

N.J. voters need to be able to register at polls

By Frank Askin and Yael Bromberg

Gabriela G., Annalee S. and Ed V. are Rutgers University students who eagerly went to the polls to vote in the November 2008 general election. All three had registered to vote, prior to the 21-day deadline, from their college addresses.

However, when they went to cast their ballots, they were surprised to find that their names were not on the voting lists. They were directed to either leave the polling place or to vote by paper provisional ballots, which are checked post-election against the voting rolls. However, they were not informed of the strong likelihood that their provisional ballots would be thrown out, since their names were not in the system.

The irony is that if their provisional ballots were not counted in the intended election, they still served as voter registrations for future elections. The information provided on the ballot was enough to establish voter identity and eligibility. This occurs statewide.

In the 2008 general election, 16,308 New Jersey citizens — many of them college students — cast rejected provisional ballots, which effectively registered them to vote in future elections. That figure represented 22 percent of the total provisional ballots cast in that election.

Beth Rose B., another Rutgers dormitory student, was registered to vote at her mother's home in Princeton and had planned to return there to vote on Election Day. But on Election Day, she was on crutches and could not travel. Since she was registered in a different county, she was not allowed to vote in New Brunswick.

If it sounds counter-intuitive that, in this advanced computer age, it is not enough that an individual can prove his or her identity and residence to cast a valid ballot on Election Day, that's because it is. Nine other states and the District of Columbia have Election Day registration, using federally mandated statewide computer systems.

Election Day registration greatly boosts voter turnout. The top five states in voter turnout use Election Day registration. In Minnesota, for example, nearly 78 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the 2008 election — the highest rate in the nation. Meanwhile, in New Jersey, only 67.9 percent of eligible persons voted in 2008. On average, Election Day registration states have 7 percent higher voter turnout, according to the nonpartisan think tank Demos.

The groups most affected by an advance-registration requirement are highly mobile populations, including students and young adults. That is one reason the Rutgers University Student

Assembly has stepped forward to serve as lead plaintiff for a legal challenge of New Jersey registration law.

A dozen plaintiffs, including the students mentioned above and RUSA, the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, New Jersey Appleseed Public Interest Law Center, New Jersey Citizen Action and the Latino Leadership Alliance of New Jersey, are challenging the registration law as a denial of the right to vote guaranteed by the New Jersey Constitution.

They are calling for Election Day registration to bring New Jersey in line with nine other states and the District of Columbia.

According to Secretary of State Mark Ritchie of Minnesota, which has had Election Day registration for 35 years: “EDR is much more secure because you have the person right in front of you — not a postcard in the mail. This is a no-brainer ...”

New Jersey’s technology already meets the needs of Election Day registration. Now, New Jersey law needs to catch up with the times by encouraging voter turnout and preventing the needless disenfranchisement of thousands of eligible voters every year.

As Rutgers University student body president Matthew Cordeiro put it, “We have cell phones that pinpoint your location from thousands of miles away, I don’t know why we can’t provide for same-day voter registration.”

Exactly.

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