



THINGS THAT WORK

States with Election Day registration see bonus for democracy

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A voter in Montpelier, Vt., cast a ballot for the Republican presidential primary in 2012.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Voting on Election Day usually entails some pre-planning, with registration required several days, if not weeks, ahead of time in most places.

But following a court decision last week, Massachusetts is under pressure to join more than a dozen other states — including Connecticut, Maine, and Vermont — in allowing residents to register or reregister on Election Day, and vote moments later.

While the state's top election official is raising concerns about costs, research shows that allowing same-day, or Election-Day, registration can bolster democracy by motivating voters to go to the polls.

“While most other election reforms show pretty mixed effects, Election Day registration . . . has produced a wide consensus that in pretty much every study you find positive and increased voter turnout,” said professor Barry C.

Burden, director of the Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



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Secretary of the Commonwealth William Galvin, whose office oversees elections, said he is not opposed to the idea. But he said the state is appealing the Suffolk Superior Court ruling because election officials would need extra funding to deploy additional equipment and staffing for Election Day, or else there would be “chaos.”

“Can it be done? Is it something we should do? Yes,” he said. “But it’s something we have to make sure we do right.”

Officials from several states that have same-day registration said that while there have been logistical issues to iron out, they and the voters in their respective states have been generally happy with the policy.

“For us it’s been great,” said Denise Merrill, secretary of the state in Connecticut, which adopted same-day registration in 2013 and saw nearly 35,000 people take advantage of it this past November. “It’s enabled thousands of people to vote who would not have otherwise.”

Same-day registration has been done for decades in other states without the need for any special technology. And officials in some states, including Vermont and Connecticut, said they rolled it out without any significant boost in funding.

Before casting ballots on Election Day, voters must prove their identity and residency in person, said Wendy Underhill, program director of elections and redistricting for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Specific requirements vary, but can include showing a driver’s license, ID card, paycheck, utility bill, or other documentation.

In some states, those who want to register on Election Day must do so at a certain location, such as a city or town hall. Typically, residents can then vote in that same location.

Election officials have also taken steps to discourage fraud, such as sending a mailing to same-day registrants to verify their identity and residence, or updating the statewide voter database to ensure no one casts multiple votes.

At some polling locations, election officials use electronic poll books, which connect to the state’s database of voters and can verify in real time that the person isn’t registered and hasn’t already voted.

Nationwide, voter fraud is believed to be [exceedingly rare](#). Experts say there’s [nothing](#) to indicate that states with same-day registration see any uptick in fraud. Some argue the same-day registration process is more secure because verification is done in person by trained poll workers, rather than registering by mail or online.

President Trump in February [alleged](#) that thousands of Massachusetts residents were bused to New Hampshire and voted illegally (and against him) by taking advantage of the neighboring state’s same-



day registration policy. No evidence was ever presented to back up the claim, and [numerous](#) officials have disputed it.

The potential benefits of the policy are clear, experts say.

A US Government Accountability Office [report](#) last year said that a majority of studies on same-day registration showed it improves voter turnout by a statistically significant amount, from about 2 to 10 percentage points.

The Massachusetts ruling came in a lawsuit filed [last year](#) by the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, the Chelsea Collaborative, a social services nonprofit, and MassVOTE, a nonprofit that registers people to vote.

If the state were to adopt same-day voting, Galvin would want a system in which election officials could use special computers that are connected, he said, (though not via the Internet) to the state voter database. That would allow registrants to be cross-checked in real time, and no one could accuse the state of compromising voting integrity, he said.

Getting that technology in place statewide would cost millions of dollars, he said.

Polling locations, unless they are located inside a city or town hall, do not have the technology and equipment in place now, Galvin said. Every city and town hall in the state does have the capability, but Galvin said those places would still need additional money for staffing and training to prevent long lines, confusion, and errors.

Connecticut avoided extra costs by offering same-day registration only in buildings where the technology already exists. Other states simply do not use the technology at most, if not all, polling locations.

Massachusetts lawmakers, who for years have considered same-day registration, are now [considering several](#) bills [that](#) would allow for the policy. State Senator Anne Gobi, cochair of the Joint Committee on Election Laws, said they are likely to get more attention this year in light of the court case.

“I think this issue is really coming to the forefront now,” said Gobi, a Democrat from Spencer. “I’m very much in favor of anything we can do to get people more engaged in our government. If it requires more funding, obviously that’s what we need to do.”

Election administrators and some experts said same-day registration could actually reduce costs because it could slash the number of provisional ballots — used when questions about a voter’s eligibility arise. In states with the policy, voters can typically address any issues on the spot, while those without it must commit resources to investigate after an election.

Same-day registration could also help election officials have cleaner, more accurate voter rolls, improving efficiency by keeping data up-to-date.

And while there are startup costs for electronic poll books, over time they can decrease the cost of printing paper ones.

Wisconsin officials said they’ve had same-day registration since 1975. The issue shouldn’t be about money, said Neil V. Albrecht, executive director of the City of Milwaukee Election Commission. (Albrecht and Burden, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, [were called](#) by the ACLU to testify in the Massachusetts case.)

“Elections should be about access and making sure everyone had an opportunity to cast a ballot. If there’s somewhere you’re going to earmark dollars, this is the place to do it” Albrecht said. “Voting is the foundation of democracy. It’s hard to put a price tag on democracy.”

States with same-day voter registration

In the map below:

Red = Same-day registration is allowed

Orange = Residents can register and vote on the same day, but only during early voting, not on Election Day

Note:

- Years shown below are either for when the policy was enacted or implemented.
- Not shown below, Utah tested same-day registration in recent years but does not currently have it in place.
- Not shown below, Rhode Island lets residents register and vote on Election Day, but only for President and Vice President.

SOURCE: National Conference of State Legislatures
MATT ROCHELEAU/GLOBE STAFF

Part of a series exploring initiatives that have succeeded or hold great promise. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com.

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