



LOST VOTERS, LOST VOTES

WHEN CITIZENS DON'T KNOW WHERE TO VOTE, DEMOCRACY LOSES

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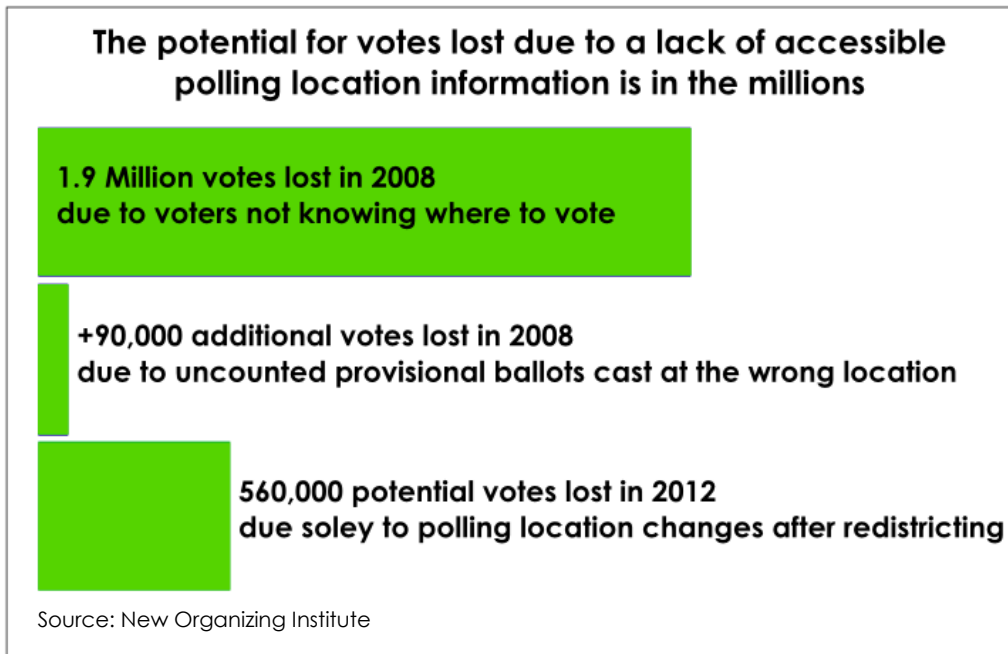
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LACK OF POLLING LOCATION INFORMATION LEADS TO MILLIONS OF LOST VOTES

In the United States, the task of voting goes beyond making an informed decision on candidates and issues. For many voters, simply communicating that decision to the relevant election officials involves paperwork, long searches for information, collecting requisite identification, and navigating multiple bureaucracies. While many of these barriers to the ballot can be removed only by those who administer elections or the lawmakers who craft the process, some of the burden can be alleviated by independent efforts. A key example is the dissemination of accurate polling place information.

In 2008, an estimated 1.9 million voters did not cast a ballot for one simple and solvable reason: they did not know where to go.¹ Marginalized voters including racial and ethnic minorities and the young were disproportionately likely to have difficulty finding their polling place. Without a comprehensive and multi-modal approach to providing accurate polling place information to all eligible voters in America, 2010 and 2012 could continue to be case studies in too many votes lost rather than models of progress toward all votes counted.

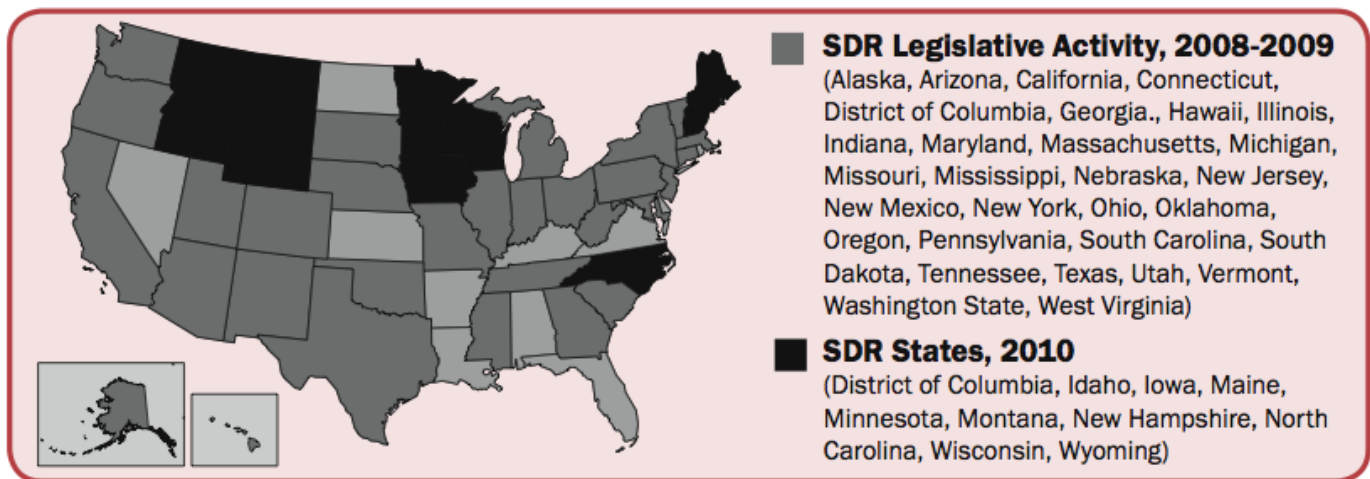


¹R. Michael Alvarez et al, *2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections*, March 2008, <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Final%20report20090218.pdf>.

1.9 MILLION VOTES LOST: A CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATE

Researchers at Caltech, Harvard, MIT, and the University of Utah surveyed 12,000 registered voters just after the 2008 general election in order to assess the challenges they faced related to voting.² From these findings, the researchers estimated that 1.9 million voters nationwide would have cast a ballot in 2008 but for one critical factor: they did not know where to vote. This study, however, did not take into account one major bloc of the U.S. citizenry: unregistered voters.

Most states force citizens to register far in advance of an election (typically about a month in advance) in order to vote. In these states an unregistered voter has little use for information about polling locations since they would not be able to cast a ballot there anyway. An increasing number of states, however, are implementing same-day registration (SDR). In these states, depending on implementation of SDR, an unregistered voter could simply arrive at either an early vote location or on Election Day at the polling location itself, register to vote, and cast a ballot on the spot.



Source: Dēmos, *Voters Win with Same Day Registration*, January 2010, http://www.demos.org/pubs/voterswin_feb032010.pdf

In the nine states with some form of SDR in 2008, over 1 million voters both registered to vote and cast a ballot at the same time thanks to the existence of SDR.³ In 2009 the District of Columbia adopted SDR and in 2008-2009 thirty additional states saw legislative activity around the issue.

² R. Michael Alvarez et al, *2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections*, March 2008, <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Final%20report20090218.pdf>.

³ Dēmos, *Voters Win with Same Day Registration*, January 2010, http://www.demos.org/pubs/voterswin_feb032010.pdf. North Dakota does not have any voter registration and thus could be considered a SDR state of sorts, although figures from ND are not included here.

As more states implement SDR, and thus voter registration becomes less of an impediment to voting, the potential impact of accurate voting information becomes increasingly significant. In some ways the lack of polling location information becomes the primary barrier remaining between a prospective voter and their vote once a state adopts SDR.

PROVISIONAL BALLOTS: A TREACHEROUS OPTION RESULTING IN STILL MORE LOST VOTES

A provisional ballot is issued in most states⁴ only for voters who do not seem to meet the voting qualifications. Reasons for issuing a provisional ballot can include not finding the voter on the voter rolls, the voter not carrying the correct identification, or someone challenging the eligibility of the voter for any other reason. Voters also often must vote provisionally when they show up at the wrong polling place or try to vote at the wrong precinct within a polling place. Because many states keep data on why each provisional ballot was issued, it can be determined with a degree of precision unusual in election administration how many voters actually showed up at the wrong polling place.

While some states will count a provisional ballot cast in the wrong precinct, most will not. In fact, the implementation of provisional balloting can vary erratically from one local jurisdiction to another depending on local election administrators and the quality of poll worker training.⁵

The unfortunate irony of allowing a voter to cast a provisional ballot is that they may leave believing their vote will count when, were they turned away outright, the result would have been the same but they would at least have known that they failed to cast a counted vote. For a registered voter who is simply at the wrong polling place, a provisional ballot can be no more than an officially sanctioned opportunity to throw away their vote.

According to research by the Pew Center on the States, more than 2 million provisional ballots were issued during the 2008 general election and, of those, approximately 30% were never counted.⁶ Among those provisional ballots that were rejected, 14.7% were rejected because the ballot was

⁴ Idaho, Minnesota, and New Hampshire do not issue provisional ballots. The Help America Vote Act, which requires provisional balloting to be available nationwide, exempts states with Election Day Registration from that requirement. Some states with EDR, however, choose to use provisional ballots for voters with problems other than registration status, such as insufficient voter ID.

⁵ The Advancement Project, *Provisional Ballots: Failsafe Voting or Trapdoor to Disenfranchisement?*, September 2008, <http://advancementproject.org/sites/default/files/publications/Provisional-Ballot-Report-Final-9-16-08.pdf>

⁶ Pew Center on the States, *Provisional Ballots: An Imperfect Solution*, July 2009, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/ELEC_ProvBallot_Brief_0709.pdf

cast at the wrong polling place.⁷ Assuming that these rejected voters would have cast valid votes that would actually have been counted had they journeyed to the correct polling location, **approximately 90,000 additional votes were lost in 2008, despite the fact that voters actually showed up and cast ballots, simply due to provisional voters not knowing where to vote.**

THE LOOMING CHALLENGE OF 2012

2012 will be the first presidential election cycle in twenty years to immediately follow a U.S. census. Each decennial census is followed by a host of election-related changes, paramount of which is redistricting at the congressional, state legislative, and local levels. Precinct boundaries across the nation will be redrawn and polling locations will be reassigned, consolidated, or eliminated. A voter who previously voted at the church a few blocks east of their house now will vote at the school a few blocks north. Tens of millions of such voters in 2012 will be asked to cast their ballots at a changed polling location.

News reports from 2002 reported that up to 30% of voters or more had their polling location changed after the federal census.⁸ If this holds true following the 2010 census then in excess of 29 million established voters could have their polling location changed in 2012.⁹ Add to that the prospect of outright polling location closures due to state and county budget shortfalls (already seen in Hawaii¹⁰, Montana¹¹, and counties in Ohio¹² and Alabama¹³) and the landscape for voters in 2012 could be one of the most challenging in decades.

⁷ This figure includes provisional ballots that were issued either because the ballot was cast in the "wrong jurisdiction" or the "wrong precinct" and does not include provisional ballots issued because the voter was not registered in the state.

⁸ Buddy Nevins, *Polling Changes Anger Voters*, Sun Sentinel, 31 August 2002, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2002-08-31/news/0208300958_1_polling-places-new-polling-polling-locations; Gary Taylor, *Redistricting Changes Precincts For Many Voters*, Orlando Sentinel, 8 September 2002, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2002-09-08/news/0209060570_1_precincts-registered-voters-polling-places. Note: even states with only one congressional district are mandated by state and federal law to redraw local electoral boundaries after the decennial census, often within a year or two.

⁹ NOI analysis. Figure is based on the number of total Americans who voted for president in 2008 as calculated in the Center for the Study of the American Electorate report *2008 Turnout Report: African-Americans, Anger, Fear and Youth Propel Turnout to Highest Level Since 1960* (available at <http://www1.american.edu/ia/cdem/csae/pdfs/2008pdffinaledited.pdf>) and assume an annual rate of movers of 13%.

¹⁰ Herbert Sample, *Hawaii Plan Would Slash Number of Polling Places*, The Associated Press, 2 December 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=9223897>.

¹¹ Missoula County Office of Elections, *Precinct & Polling Place Consolidation*, <http://www.co.missoula.mt.us/election/>

According to a 2005 Berkeley University study, a changed polling location alone results in a 1.88% decrease in turnout for affected voters.¹⁴ **The impact of changed polling locations alone could result in over 560,000 additional lost votes in 2012.**¹⁵

These re-districting pains are unlikely to cease after 2012. Certain states are notorious for re-drawing district lines on multiple occasions between decennial censuses. As the legal scholars Justin Levitt and Michael P. McDonald noted in a 2006 accounting of state redistricting practices, “absent state constitutional provisions restricting re-districting, we expect that political parties and incumbent legislators with political control of the redistricting process will be drawn to redraw the lines for maximum advantage with increasing frequency.”¹⁶ Consequently, mass changes of polling locations are likely to become even more frequent between federal censuses.

ONLINE POLL LOCATORS: ESSENTIAL BUT AN INCOMPLETE SOLUTION

In 2008, 34 states had a polling location lookup tool on their state election website and of those only 11 would identify a polling location for any address in the state.¹⁷ Some of the most populous states such as California, Florida, Illinois, and Texas are the least likely to provide this service to voters because voting information is maintained in a decentralized fashion, often at the county level.

¹²Tim Chitwood, *Muscogee elections board to hold Feb. 25 public meeting on consolidating voting precincts*, Ledger-Enquirer, 9 February 2010, <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/2010/02/09/1007477/muscogee-elections-board-to-hold.html>.

¹³Keith Clines, *Voting sites set for big overhaul*, The Huntsville Times, 9 February 2010, <http://www.al.com/news/huntsvilletimes/local.ssf?/base/news/1265710514244150.xml&coll=1>.

¹⁴Henry E. Brady and John McNulty, *The Costs of Voting: Evidence from a Natural Experiment*, 2005 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, March 2005, <http://www.csus.edu/org/wpsa/PiSigmaAlpha06award.pdf>.

¹⁵NOI analysis. This is 1.88% of the total number of voters predicted to have their polling location changed for 2012 (29.8M).

¹⁶Justin Levitt and Michael P. McDonald, *Taking the 'Re' out of Redistricting: State Constitutional Provisions on Redistricting Timing*, The Georgetown Law Journal, 6 November 2006, http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/taking_the_re_out_of_redistricting_state_constitutional_provisions_on_redis/.

¹⁷Pew Center on the States, *Being Online is Not Enough: State Elections Websites*, October 2008, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/VIP_FINAL_101408_WEB.pdf. Note: in some states the address of a currently registered voter or other personal information is required to return a polling location.

Demographics of internet users

Below is the percentage of each group who use the internet, according to our December 2009 survey. As an example, 74% of adult women use the internet.

Internet users	
Total adults	74%
Men	74
Women	74
Race/ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	76%
Black, Non-Hispanic	70
Hispanic (English- and Spanish-speaking)	64
Age	
18-29	93%
30-49	81
50-64	70
65+	38
Household income	
Less than \$30,000/yr	60%
\$30,000-\$49,999	76
\$50,000-\$74,999	83
\$75,000+	94
Educational attainment	
Less than High School	30%
High School	63
Some College	87
College +	94
Community type	
Urban	74%
Suburban	77
Rural	70

Source: The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, November 30-December 27, 2009 Tracking Survey. N=2,258 adults, 18 and older, including 565 cell phone interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Margin of error is ± 2%.



Nationwide polling place lookup options such as those provided by Google, voteforchange.com (created by the Obama presidential campaign), and vote411.org (run by the League of Women Voters Education Fund) took up some of the slack in 2008, but a wide crevasse remained between voters seeking information and the information itself. In 2008, 19.6% of non-voters reported that not knowing where to vote was a factor in not voting.¹⁸ Among those who did cast a ballot, 1.8% said they had a “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” time finding out where to vote. These difficulties did not affect all voters equally. Interestingly, young voters under the age of 30 were nearly twice as likely as other age groups to have difficulty finding out where to vote. This is all the more striking because individuals under the age of 30 are the most likely age group to be online; 93% use the internet compared to the average of 74% for all adults in the U.S.¹⁹ The internet is clearly a good place to start when attempting to inform young voters.

On the other hand, marginalized populations that are notably less likely to be online were also *more* likely to have difficulty finding their polling place in 2008. African-American and Hispanic voters are less likely to be online and were three times as likely as White voters to have difficulty finding out where to vote. Multiple ways of distributing this information are required to ensure that all voters in the U.S. know where to vote.

¹⁸R. Michael Alvarez et al, *2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections*, March 2008, <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Final%20report20090218.pdf>.

¹⁹ Lee Rainee, *Internet, Broadband, and Cell Phone Statistics*, Pew Internet and American Life Project, Pew Research Center, January 5, 2010, http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_December09_update.pdf.

CONCLUSION: A MULTI-MODAL SOLUTION

As of 2008, 66 percent of internet users went to government websites for information.²⁰ There is no doubt that state election websites play a crucial and authoritative role in providing voting information to voters. What is just as clear, however, is that not everyone can be reached by government resources alone, nor can everyone be reached online. The poor, those with lower education levels, African-Americans and Hispanics, and the elderly are all less likely to be online.

A comprehensive solution to providing accurate polling place information to all voters must include not only widespread internet access points and tools, but also mail, phone, and in-person outreach. Civic engagement groups, political campaigns, community organizations, and other local groups wishing to cultivate voter participation need to be able to access polling location data in formats that will allow them to incorporate the information into their multi-modal programs. A nationwide, online, address-based lookup tool is an essential piece of the puzzle, but the data must also be available in downloadable text and spreadsheet formats and made freely available to anyone who wants to use it.

Providing accurate polling location information to all voters is not rocket science, but it could have stellar results. By taking simple steps to improve the availability of this information nationwide and in a variety of formats, advocates for voter participation can help reclaim millions of votes.

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²⁰ Pew Center on the States, *Being Online is Not Enough: State Elections Websites*, October 2008, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/VIP_FINAL_101408_WEB.pdf.