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PROGRESSIVE POLITICS & THE MOTOR VOTER LAW

By PETER DREIER. *Third Force*. Dec 31, 1994. Vol.2, Iss. 5; pg. 32

In June 1993 President Clinton signed the National Voter Registration Act, legislation that progressive activists had been pushing for almost a decade. Commonly known as the "motor voter" bill, it requires all states to streamline their voter registration laws to make it easier for citizens to sign up. Specifically, it requires states to give voters the option to register when they apply for or renew their drivers licenses at state motor vehicle departments (thus, "motor voter"), to enlist voters at social service and other agencies (where AFDC, food stamps and other benefits are distributed) and to allow voters to register by mail. The federal law orders states to implement these provisions by January 1, 1995.

But the battle for a motor voter bill was hard fought. After almost a decade of frustration, a fragile grassroots coalition -- voting rights groups, senior citizens and labor organizations, civil rights activists and good-government groups like Common Cause and the League of Women Voters -- finally got Congress to pass the motor voter bill in 1992, only to see it vetoed by President Bush.

When Congress reconvened in 1993, the motor voter bill was near the top of its agenda. This time, legislators knew that President Clinton would sign it (he endorsed the idea during the campaign), so the Republicans took greater care in forcing compromises. But the final bill was still a giant step in the long battle for voting rights.

When Clinton signed the bill at a White House ceremony, social scientists and activists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, the early architects of the motor voter crusade, were on hand for the Washington press corps and the CSPAN audience to see.

It should have been a moment of glory. One would think that after 12 years of Reagan and Bush, progressive activists would savor such a clearcut victory. But while the mainstream press paid some attention to the struggle over the legislation, and in many cases even endorsed it editorially, progressives did little cheering when the bill finally became law. And now, when some key states like California are balking at implementing the federal law, progressives are, with some exceptions, sitting on the sidelines and allowing insiders to make key decisions that could have enormous political consequences.

IF CLINTON LIKES IT, HOW GOOD CAN IT BE?

Perhaps the left's early skepticism about the Clinton administration made it feel like Groucho Marx, who quipped that he wouldn't want to join any club with such low standards that it would let him in. Could a bill that Democratic Leadership Council crony Bill Clinton endorsed during the campaign and then signed soon after taking office be any good for progressive political forces?

The answer is an unequivocal yes. The motor voter bill has the potential to dramatically alter the terrain of American politics. It could significantly expand voter registration among low-income and minority Americans, making it much easier to get out the vote for candidates and causes in tune with the concerns of currently disenfranchised citizens. Candidates for office also would have greater incentives to address progressive issues.

An expanded electorate, particularly among the poor and people of color, could make the margin of difference in many close races. There's almost no doubt, for example, that had the motor voter law been in place four years ago, Harvey Gantt, the progressive African American former mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, certainly would have defeated incumbent Senator Jesse Helms. In Minnesota, which has one of the nation's highest voter turnouts -- thanks, in part, to its model motor voter system -- Senator Paul Wellstone gives the system partial credit for his victory, despite a shoestring campaign budget.

Multiply these examples in races across the country for school boards, city councils, mayors, county boards of supervisors, state legislatures, Congress and even president, and it's clear that the motor voter law could have a tremendous political impact.

Most experts believe that our nation's crazy-quilt voter registration laws, not apathy or satisfaction with the status quo, account for low turnout figures in the U.S. For example, in our highly mobile society, people are dropped from the voting rolls every time they move, and many don't get around to reregistering in time for the next election. This undermines voter participation. (Under the new law, citizens won't be purged from the voter lists when they move within the same state.)

In most other democratic countries, the government actively encourages and takes responsibility for registering voters. When an election is called in Canada, for example, a complete national registration is carried out in a matter of weeks by a federal agency called Elections Canada.

The motor voter law will certainly increase voter registration significantly. Currently about 91 percent of America's voting-age population has drivers licenses or photo ID cards issued by state motor vehicle departments. At least another 4 percent -- those who don't drive or otherwise aren't in contact with motor vehicle departments -- will be reached through social service and disability agencies, for instance.

But will these newly registered voters go to the polls? Currently, about 85 percent of registered voters actually cast ballots in national elections. So an increase in overall registration is likely to dramatically expand election-day turnouts. How much it increases depends on whether candidates and movements mobilize voters and address their concerns.

Some states, including California, are dragging their feet in implementing the federal law, since many politicians don't want to see a lot of poor people casting votes. Responding to pressure from voting rights groups, Attorney General Janet Reno in May sent letters to 23 states that had not yet passed legislation to carry out the federal law, threatening to sue those that refused to act.

How the law is implemented can make a big difference. For example, motor vehicle departments that use one form (rather than multiple forms) for registering drivers and voters will increase voter sign-up. If states routinely register people at places like unemployment offices or public housing projects -- a tactic that is only optional in the federal law -- it would help enfranchise the poor. Progressive activists need to monitor and pressure their state officials to fully implement the federal law. They can contact Human SERVE (622 West 113th St., New York, NY 10025; phone: (212) 854-4053), the major force in the motor voter movement, to get the names of local groups active in each state.

American politics often boils down to a struggle between organized money and organized voters. The current fight over national health care exemplifies the power of corporate PACs in shaping the agenda. The recent defeat in Congress of the bill banning strikebreaker replacement reflects the overwhelming imbalance of influence between big business and labor.

The motor voter bill could therefore have important ramifications for grassroots organizations. During the past decade, for example, community activists have made some significant progress on issues such as bank redlining and government support for community-based nonprofit housing. Even at the national level, they've won important victories in strengthening the Community Reinvestment Act, protecting tenants in subsidized developments and expanding resident participation in public housing. This year, we even saw a slight increase in the Housing and Urban Development department budget.

But urban issues are still not near the top of the nation's public agenda. At the local level, as well as in Washington, community groups are fighting an uphill political battle when it comes to redlining, tenants' rights, slumlords, building code enforcement, public safety, basic government services and similar issues. Although progressive community groups have occasionally helped their allies (and sometimes their own activists) to win public office at all levels of government, these victories have been few and far between.

DISRUPT, AND THEN VOTE

Grassroots activists know that most public officials usually ignore their concerns unless they disrupt "business as usual." The motor voter bill doesn't mean community movements should abandon protest and confrontation, but it does mean that they can have a stronger voice in electoral politics if they mobilize people to exercise the vote as part of grassroots campaigns.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition, for example, is sponsoring a Housing Justice Campaign to reform the "mansion subsidy" (tax breaks for wealthy homeowners) in order to provide more federal housing funds for the poor. If this effort is to gain momentum, however, local housing and neighborhood activists will have to organize politically to make it difficult for Congressmembers to vote against the poor.

Low-income tenants are currently less likely to register and vote than almost any other group in society. The motor voter bill

guarantees that the registration of renters -- including those who live in subsidized and public housing -- will increase significantly. Once implemented, the motor voter bill will make get-out-the-vote efforts much easier, since grassroots groups can now assume that most people, including the poor, are already registered.

Like the Voting Rights Act enacted two decades ago, the motor voter bill removes a major barrier to political participation, especially for the poor. It has the potential to balance the political playing field between corporate America and average citizens. Whether it fulfills its potential depends on progressive movements mobilizing citizens to take back their government from big business and the radical right.

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