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# Governor Hobbles Voting Reform in Illinois

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD AUG. 22, 2016

Invoking Republicans' phantom fear of voter fraud, Gov. Bruce Rauner has vetoed a bipartisan measure to make Illinois a pioneer in one of the truly innovative reforms of modern politics — the automatic registration of citizens as they conduct routine business at motor vehicle departments and other state agencies.

In the past 18 months, five states have approved this obvious boon for electoral democracy; others have it under consideration. The state sends proof of registration electronically to local election officials. Voters are thus spared the old bureaucratic paperwork maze and haphazard record-keeping that compounds delays on Election Day. Citizens are free to not register (and, of course, to not vote), but they cannot complain about opportunity denied.

More than 30 states have registration systems that require a voter to opt in at motor vehicle offices. That places the burden on voters. Automatic voter registration (A.V.R.) takes the process a step further, placing the responsibility on the state. As it is, the United States is one of the few democratic nations that place the registration burden on voters, leaving up to a third of eligible citizens unregistered. Canada's automatic system has registered more than 90 percent of those eligible.

Had the Illinois measure gone forward, it would have added two million potential new voters to the rolls once it began in 2018. A more immediate effect would have been to update the registration of an estimated 700,000 voters in time for this November's elections.

Mr. Rauner insisted he supports increased access to the polls. But he warned of possible fraud, a card red-state Republicans have been playing as they engineer thinly veiled voter suppression drives directed at young new voters and ethnic groups seen as more favorable to Democrats. Repeated research has shown the threat of fraud to be minuscule. But that hasn't stopped the introduction of unreasonably stringent identification standards in a presidential election year in more than a dozen states.

A healthy voting system is needed more than ever, particularly as Donald Trump is cynically telling voters the process may be rigged (unless, of course, he's the winner). Oregon was the first to enact A.V.R. in March 2015, and the initial results have shown the registration rate more than tripling to 15,000 potential new voters per month, including a surge in young Republican registrants.

California approved A.V.R. last October, and the results will be closely studied once it takes effect next year. The state is trying to cure a low registration rate of 42 percent, with more than six million eligible residents unregistered. This year, Vermont and West Virginia enacted A.V.R. on the strength of bipartisan support, and Connecticut ordered the innovation administratively. Gov. Chris Christie, amid his failed run for the Republican presidential nomination, foolishly vetoed A.V.R. for New Jersey voters, citing the nonexistent threat of voter fraud.

In Illinois, Mr. Rauner's critics think he wants to skirt the issue to avoid a voter registration surge in 2018, when he intends to run for re-election. The Legislature should not hesitate to override his veto later this year.

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