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## The Voting Rights Act in Iowa

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## **The Voting Rights Act in Iowa**

Part of the journal section "Forum: Constitution Day 2015: The Voting Rights Act of 1965"

Paul Pate "The Voting Rights Act in Iowa"

1. I put together just some brief statements, then I will give you more personal comments. Let me just start by telling you a little background, too. We got a little history lesson tonight, and it is important to know where we come from. If you do not appreciate the history, it is very hard to map a future for where we are going. While Democrats and Republicans in the South may have voted against the Voting Rights Act 50 years ago, eight of Iowa's nine federal elected officials helped the measure pass. Iowa has long been at the forefront of making elections accessible. The passage of Voting Rights Act was a monumental achievement in our nation's history, and voting is a civic duty that all Americans should fulfill. I am proud that Iowa is one of the nation's leaders in voting accessibility. I would like to continue that trend in my role as Iowa's Commissioner of Elections by increasing participation while maintaining the integrity of the vote. That is the balancing act as part of what we are talking about tonight.

2. Let's look at Iowa's success, if you will, in voting accessibility statistics. Iowa's 40-day early voting period is one of the longest in the nation. Forty days before the election, we allow people to cast a ballot; about 45 days if you include military personnel. New York is the only state whose polls are open longer on Election Day than Iowa. Out of 50 states, only one. Iowa is one of only 11 states that allows voter registration on same day of voting on Election Day itself. And we will be bringing true online voter registration to Iowa beginning January 1. We will be one of the first states that has the entire process done online. We are doing that in cooperation with the Department of Transportation.

3. Many of the states you see in the map that was just shown, in my opinion, do not have true online voter registration. They fill out the form, they mail it to you, or they have it sitting there when you come show up to vote. There are all kinds of little hoops and things to go through, but, effective January 1, you can go online anywhere and register to vote.

4. This will make voter registration easily accessible to almost every Iowan, and we are not done. We joined the Iowa Democratic Party and the Republican Party of Iowa in promoting National Voter Registration Day this past Tuesday. We have 82.5% of the eligible Iowans registered to vote. And I want to obviously bring that number to a hundred percent or as high as we can bring it. That is what's key. We are doing that through a lot of the programs that you see and hear

about, through partnering with various groups like the League of Women Voters, doing this kind of forum today, trying to bring the attention to it.

5. We also have a program called Caucus 101. And I'd encourage you to check that out. That's the website, [Caucus101.com](http://Caucus101.com). Take a look at that. When I served in this position some years ago, we had a program called Kids Caucus and I have been told we do not call people "kids" anymore, so it is called Caucus 101. This is a program we worked on with Newspapers in Education, the Democratic and Republican parties. We worked with Drake University and many others and put together a curriculum, if you will, that's designed to meet the Social Studies/Government class criteria on local government. There are not a lot of materials out there on the caucuses and Iowa will be the first in the nation. We wanted to make sure we had material for them. And its design is online. As I said, you can access that for free. We're partnering up with Social Studies teachers across the state. So they will be offering this in their classrooms. We are also working with the political parties on doing a youth mock caucus in November. That will be statewide, done in many locations. This is, again, getting people involved early on, so they understand what the government process is, so they will be encouraged to take part in it.

6. While Iowa is one of the most accessible states for voting, I know some might share some frustrations that we hear people talk about. Number one, there are a lot of people who are not registered to vote. Number two, there are a lot of people who are registered but they choose not to vote. The Pew research Center reports that each year young voters are significantly less engaged in the election process than the election before. For example, in the last presidential election, the share of voters younger than 30 was half of what it was four years before. Nationally in 2010, only 24% of the millennials, the 18-29 year olds, voted, compared with 51% of the Americans aged 30 and over. The trends show that not only are young registered voters less engaged, but fewer young people are registered to vote. So the question has to be why don't people register to vote? And why don't those who are registered to vote actually vote?

7. My staff has been digging a little deeper on this, and working with the Pew Research Center again. They went out and asked those questions and Iowa was included in this poll and the survey work and they asked these critical questions. Here's what the research has told us: There are three reasons why people chose not to participate. Number one, they do not like or trust government. Number two, they like government so much that they are afraid that they may make a wrong choice. Number three, the largest group is those who do not believe that government is relevant to their life. Not only do they believe that their vote doesn't matter, voting isn't even on their radar screen.

8. Harvard comes to some of the same conclusions in their survey of young American attitudes toward politics and public service. Harvard asked young people why they do not vote or why they did not vote. Here is what they found: 12% said they do not know enough about the candidates, 11% said they were not interested, 10% said they were too busy, 8% said they were not registered, 7% said they do not trust or like the candidates or politicians in general, and another 7% said their vote does not make a difference.

9. There was a blogger who recently put out something and I looked at it. I'm reluctant to just say bloggers or Wikipedia, but I will fill this one out because it fits for our message here and they said it is kind of a catch-22. Young people don't vote because politics doesn't serve their interest. And the reason politicians ignore them is because they don't vote. I think it is very accurate, ladies and gentlemen. They catch on, so I thought I would share that moment of wisdom with you, for what is worth.

10. So, the technical side of the elections is critical for those fair and honest elections, but to increase voter participation, it's going to require us to think deeply on how we can reach out to those that don't trust government, those who love government so much that they are afraid they are going to make a mistake when they vote, and for those who cannot see the relevance of government in their lives. So, I want to leave you, if I could, with a question and a challenge tonight. First, a question to you is, are you registered to vote? Then I am going to ask you, if you aren't registered, I've got a couple registration forms over here. I will be happy to give one to you before you sneak out tonight. But I also want to challenge you to reach out and get one person to register to vote. Just one. If we all just did that simple task, we could be so much more successful. If you or your organization are interested in helping out with voter registration drives, just go our website: [sos.iowa.gov](http://sos.iowa.gov). We have toolkits that you can pull up on how to put a voter registration drive together.

11. Some of the numbers I have seen are very disturbing, as we have talked about before. Over 6 million Americans who are eligible voters are not registered. That is disconcerting. And the fact is that Iowa is so far ahead of the rest of the nation. You should be proud of that. We are not done though. We really aren't. We lead, by far. We have very good, clean open elections in my opinion. And we are going to continue to do that. And one of the areas is the direction we are going with absentee ballots. Vote by mail is growing leaps and bounds and this is probably the area you are going to hear more discussion about and it is also one of those areas that is disconcerting, how to balance the participation and integrity of that. When you look at counties that over 60% of the ballots that are done through the mail rather than in place, it's clear our times are changing. Your demands as voters are changing. Our grandparents, and even in my generation, traditionally would walk to the polling place on Election Day and cast their ballot. Now you can do it through satellite voting, you can do it by voting by mail. We have more options than you ever had before, frankly, but we are not done.



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