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ProGov21 is a shared resource for progressive local policy makers and advocates alike. Operated and maintained by COWS, a national think-and-do tank based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, ProGov21 offers a fully searchable digital library of progressive policies, practices, and other resources for 21st century local government.
The Problems & Progressive Local Solutions

Voter participation is the foundation of a healthy democracy, but voter turnout in the United States is low compared to many similar countries. The American voting system has historically discriminated against non-land-owners, women, native people, and people of color, while those with entrenched political power have consistently used it to make voting more difficult or less effective. The U.S. states place a heavy burden on voters trying to get registered, stay registered, or to actually cast their vote. Voting will soon be even more difficult in the United States: in the first four months of 2021, state legislators introduced 389 bills with provisions that restrict voting. These attempts to disenfranchise Americans are already having their intended effect: during the 2016 Presidential Election, only 55.7 percent of America’s eligible voting age population went to the polls, far behind turnout in the most recent comparable elections in Canada (62.2 percent of voting age population), the United Kingdom (63.25 percent), Mexico (65.97 percent), and Norway (70.59 percent).

Although the structure of the US Constitution places many decisions about voting in the hands of state and federal officials, there are still significant opportunities for local elected officials and activists to safeguard the political enfranchisement of local residents, including building voting infrastructure, expanding the pool of skilled and engaged poll workers, helping potential voters register, fostering early voting, and sustaining outreach and outreach efforts so that people are informed about registration and elections. For every official or activist, the target of these efforts should be the registration of 100% of eligible voters registered and able vote without facing undue hurdles.
Available Local Levers & Targets for Reform

Although federal and state law regulate many aspects of U.S. elections, local governments can still influence voting rights policy by making voting and voting registration easier and more accessible. It is critically important that local officials take initiative and act creatively in deploying resources such as money, people, and information to improve their constituent’s access to the vote.

In states without automatic voter registration (AVR), local policymakers can employ a variety of outside-the-box methods to increase voter registration. Agency-based voter registration, where public agencies are mandated to offer eligible persons the opportunity to register to vote when applying or receiving services such as affordable housing, health programs, and more, is one example of local elected officials using their power in creative ways to move the needle on voting. This strategy is particularly valuable when trying to increase voter registration for marginalized communities because registration through public agencies makes registration more accessible to low-income people and people of color. Similarly, policymakers can enact a renter registration policy, in which landlords must provide tenants with voter registration forms during move-in; this strategy is also useful for registering marginalized communities, because renters are disproportionately low-income people and people of color. Additionally, local officials can proactively mail voter registration material absentee ballot requests forms, and prepaid return envelopes to every resident eligible to vote. Proactively mailing absentee ballots is estimated to cost between $1.15 and $2.00 per registered voter, but may be as low as $0.65 per voter depending on the specific materials. High school voter registration drives can register students that are eligible to vote and (in certain states) pre-register students before they turn 18. Ultimately, such strategies to increase voter registration increase voter turnout: according to the U.S. Census Bureau data, most Americans who are registered to vote show up on election day; 87 percent of Americans who were registered to vote cast a ballot in the 2016 presidential election, while only 61 percent of the total eligible population voted.

In 2018, approximately 70% of jurisdictions reported difficulty obtaining enough poll workers to staff locations on election day. High school students have been serving as poll workers since the early 1990s, and became more popular after the Help America Vote Act of 2002 provided federal support for these programs. Involving high school students as poll workers, even before they themselves are eligible to vote, can help familiarize young people with American democracy and increase their civic engagement. Additionally, high school students are more likely to be bilingual and tech savvy than other groups of poll workers,
and are less likely to have compromised immune systems, which is currently an important consideration.

Furthermore, in states where municipalities have legal authority to set voter eligibility requirements for local elections, local policymakers can extend the franchise to new voters. Cities and counties can do so by permitting 16 and 17 year olds to pre-register to vote, lowering the voting age for local elections, and allowing non-citizens to vote in local elections. Additionally, where possible, municipalities should combat criminal disenfranchisement laws, which disproportionately impact low-income people and people of color, by restoring voting rights to felons. Similarly, due to the lack of access to voter registration forms, voting booths, and information regarding voting, detainees awaiting trial are often deprived of their ability to vote; in response, policies should be implemented to register people in jail pre-conviction and enable their vote.

**Current Reforms & Tools to Fight for Them**

Many localities have acted against restrictive voting and voter registration. New York City, for example, enacted the Pro-Voter Law which requires 18 state agencies to offer voter registration forms to all persons submitting applications, renewals, or recertification for agency services. Other municipalities, like Broward County and New York City, have increased voter registration by conducting annual high school voter registration drives. This has shown to be widely successful as they have registered over 25,000 students in the past four years.
During New York City’s annual public high school “Civics Week” the Mayor’s Office and the Department of Education coordinates with voter registration organizations to register first-time student voters in high schools across the city, helping students become engaged citizens who are empowered to impact New York City’s future. Houston increased voter registration by having taco trucks double as voter registration booths. In cities like Madison and Minneapolis, landlords must provide voter registration forms to their tenants.

To address the impact of voting restrictions on marginalized communities, local governments have created policies to include immigrants, previously incarcerated felons, noncitizens, transgender individuals, and others in the voting process. In Maryland, nine municipalities have created legislation allowing noncitizens to vote in local elections. Takoma Park addressed this issue through granting previously incarcerated felons the right to vote in municipal elections following their sentence. To increase voting within immigrant communities, Seattle launched an immigrant voting task force. The National Center for Transgender Equality created a Voting While Trans guide to increase voting accessibility for trans individuals. Lastly, in an effort to include younger people in local elections, five Maryland cities have lowered the voting age to 16 for municipal elections. Expanding voting sites and improving polling place accessibility has also been a focus of many local governments.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Milwaukee expanded early voting locations from 3 sites in 2016 to 14 sites in 2020. In a similar effort, Harris County developed a Polling Place Program, where voters could choose any polling station to vote. Los Angeles County aimed to make voting more accessible for all individuals by providing many multilingual services, including recruiting over 4,000 bilingual poll workers, translating the entire website into all 9 federally mandated languages, creating a translated text service that allows people to find out where to vote, and more. Additionally, Sandusky, Ohio aimed to make election day as accessible as possible by declaring Election Day a paid holiday.
Gigh school student poll worker programs have had great success in Minnesota. Counties in Minnesota have adopted different strategies for recruiting student poll workers, but critical to the success of all programs were strong, long-term relationships between local election officials and high school teachers or administrators that extend beyond a single election cycle. The Minnesota YMCA has released two in-depth research reports, one covering the program as a whole, and a second detailing five unique high school election poll worker programs.

Taking it to the Next Level

Local officials and activists must also take care to incorporate equity in their voting programs. Access to the vote is especially important for communities of color, poor communities, and LGBTQIA communities because the tools and resources needed to achieve social and economic equity are, under our current system, only available through political empowerment. For these groups, exclusion from the electoral process further entrenches their marginalization. It is critical for local officials to ensure that poll workers have the cultural competencies to help the people who come into the polling locations without bringing implicit biases into the space in a way that could unintentionally or unknowingly lead to disenfranchising people. Trans voters, whose IDs may not accurately reflect their gender identity or presentation, are especially vulnerable to Voter ID laws and need resources and support to ensure they can use their franchise.

Laws that make it more difficult to vote have been rationalized by the specter of voter fraud, but this is merely a thinly disguised fear of the “wrong” people voting. Americans are more likely to be “struck by lightning than...impersonate another voter at the polls.” Extant voter suppression laws, however, have had their intended effect of suppressing the vote of poor people and minorities. The 2016 election had the most diverse electorate in U.S. history, but turnout among racial and ethnic minorities remained proportionately lower than their share of the general population. Voter participation correlates directly with household income: people in the lowest income category of Census’ Current Population Survey had an average income of $5,000 and a voter participation rate of 48 percent, while people in the highest income category had an average income of $150,000 and a voter participation rate of 86 percent. The intention of these voter suppression laws is not to stop voter fraud. They are the product of a political structure that wants to avoid losing power, and does so by stopping people from voting rather than by presenting policies and vision that can attract support.

When local officials or activists are asked to address voter fraud or other election conspiracy theories, they should directly
ask for (1) specific examples of voter fraud the questioner has experienced; and (2) ask them to what agency they reported this fraud, and for details of the contact in order to follow up further. It should also be pointed out that these narratives are lies propagated by people in power in order to remain in power, not to address a real problem. Eliding the nefariousness and the bad faith of voter suppression empowers the worst actors in our political system.

**Allies, Comrades, and Helpers**

**The Mayor’s Innovation Project (MIP)**
MIP has resources around how to reduce carbon emissions through transportation policies, parking, and bike infrastructure.

**FairVote**
FairVote is a nonpartisan champion of electoral reforms that give voters greater choice, a stronger voice, and a representative democracy that works for all Americans.

**Local Progress**
Local Progress is a network elected officials working for racial and economic justice at all levels of local government. They offer many resources addressing equitable local revenue and tax systems.

**Center for Popular Democracy**
The Center for Popular Democracy works to create equity, opportunity and a dynamic democracy in partnership with high-impact base-building organizations, organizing alliances, and progressive unions.

**Brennan Center for Justice**
The Brennan Center’s mission is to work to reform, revitalize, and when necessary, defend our country’s systems of democracy and justice.

**Center for American Progress**
CAP is an independent nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action.

We continue the conversation around this Voting Rights Roadmap on ProGov21’s Podcast. Our latest episode features experts the Center for Popular Democracy on a panel discussion all about Democracy, Voting Rights, and highroad progressive voting policies.

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