

The Republic

Ensuring fairness, right to vote important

By Staff Reports –

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One of the more intriguing aspects of this unusual election year was the extent to which the underpinning of the election itself — voting — became an issue in its own right. An act that we used to take for granted was increasingly being called into question.

Just look at the headlines from the past few months. Russia, it seems clear, tried to meddle in the process, sowing confusion and distrust about the integrity of the vote and about the vibrancy and fairness of our democracy. There were questions about the cyber-security of voting infrastructure across the country — “States Unprepared for Election Day Cyber Attack,” ran the headline on a Politico story 10 days before the election.

There are worries about the fragility of our voting system in general, what with its patchwork of procedures, obsolete machinery, and increasingly complex training requirements for poll workers. And, of course, you had the cries from one of the presidential candidates that the entire system is rigged against him.

But perhaps most notable of all, we’re faced with a fundamental disagreement among state governments, which are charged with protecting Americans’ most basic right, as to how they should treat it. Some states have sought to constrain voting, instituting restrictive registration requirements, limiting access to the ballot box with ID requirements and even imposing shorter hours for early voting and for voting on Election Day.

In essence, they're trying to limit voter turnout. Other states have moved in the opposite direction, trying to expand the ease with which citizens can vote by knocking down barriers.

These are mostly, but not entirely, partisan stances. Jim Sensenbrenner, the senior Republican from Wisconsin in the House of Representatives, noted in a March New York Times commentary, "Ensuring that every eligible voter can cast a ballot without fear, deterrence and prejudice is a basic American right. I would rather lose my job than suppress votes to keep it."

Still, members of his party generally support restricting voting; Democrats support expanding the vote. Politicians in each party tend to see the issue through a partisan lens: they support positions which they believe will help them win elections.

I'm with Jim Sensenbrenner on this one. The right to cast a vote is fundamental in a democracy. It is the preeminent emblem of American citizenship — indeed, the right to vote is synonymous with being a citizen, the essential attribute of American freedom.

The history of our country can be written in part by tracking who has the right to vote. The 15th Amendment gave it to African-American men; women of all races won the right after World War I; discrimination at the polls constricted the vote for many decades, until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 once again bolstered access to the ballot; 18-year-olds were given the vote six years later. Over many decades, from the 19th century on, the electorate has expanded, contracted and expanded again.

These days, you pretty much need a scorecard to keep track of voting rights in the U.S., although I believe that in the long run, seeking to undermine the privilege of voting is a losing cause. The courts have been getting heavily involved, and in recent years have often overturned, challenged or blocked some of the more restrictive laws passed by state legislatures.

Moreover, the effort to disenfranchise or suppress votes in the name of “ballot security” runs the risk of antagonizing voters who, given a chance to vote, will inflict political losses on the party that tried to block their way.

Instead, we ought to be expansive in championing voting rights. I’ve worked in a lot of precincts over my decades in politics, and I understand full well that there are deficiencies in our voting laws and procedures.

Registration records get skewed. Errors occur. Incompetence happens. Inadequate state or local resources result in confusing ballots, some precincts getting short-changed on voting machines and voting machines breaking down.

Voting is an issue worth our sustained attention. But let’s place our priorities where they belong: on ensuring the fairness, integrity and efficiency of our voting infrastructure and procedures, and assuring that qualified citizens exercise democracy’s most fundamental right — voting.

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