to build the voter rolls - have opened the door to a registration system that is more efficient and accountable than we have currently.

**Pass the Student Voter Act**

An additional solution to the problem of accessibility to voting for students is offered by the *Student VOTER Act*, introduced last summer by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL). The bill would designate federally funded colleges and universities as "voter registration agencies," much like departments of motor vehicles under the National Voter Registration Act. As Senator Durbin stated in July, the bill would "*make registering to vote as simple as registering for class,*" and would provide bridge legislation until the passage of a more comprehensive automatic voter registration bill.

Thorough Enforcement of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA):

The 1993 National Voter Registration Act requires states to offer registration to citizens when they interact with government. The "motor voter" part of the law that allows citizens to register to vote when they apply for their driver license is one of its best known provisions.

Despite its importance in ensuring basic civil rights, a congressional hearing held by Rep. Zoe Lofgren, (D-CA), revealed high levels of noncompliance with NVRA. For example, a study by Project Vote, "Unequal Access: Neglecting the National Voter Registration Act" found that voter registration at public assistance agencies has plummeted from 2.6 million in 1995-1996 to just 550,000 in 2005-2006. At the national level, Representative Lofgren has noted that lack of enforcement by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) since 2000 is a significant contributor to this problem. U.S.PIRG looks forward to working with DOJ to ensure a higher level of enforcement of this cornerstone voting rights statute.