Voter Registration is a responsibility of government officials in most European countries; in the United States, it is a task that each voter must accomplish individually. From 1968 through 2000, 87.5 percent of registered voters cast ballots in American presidential elections. But in 2000, only 63.9 percent of the voting age population and 69.5 percent of those of voting age who were citizens were registered. White and black registration rates were comparable – 70 percent for whites and 68 percent for African-Americans – but Asian-American and Latino registration rates were substantially lower, at 52 and 57 percent of citizens, respectively. It is the double barrier of registration and turning out to vote that accounts for the notoriously low American participation rates: only 55 percent of the citizen voting age population voted in 2000. Personal registration is the largest remaining barrier to political participation in America.

It was designed that way. Before the Civil War, only a few New England states forced voters to register. After 1865, state legislatures required men who lived in large cities and later, smaller cities and rural areas, to register to vote periodically, often before each major election. Adopted by 31 of the 37 northern states by 1920, the laws were touted as efforts to combat ballot fraud, but many proponents wished, as well, to eliminate lower-class, often immigrant voters, especially the reformers' partisan opponents. They succeeded. The best estimate is that registration laws were responsible for 30-40 percent of the 29 percentage point decline in turnout in the northern states between 1896 and 1924.

In the post-Reconstruction South, registration laws were even more openly employed for the purposes of racial and partisan disfranchisement. Registrars, who were almost always white Democrats, were often given absolute discretion to add anyone they pleased to the voting lists and to reject as insufficient the information provided by others who sought to register. Such power was dramatically employed immediately before elections concerning constitutional changes in suffrage regulations. In Louisiana before a referendum in 1898 on whether to hold a constitutional convention to disfranchise most African-Americans, authorities wiped the registration books clean and allowed fewer than 10 percent of blacks and 40 percent of whites who had previously been registered to do so again.

Gradually during the 1950s and 60s, the laws were liberalized and registration offices were professionalized. By 1970, nearly all states made registration permanent, so long as registrants voted at least every two or four years, and in that year, Congress amended the Voting Rights Act to require that people could register up to 30 days before a federal election. Many states began accepting registration applications by mail, opening convenient temporary offices in the weeks before the registration deadline, and allowing volunteers to distribute and return registration forms.

Still, registration rates were low, especially among young, poor, and minority voters. So Michigan and other states began to offer voting registration to people obtaining or renewing their drivers' licences, and after a 20-year struggle, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, popularly known as "Motor Voter." By 1999-2000, 38 percent of the 45.6 million people who registered initially or changed addresses in those two years did so at motor vehicle offices, and 31 percent used the mails. NVRA also regulated purges of inactive voters or felons and required the Federal Election Commission to gather and

disseminate information about the election process in each state. These reforms notwithstanding, discriminatory purging of the registration rolls and failures to pass registration information from motor vehicle and other offices to registrars and officials at the polls disfranchised thousands of voters throughout the country and probably determined the result of the presidential election in Florida and therefore, in the nation.

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