



NEWS from U.S. Senator Bob Dole

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - JUNE 15, 1972

SENATE FLOOR STATEMENT

NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION MONTH

The right to vote is a precious freedom, an integral element of an open and democratic system of government. The vote is the fundamental and most powerful force in the hands of a free people who wish to guide and direct the destiny of themselves and their nation. From the ballot of each voter flows an uninhibited mandate and a statement to those who would represent him. It gives each voter an equal say in the election process, a voice which is not affected by wealth, race, geography, religion or any other element which from time to time may influence the affairs of men.

The importance of voting is difficult to overstate. Indeed, this importance raises it to an obligation upon all eligible men and women, for, just as each citizen is responsible for the quality of a government which is of, for and by the people, that responsibility is most importantly met through regular and conscientious exercise of the vote.

EXPANDING THE FRANCHISE

We Americans have always cherished the institutions of our Republic -- including the electoral process -- and we have taken significant steps over the years to broaden both voter participation and the scope of the votes cast.

In 1868 and 1869 the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution granted and insured the right to vote to former slaves. The 19th amendment, extended the franchise to women in 1920. The 23rd amendment, ratified in 1960, gave the vote in Presidential elections to residents of the District of the District of Columbia. The 24th amendment in 1964 removed the impediment of the poll tax in federal

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elections. And most recently, in 1971, the 26th amendment granted the vote to those aged 18 to 20. The cumulative effect of these six amendments is that some 60 to 70% of today's voting population enjoys the franchise which would be denied them under the "free, male, white and 21" construction originally given the Constitution.

Voter participation has also been enhanced by recent voting rights acts which provide real protections for participants in all federal elections and less stringent barriers to absentees and new residents in Presidential contests. The Supreme Court has just this year delivered a major decision still more strictly limiting the inhibitions of residency requirements.

INCREASED SCOPE

The scope of the vote has also been broadened in this country by such steps as the 17th amendment providing for direct election of Senators, and the Supreme Court's one-man-one-vote decisions which govern the population of Congressional Districts. Of course, efforts are continuing to devise a new formula for the election of the President and Vice President whereby the Electoral College can be reformed or eliminated to make way for direct or automatic apportionment of each state's vote.

Of course, our people can take justifiable pride in this record. It is a story of continuing progress toward improving our election system and thereby the quality of our government.

A NATIONAL SHORTCOMING

But there is, unfortunately, an aspect of our electoral process which is not a source of pride, but which is, rather, a point of some embarrassment for a Nation with our heritage, wealth and position of prominence in world affairs.

The fact is that, although many avenues of voter eligibility have been opened and in spite of the increased importance which the vote of each individual has assumed, Americans do not exercise their right to vote -- do not live up to their responsibility to vote -- as they should.

POOR COMPARISONS

In fact, in the 1968 Presidential election only 61% of the American voting age population cast ballots. This figure compares poorly with 76% in Canada; 89% in Denmark; 86% in West Germany; 87% in New Zealand and 89% in Sweden. The comparison is even more unfavorable when one considers that the highest turnout in the last two decades was 64% in 1960, and the rate in non-Presidential years runs far below 50%. In 1970, only 44.9% voted. Such performance amounts to a national disgrace.

Of course, get-out-the-vote drives are features of every election, but such activities only address part of the problem. Undoubtedly, voters should be gotten out, but, more fundamentally, voters should be enrolled so they can be eligible to be brought to the polls.

UNTAPPED RESOURCE

Voter registration is the key to increasing voter turnout on election day, and unregistered voters are the great, untapped resource of the political world. In 1968, it was estimated that some 23.1%, nearly 1/4th, of our eligible voters were not registered. It takes no great gift of insight to appreciate the impact these votes would have on contests from the Presidency to the city council.

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Even at the prevailing 61% turnout rate in 1968, those additional 18.3 million votes could very well have changed the outcome of a significant number, if not a majority of the races. After all, how many officeholders received greater than a five or ten percent majority -- much less one in the 25% range?

INCREASED ATTENTION

In 1972 a great deal of attention should -- and is -- being paid to the unregistered -- otherwise eligible voter. Both national parties are directing significant voter registration drives all across the country, and many other groups and organizations have developed programs. Some of this activity is directed at the newly-enfranchised 18 - 20 year olds, but it goes much further. I believe that the entire political apparatus of America is awakening to the opportunity to be found in the unregistered voter. Whether he or she is young or old, a college student or a retired person, whether an individual is a member of a highly mobile executive family or one who suffers from a mobility-reducing disability -- there is growing recognition that this individual must be sought out and brought into the electoral process in unprecedented numbers.

And because of this awakening and activity, I believe the American political system stands at the threshold of a great opportunity to take on the increased vitality and strength which inevitably comes from greater citizen participation.

NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION MONTH

It is a pleasure to join with the distinguished senior Senator from West Virginia in introducing a measure which will serve to draw the Nation's attention to the importance of voter registration.

Authorizing the designation of September, 1972, as "National Voter Registration Month" will put the Congress on record as a full-spirited participant in the campaign to expand the voter rolls and thereby the people's part in securing the sound and wise functioning of government in America -- at local, state and national levels. It is highly appropriate that the legislative branch take this step to provide leadership and support for the many efforts which will be made between now and election day to reach and enroll unregistered voters.

The Senator from Kansas would certainly hope that the support already shown for this measure by the many Senators who have joined as co-sponsors indicates that it might receive rapid approval from the Senate. Hopefully, our colleagues in the House can approve an identical bill, so full Congressional action can send it to the President in ample time to give National Voter Registration Month a well-deserved round of national publicity.

SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE

I would also take this opportunity to congratulate the Senator from West Virginia for his long record of leadership in extending and expanding the vote in this country. This year is of particular significance to him and his work, because it marks the first Presidential election in which 18 to 20-year-old citizens have been universally entitled to vote. They gained this privilege and responsibility in large measure because of Senator Randolph's years of leadership and support for the measure which finally became the 26th amendment to our Constitution.