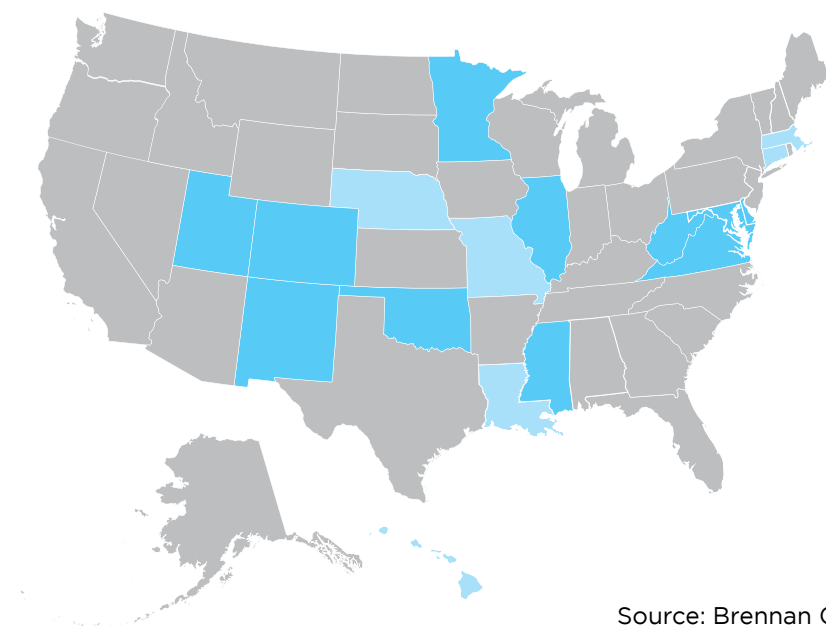


# IMPROVING VOTING ACCESS: BACKGROUND AND KEY MESSAGES

Despite widespread efforts to restrict voting rights, advocates have pushed a number of affirmative reforms that empower voters and bolster protections for basic rights. In fact, dozens of states introduced legislation in 2013 and 2014 to improve access to the polls.

## 16 STATES THAT EXPANDED VOTING IN 2013 AND 2014



Source: Brennan Center for Justice

Colorado (registration, access to ballots), Delaware (restoring voting rights), Illinois (registration, early voting), Maryland (early voting, registration), Minnesota (registration), Mississippi (access to ballots), New Mexico (registration), Oklahoma (voter ID, access to ballots), Utah (registration), Virginia (registration), and West Virginia (registration) have laws in effect this year, and are shown in blue. Laws in Hawaii (registration), Louisiana (registration), Massachusetts (early voting, registration), and Nebraska (registration) will not be in effect in 2014. Missouri and Connecticut voters will consider ballot measures this year to add early voting (Connecticut's bill passed prior to 2013 and is not included in the count of 16). These states are shown in light blue.

## ENACTED AND PROPOSED REFORMS

- *Voter Registration Modernization:* A total of **11 states** passed laws to modernize the voter registration system and make it easier for eligible citizens to sign up. Research shows these upgrades can save money, curb the potential for fraud, and increase registration rates, efficiency, and accuracy.
  - **7 states** passed laws creating or upgrading online registration systems.
  - **5 states** added same-day registration options.
  - **2 states** passed laws requiring motor vehicle offices to transfer voter registrations electronically to local election offices.

- *Early Voting:* **3 states** expanded or created early voting opportunities, which can reduce stress on the voting system, lead to shorter lines on Election Day, and improve poll worker performance, among other benefits.
- *Pre-Registration:* **3 states** passed laws allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote before turning 18.
- *Access to Ballots:* Colorado expanded access for voters who speak a language other than English. Mississippi and Oklahoma also expanded access to absentee ballots.

There was also movement on the national level. The bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration released a widely-praised set of recommendations to fix many of the problems persistently plaguing the voting system. These ideas included modernizing voter registration and increasing early voting opportunities. A few states — Hawaii, Illinois, Nebraska, Massachusetts, and Minnesota — adopted some of these reforms in 2014. And in Congress, Republicans and Democrats introduced a bill to strengthen the Voting Rights Act and Democrats introduced a host of bills to modernize the voting system, reduce long lines, and increase access to the polls.

## KEY MESSAGES

Whether you are engaged in an effort to support the right to vote, enact enhanced early voting, or implement modernized registration systems, there are several common messages and themes that advocates can use to support basic minimum voting standards. These can be deployed in conjunction with tailored messages that address specific issues related to improving the voting system.

### *Core Messages*

- The long lines we saw on Election Day 2012 were unacceptable. Outdated registration records, cutbacks to early voting, and poll sites that ran out of ballots all contributed to the long lines. It is not fair that voters who take responsibility to do their civic duty aren't guaranteed the right to vote. We must fix that.
- In order to keep our voting system free, fair, and accessible, our voter registration system needs to be modernized and brought into the 21st century to give Americans more opportunities to participate in our great democracy.
- Eligible Americans must take responsibility to register and have their say in our democracy. But it is also the government's responsibility to make sure no eligible voter is prevented from casting a ballot because of human error, complex voter registration rules, or self-interested politicians who manipulate the system for their own gain.

- Across the country, self-interested politicians have wrongly been creating lists of voters to purge from the rolls. Modernizing would allow voters to keep their registration updated and make sure it hasn't been tampered with. Let's keep the politicians out and voters in.
- As the leading democracy of the world, every eligible American should be able to participate in our great democracy, and that begins with making sure that voting is convenient and accessible.

### *How to Advocate for Voter Registration Modernization*

- We need to change the way we think about voter registration. We have the technology to add 50 million new voters and make sure no one loses the right to vote because they move or are kicked off the rolls. If you're an eligible voter, you should be a registered voter — period.
- Using computer technology to get and keep citizens on the voter rolls will make registration more convenient. Offering voters more choices in how they register gives them more freedom, and that is the American way.
- Unfortunately, today's outdated voter registration system is vulnerable to human error, including lost paper forms and typos, which can jeopardize a person's right to vote. That's why we need to harness the power of technology and modernize our voter registration system to give citizens more options to register securely and conveniently.
- In this day and age, no voter should ever lose the right to vote just because they move. We can modernize our registration system and make sure that every eligible citizen's voter registration is electronically updated whenever the voter changes addresses, just like our bank accounts and Social Security.
- In these tough economic times, people move around often for jobs. We can make sure that every eligible citizen's voter registration transfers when the voter updates their address.

## WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

- **Education Is Key:** More than half of likely voters have not heard about laws that change voting rules and a plurality think they make no difference — positive or negative.
- **Americans Believe in the Core Values behind Voting:** 98 percent of likely voters agree with the statement that “voting should be equally accessible to all citizens regardless of income, race or disability” and 97 percent agree with the statement that “as the leading democracy, the U.S. needs to work to keep our voting system free, fair and accessible.”
- **Americans Support Positive Reforms:** 72 percent of likely voters support basic national standards for elections that would apply to all states and would include limiting the amount of time people have to stand in line to vote, establish early voting periods, and reform the voter registration system to make it more flexible.

## STATS AND FACTS

**When promoting positive reforms to improve access to the ballot, some facts advocates can cite include:**

- **Modernizing Boosts the Voter Rolls:**

Bringing voter registration into the 21st century would add up to 50 million to the rolls, improve accuracy, and curb the potential for fraud.

- **Minimum Voting Standards and Modernization Tools Are Proven:**

Most tools that would ensure 21st century access to the ballot are proven — 27 states have (or will soon have) electronic registration at DMVs, 8 states have portable registration, 11 states feature Election Day registration, and 24 states offer (or will soon offer) online registration. At least 34 states have (or will soon have) some form of early voting.

- **Improving Access to the Ballot Saves Money:**

In Arizona, a county effort to use electronic and online registration dropped the taxpayer-borne cost from 83 cents to 3 cents per registration. Another example is Delaware, which saves \$200,000 per year using electronic registration at DMVs.

### *How to Advocate for Online Registration*

- Americans do so many things online these days, and registering to vote shouldn't be any different. It is time to bring our registration system into the 21st century and give voters more convenience and choice about how they register to vote.
- We should use existing technology to enable citizens to register and verify their voter information online and easily update their records when they move. This system would have strong safeguards and penalties to prevent hacking and fraud, and would give voters the choice of registering online or on paper.
- Citizens who take responsibility to register and vote should have convenient and accessible options for voter registration. Giving Americans the choice to update their registration records online will make voting more convenient for younger generations, people who move around a lot, the disabled, and our service men and women who are deployed overseas.

### *How to Advocate for Electronic Registration*

- Citizens should have the choice to be electronically registered to vote at the same time they do business with a government office, such as applying for a driver's license or state veteran's benefits.
- This will upgrade our system, eliminate errors caused by paper records, and clean up the voter rolls. And it will ensure that every American who wants the opportunity to participate in our great democracy can do so.

### *How to Advocate for Same Day/Election Day Registration*

- In the 2012 election, some voters stood in line for hours only to find they had been kicked off the voter rolls, and there was no option for them to register at the polls to cast a ballot that counts.
- Giving eligible Americans more opportunities to register to vote is a good thing for our democracy. Citizens need to take responsibility to get themselves registered, but people who want to participate should have convenient and accessible ways of doing so, and that includes registering on Election Day.
- Our voting system needs to be free, fair, and accessible to ensure every American can have a say in our democracy. Allowing voters to register the day they vote offers freedom, convenience, and choice.

### *How to Advocate for Early Voting*

- In the 2012 election, millions of voters across the country had to stand in line for hours just to cast a ballot and have their voices heard. Worse, some stood in long lines just to learn they had been kicked off the voter rolls. That's unacceptable and we can fix it.
- Elections are the one time all Americans can make their voice heard. By requiring states to expand early voting to a minimum of 10 days, including Saturdays and Sundays, we can give voters more opportunities, reduce the number of people who vote in person on Election Day, and ease the congestion at polling places.
- While dozens of states allow early voting, there are still millions of Americans who don't have this opportunity. More states should offer early voting so that every eligible American citizen can have their voice heard without waiting in line for hours.
- Early voting gives eligible Americans a choice of when they can cast their ballot. This offers voters the freedom and convenience they need to make their voice heard in our great democracy.

### *How to Advocate for the Voting Rights Act*

- The Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965 to stop state and local governments from passing laws or policies that deny American citizens the equal right to vote based on their race.
- Last year, a Supreme Court decision removed key parts of the law, and today, almost 50 years since the Voting Rights Act was first passed, states and localities around the country are passing discriminatory voting rules that make it harder for many Americans to vote.

- The good news is that there is a bipartisan proposal in Congress to restore the Voting Rights Act and strengthen protections for the right to vote.
- The Voting Rights Amendment Act increases transparency by requiring public disclosure of certain changes to voting laws; enables official observers to monitor elections in places with a recent history of discrimination; and allows voters to ask for a review and challenge certain types of voting changes that are likely to be discriminatory.
- The Voting Rights Act is the one law that ensures every eligible citizen has an equal opportunity to have a say. The Supreme Court's decision to strike down a key part of the Voting Rights Act opens the door to state and local politicians manipulating voting laws for their own gain, allowing them to pick and choose who they want to vote.
- We need to restore the Voting Rights Act to fulfill the promise of our constitution and ensure that all Americans have the right to vote without facing discrimination.

#### *How to Advocate for a Constitutional Amendment Guaranteeing the Right to Vote*

- As the leading democracy of the world, our voting system should be free, fair, and accessible to all eligible Americans.
- A constitutional amendment protecting our freedom to vote will guarantee that every citizen has the same opportunity to cast a ballot.
- Many are surprised to learn that there is no explicit mention in the Constitution of a guaranteed right to vote. While the Constitution mentions the right to vote more than any other — forbidding it from being abridged based on race, gender, age, or ability to pay a poll tax — it contains no affirmative language making that right explicit.
- The freedom to vote is essential to the American dream. A constitutional amendment would allow the federal government to set national minimum election standards to ensure no one is denied this fundamental American right.

**For more on new positive voting reforms proposed and enacted since the 2012 election, visit: <http://www.brennancenter.org/expandvoting2012>**