Senate Bill 854

STUDENT E-VOTER REGISTRATION ACT OF 2007

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ISSUE

Voter participation in California has been on a steady decline for decades. In the 2006 Primary Election, only 23 percent of eligible voters cast ballots – the lowest turnout rate since 1928.

The problem is especially severe among California's youngest eligible voters, who make up the lowest-voting age demographic. An August 2006 Public Policy Institute (PPIC) study found that only 58 percent of 18-24 year-olds are registered to vote, compared with over 90 percent of Californians over 65. The State is failing in its responsibility to cultivate civic and democratic participation in its newest generation of workers, parents, taxpayers, and college students.

According to the Office of the Secretary of State, some problems identified for young adults include: "living away from home, not knowing where to register to vote, not knowing how to register to vote, not having the time to register, [and] not realizing the need to re-register when moving away from principal residence." (California Community Colleges Voter Registration Project, 2003)

EXISTING LAW

The Student Voter Registration Act of 2003 (AB 593 – Ridley-Thomas) requires the Secretary of State to mail voter registration cards to every high school, California Community College (CCC), California State University (CSU), and University of California (UC) campus.

This program has been moderately successful. The Secretary of State sends out approximately 400,000 – 450,000 voter registration cards each year pursuant to AB 593; just over 10,000 cards were returned in 2006. Beginning in 2007, the Secretary of State has roughly estimated that it will send out over a million cards pursuant to AB 593.

The Secretary of State identified the following issues as limiting the greater success of this program:

- AB 593 did not mandate secondary schools do anything once they receive the voter registration cards. Anecdotally, it seems that many schools are not expecting the forms and do not distribute them upon receipt.
- Most UCs, CSUs, and CCCs have large student bodies and allow most student services, for example class registration, to be conducted electronically. Because of this, it is difficult for these higher education institutions to effectively distribute voter registration cards.

THIS BILL

This bill would:

- Require the Secretary of State (SOS) to provide an annual report to the Legislature on the results of its student voter registration efforts pursuant to AB 593 (Ridley-Thomas, 2003);
- Require high schools, CCCs and CSUs, and urge UCs, to provide the SOS with a contact person to coordinate voter registration efforts pursuant to AB 593;
- Require all California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU), and urge all University of California (UC) campuses to make the voter registration process available through an automated program, operated in coordination with the Secretary of State, that permits students, during their class registration process, to elect to receive a voter registration form that is preprinted with personal information

relevant to voter registration. This requirement would come into effect on January 1, 2010;

- Remove the requirement that the SOS transmit blank voter registration cards to campuses pursuant to AB 593, provided that they have switched to an electronic registration system.

SUMMARY

This bill would require high schools to provide the Secretary of State with a contact to coordinate the distribution of voter registration cards. It would also require CCCs, CSUs, and urge UCs to include in their online class registration systems a check-off option for students to receive a completed voter registration card in the mail. This provision would be required by 2010.

BACKGROUND

There are approximately 200,000 UC students, 410,000 CSU students, and 1.6 million full-time CCC students. Few of them are registered to vote. SB 854 will facilitate the voter registration process for college students by expanding the scope of a successful electronic voter registration system begun in some Community Colleges.

The California Community Colleges Automatic Student Voter Registration Project was created as a partnership between the Secretary of State's Office and the California Community Colleges and operated by San Francisco City College. Twenty-seven Community Colleges have voluntarily joined this program, which enables students to request a completed voter registration card as they electronically register for classes. Between November 2003 and March 2007, this program generated 104,000 voter registration card requests.

Q & A

Which Community College Districts are involved in the Automatic Student Voter Registration Project and how many registration card requests have they received?

The following Community College Districts are a part of the Automatic Student Voter Registration Project:

San Francisco:	13,976 requests
West Kern:	4,184 requests
Peralta:	15,478 requests
Los Angeles:	14,524 requests
Chabot – Las Positas:	11,530 requests
San Joaquin:	11,101 requests
Rio Hondo:	14,517 requests
Coast:	6,572 requests
Kern:	7,682 requests
South Orange:	4,529 requests

Why does this language require schools to provide the Secretary of State with a contact person?

The Secretary of State has found that many schools are unaware that they will be receiving voter registration cards and consequently are ill-prepared to distribute these cards to their student. The Secretary of State's Office estimates that approximately 90 percent of schools have specified a general office (i.e., Registrar's Office, Admissions Office, Counselor's Office), as opposed to a "person" for the Secretary to contact. The Los Angeles Unified School District did a spot check of eight local high schools and found that only one was aware of the Student Voter Registration Act. By requiring schools to provide the Secretary of State with a contact person, it is expected that coordination and effectiveness of this existing program will be improved.

Why does this law send students a registration card, instead of allowing them to register electronically?

Current law requires a signature to register someone to vote, which cannot be done electronically.

Does it make sense to link something unrelated to voting – class registration – to voter registration efforts?

Absolutely. All UCs, CSUs, and CCCs have a responsibility to educate *and civically engage* California's young adults, so this falls under their mandate.

Moreover, similar linkages have been very successful in the past. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 required the DMV to offer voter registration as part of its services. "Motor Voter", as it is popularly referred to, is the largest source of voter registration in California: between June 1995 (when the law went into effect) and December 2006, 18 million Californians were registered to vote through this program.

Are there any other states that are doing this?

California would be the first state to do this.

Has this bill been introduced before?

Senator Cedillo introduced a similar bill last session, SB 191, which required CSUs and CCCs to allow students to receive a voter registration card as they electronically register for classes. That bill did not address the existing program (AB 593) of sending blank voter registration cards to all the colleges.

How much would this program cost?

The Senate Appropriations Committee estimates that SB 854 would incur one-time implementation costs of $200,000 for all UCs, $50,000 for all CSUs, and $300,000 for all CCCs.

The technology to implement this system is freely available from City College of San Francisco. Dr. Killikelly, a Political Science instructor who directs the pilot, based on averages gathered from the 27 colleges that have implemented the Automatic Student Voter Registration Project, estimates that a campus' information technology technician should require no more than one to two days to implement the change. Based on these hourly estimates and prevailing wages, the cost to implement this program for every public college would be *substantially* less than estimated by Senate Appropriations.

SB 854 might also result in significant cost-savings because the Secretary of State would no longer be required to annually send out hundreds of thousands of blank voter registration cards to participating higher education institutions.

SUPPORT

California State University, Office of the Chancellor
Los Angeles Unified School District
City College of San Francisco
Los Angeles Community College District
Peralta Community College District
Kern Community College District
West Kern Community College District
University of California Students Association
California State Student Association
California Common Cause
League of Women Voters
New America Foundation
Voter Registration & Education Project
California Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
AFSCME
CALPIRG
Greenlining Institute
MALDEF
California NAACP
Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California

OPPOSITION

None on file.

STATUS

SB 854 passed out of the Senate Elections Committee on April 18, 2007. It will be heard in Senate Appropriations on May 7.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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