Voting is a Right – Even for the Low-Income

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Abstract

Low-income is considered 200% of the Federal poverty level. The low-income population faces barriers to education, assistance services, health and voting. Voting is an inalienable right that the constitution grants to its citizens. Identified barriers to voting for low-income people included voter registration, transportation, and voting literacy. Digital voting could reduce these barriers if systems are in place to alleviate inaccessibility to the internet and/or devices, to ensure security of election data.

Voting is a Right – even for the Low-Income

One of the founding principals of our democratic country is that its citizens are allowed to vote. While it took time for all our citizens to be granted the right to vote, it isn’t hard to imagine that there are still segments of our population who are least likely to exercise that right. Franklin Roosevelt once said, “Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves and the only way they could do this is by not voting.” (Roosevelt, 1944)

As the divide between those that have and those that have less, it becomes more and more important for those citizens to know how to use their voices to ensure that their most basic needs are being met. Low-income citizens are a broad population segment. There are many other disenfranchised groups such as disabled, immigrant refugees, minorities that also need to have their voices heard. What we know is that the low-income population often made up from members of those other groups.

Today, in the United States at least, politics and politicians dominate our news cycle. These discussions are no longer limited to before election time (or after elections). It is a constant, 24/7, barrage of politics-related information. Low-income peoples’ access to this information can vary from urban to rural; even from neighborhood to neighborhood. Accessing this information requires some infrastructure to be available: broadcasts, town hall events, mobile devices, consistent internet service, etc.

Before accessing information about the politics that govern their world, low-income people need to be able access basic information about voting; and have no barriers to actually voting, if they choose to vote. (Choosing to not vote, is a valid choice; and is not a barrier.) “In the U.S., no one is required by law to vote in any local, state, or presidential election. According to the U.S. Constitution, voting is a right and a privilege. While many constitutional amendments have been ratified since the first election, none of them made voting mandatory for U.S. citizens.” (USA.gov/voting laws) Wanting to vote or to participate in your rights as a citizen and not being able to because of access barriers is a disservice to the local community and more national community.

**Current Voting Practices**

Today, national election day is held the same day every year, the 2nd Tuesday in November. States and/or cities/towns may have other election days during the year, these are usually considered special elections. Most states require a form of identification in order to vote. Also, there are laws in place to ensure that people with disabilities can vote.

**Barriers to Voting**

Despite the vast amount of political news that is all around us, getting information out on where to vote, how to vote, the “rules” for voting is often not disseminated to citizens in a way that is accessible.

Registering to vote can be required prior to election day; and an identification of some kind is required to register. Acquiring a license or state id costs money; it costs money to get the original and then it costs money to renew the identification. Only 18 states offer fee reduction/waivers for these forms of identification. These fees can be a challenge to overcome for low-income.

Transportation is often another reason why low-income citizens are not able to vote. Especially in rural areas where public transportation is either sparse or non-existence. The location of polling places can also be inaccessible to low-income people; either because of where they are physically located (too far away); or not even knowing where the polling place is in their community.

While there are many other barriers, the final one to mention here is literacy. A personal barrier for many low-income citizens can be reading literacy; as well as feeling deficient in how the voting process works; or a lack of understanding of the “rules”.

**Overcoming These Barriers**

Municipalities could (and perhaps should) take on the role of reducing the barriers for low-income citizens to vote. Creating a venue that could disseminate the information in such way that was accessible to all low-income citizens. A mobile government office that could be available in areas where low-income people live. Information could be shared in a non-partisan way. It would reduce the literacy issue by having conversations with people about how voting works and what the rules are. On election days, it could become a traveling polling center.

Most municipalities already have the infrastructure in place to handle such a vehicle. The issue would be more budgetary. Budget considerations would include purchase of the vehicle; maintenance, gas and insurance; staffing the vehicle; training the staff; appropriate materials for educating and assisting citizens.

**What to Do If Voting Goes Digital**

For many the idea of voting digitally from the comfort of your own home is both “cool” and scary. However, for low-income it widens the gap between those that have and those that don’t. “…in order for individuals to take advantage of opportunities presented by the knowledge economy, they need access to computers, skills training and technical support.” (Bach, Shaffer and Wolfson, 2013). For low-income citizens to take advantage of the e-voting, better systems need to be in place.

Start with voting literacy: what does it mean, why is it important, “your vote does count”, etc. Starting here can impact today’s votes while the country works towards a system of e-voting for everyone. Ensure that internet access is available to everyone for voting purposes. An option could be to offer free internet access at designated locations. Those areas would need to be accessible to all, especially the low-income population. Access to devices and how those devices work. Voter information is protected information. Significant security would have to be in place to ensure that information was protected for voters (all voters in this case) in order for such a system to work.

For some low-income citizens, especially in the rural areas, going voting digitally can have two opposite outcomes. The first, is that those citizens might feel that their vote is more confidential. That it isn’t their neighbor seeing how they voted. The second, opposite issue, is it could potentially take away the social component to voting. There is a sense of community on election day, especially in rural areas. It’s an opportunity to check in with your neighbors and socialize. Seeing one another has benefits that are often missing from digital communication and social media.

Another positive outcome to digital or e-voting is time accessibility. For some people the lack of extended public transportation, coupled with work or school schedules can hinder a citizen’s time availability to go vote. Digital voting (if all other resources were available) could virtually eliminate some of the time constraints on citizens.

**Conclusion**

Our country should not ignore the potential impact that digital voting could have on our elections. Regardless of any affiliation, as a citizen of this country, we should want all voices to be heard. Offering options to marginalized groups such as the low-income population ensures that America remains as democratic as possible.

Digital voting is not a solution for today. It may be a solution for tomorrow. However, we should start considering all the ways we can include all of the populations into the voting process now. Starting with making the information on voting including how to and where to vote, accessibility options, understanding the voting process accessible today. Municipalities need to work inside those areas where our most marginalized citizens are. Find out from them what can be done to get them to vote. Voting information should never be buried; and it should be disseminated in as many ways as possible. Once that happens, offering different ways to vote will happen naturally.

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