

Voter Residency Requirements prohibit otherwise qualified people from voting unless they have lived in a particular state, county, or election district for a specified period of time. Virtually unknown before the Civil War, they were imposed by permanent residents to keep recent migrants from influencing elections, to discourage fraud, and to give voting officials the ability to disfranchise political opponents, especially African-Americans in the South. When fully enforced, they had substantial effects on voting participation because Americans have always been highly geographically mobile, and because proving residency at a particular time in the past is often difficult and leaves much to the discretion of voting registrars.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, residency of up to two years was required by some states, and as late as the mid-1960s, requirements that typically amounted to a year in the state and two to six months in the district were estimated to disfranchise nearly a tenth as many Americans as were registered to vote. To encourage higher voting turnout and to minimize discrimination, Congress in its 1970 amendments to the Voting Rights Act limited residency requirements in federal elections to 30 days, and the Supreme Court in *Dunn v. Blumstein* (1972) applied the same standard to state and local elections.

Although residency requirements have now essentially been eliminated, Americans' mobility still inhibits voting. In 1997-98, 16 percent of Americans changed residences, and 10 percent of whites, 13 percent of African-Americans, and 16 percent of Latinos moved to another county. Nearly twice as high a proportion of single and divorced people as married persons living with their spouses moved during that typical year, and renters were four times as likely to move as homeowners. Perhaps because they were insufficiently familiar with public services in their new communities, or perhaps because they were just too busy, only 38 percent of people resident in a community for less than one year reported voting in the 2000 general election, compared to 72 percent of those who had resided there for 5 or more years. Thus, while geographic mobility promotes economic opportunity for individuals, it makes the political system as a whole more conservative.

Bibliography

Jamieson, Amie, Hyon B. Shin, and Jennifer Day. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002.