

Voting irregularities easily fixed

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U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Chicago)
and Cook County Clerk David Orr

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Imagine walking into your polling place on Election Day and having an election judge tell you that you cannot vote because no one can locate your voter-registration record. Never mind that you are actually registered or that you even voted in the last election. Sorry, but you're not in the system, the election judge explains. Next.

Unfortunately, this scenario occurred all too often last November, particularly in Florida where thousands of voters, mostly African American, were turned away at the polls and denied the right to vote.

Why? Because their names had been wrongfully or mistakenly removed from the registration rolls or the information listed on their registration applications was improperly processed.

Before the recounts and the debate over voting machinery, qualified voters seeking to perform their civic duty were barred from voting and disenfranchised through no fault of their own.

Fortunately, there is a solution. The use of provisional ballots would have remedied these errors by allowing voters--who for one reason or another did not appear on the registration rolls--to cast ballots that would count later if their qualifications were verified.

Here's how it would work. If a voter's name does not appear on the precinct registration rolls, the voter would still get to vote. But instead of getting counted in the precinct, the ballot would be placed in an envelope and segregated. After the polls close, the provisional ballots from each precinct would be collected and brought to the local election authority where staff would begin confirming each voter's registration status.

Along with guarding against overzealous purging efforts, provisional ballots would resolve any last-minute registration glitches and election judge oversights in the polling place. Furthermore, provisional ballots would make Election Day operations run more smoothly.

Twenty states already permit provisional balloting, including Florida, which last summer passed the bipartisan measure. Furthermore, several panels commissioned to examine election procedures, like the one chaired by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, have

recommended that all states implement provisional ballots.

Provisional ballots would ultimately provide for a more inclusive democracy, the foundation of which is meant to allow people to participate in its political system.

Meanwhile, it would prevent unequal access and the disparate treatment of qualified voters.

Congress should act now and pass a meaningful election reform bill that include provisional voting. If not, future election victories--proclaimed for the sake of expediency--may come at the expense of voters who lost their constitutional right to vote.