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Legislators offer ideas to improve election process

By **JOHN GUIDROZ**

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

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Fresh off an election with seemingly little voter interest, state lawmakers are pushing several proposals to increase voter participation and make for a smoother election process.

The ideas range from making it easier for young people to vote to improved methods for election officials to keep dead voters off the registration rolls. Unofficial estimates show voter turnout statewide for the Feb. 2 primary was less than 30 percent.

So far, there's no clear indication these will get the support needed to make an impact in the November general election and beyond.

Here is a look at the measures aimed at strengthening Illinois elections.

College voting

Two Democrats have proposals to give college students fewer excuses not to vote, despite opposition from election officials.

Senate Bill 2925 and House Bill 4872 require county clerks to provide early voting at public universities and community colleges. Clerks would also have to offer grace period voting and registration on campus under the plan.

Sen. Mike Frerichs, the Gifford Democrat pushing the Senate version, said he spoke with students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who had trouble getting to polling places.

"A lot of these students don't have cars, and frequently the voting places are not conveniently located near campus," he said.

Rep. Esther Golar, a Chicago Democrat behind the House measure, agreed. She says most college students do not know where to vote.

"Most students are not at their homes, and they're so busy with classes," she said. "Rather than be inconvenienced with their class work, they're not voting."

Frerichs said allowing students to vote early would especially help for elections scheduled during spring break.

Matt Van Vossen, president of the Student Government Association at the University of Illinois at Springfield, supports the measures. He said many students choose not to vote because they cannot reach the polling place in time.

"If early voting were to be made available on campuses, student voter turnout would increase," Van Vossen said.

UIS spokesman Derek Schnapp said students who live on campus can vote at nearby Lincoln Land Community College. He said the school's student government group offers carpools for students who need rides to polling places.

Election officials aren't fond of the measure.

"I haven't found any county clerk who's for it," Champaign County Clerk Mark Shelden said.

Shelden said most college students already have the same opportunities to vote as everyone else.

"I'm not sure why a college student should get preferential treatment in the election code versus a single mom with two kids who lives 40 minutes away from a polling place," he said.

Shelden said county clerks would also have to spend thousands of dollars to provide the service.

Golar said she did not know if the bill would be approved this year because of the state's financial difficulties, but she believes lawmakers will be receptive of the idea.

Dead voters

Election officials want to make it easier to track down voters who have passed on.

House Bill 5206 would make it easier for election officials to identify deceased voters and update voter registration lists.

The measure backed by Rep. Dan Brady, R-Bloomington, would allow county clerks statewide to check for death certificates electronically, rather than by hand.

Brady said it is part of a fight that began in 2001, when lawmakers raised the fee for obtaining copies of death certificates by \$2.

The fees went into a surcharge fund to pay for the transition to electronic monitoring. But he says the money was instead moved into the state's general fund and isn't being used for the intended purpose.

Funeral directors and coroners are submitting death certificates electronically, but only a few county clerks are using the system.

Cook County Clerk David Orr said his office has used the electronic method for about a year, reducing the steps needed to identify and remove dead voters.

"Before, everything was done by hand," he said. "People had to physically bring the box of death records and let election employees go through them."

Michelle Zippay, president of the Association of County Clerks and Macoupin County clerk, supports the bill. She said her office runs into trouble when identifying people with similar names or birth dates.

"We need to have something to tell between John Smith Sr. and John Smith Jr.," she said.

Zippay said the electronic system would also make it easier for election officials to identify a person who dies outside their hometown.

Brady said the bill would save money by cutting out mailing certificates and reducing work hours sorting through paperwork. He expects it to clear the legislature this year.

"I don't know who'd be against that," he said.

Voter guides

Giving voters more of a heads-up about who's running is the goal of another measure.

House Bill 4842 would require the State Board of Elections to post an election information guide on its Web site 45 days before a primary election.

House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie, D-Chicago, says the plan would help voters learn more about candidates before the general election. The guide, which now includes only general election information, allows candidates to post brief profiles on the Web site.

State law already requires the board to post the guide 45 days before a general election, but makes a guide optional for the primary.

Board official Cris Cray told lawmakers last week that "timing constraints," including petition objections, prevented the board from posting guides during previous primaries.

Cray said the board would have to hire a temporary worker for about a month to post the guides before primaries.

John Guidroz can be reached at 788-6882.

Comments (25)

Steve 2

2 days ago

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[Empty comment box]

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Change the voting day to Saturday. Won't happen cause Republicans want a low turnout. Higher the turnout the fewer votes they get. It's not right, but that's the way it is.

ch2535

2 days ago

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[Empty comment box]

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Very simple.....open voting, NOT declaring a party.

obscknight

2 days ago

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[Empty comment box]

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with regards to university students voting: if the university were to open one of its gyms to several precincts to use as a mass polling place, that might do it

here in Springfield, IL, the Knight of Columbus Hall on Meadowbrook Road has served as the mass polling place for five or six of the west side precincts: plenty of room for everybody

with regards to the 'open voting' canard: schedule two distinct election days (one day for the 'open voting' elections, such as governor, President, state senator, U.S. senator and so on) and (one day for the distinctly party elections, such as precinct committee person, county committee person, Presidential convention delegate and so on); this way, the internal party elections will be available only to those who declare themselves as members of that party and those who want an 'open vote' can have their 'open vote'.....and I wager that the 'open vote' turnout will still be dismal!
sgtbear47

2 days ago
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If we want change lets have change. Move the primary back to to late March or the first two weeks in April. Add the open primary and voter turn out should really go up. The recent Supreme Court ruling about corporations and unions being able to run political adds, has a side effect gone unnoticed except by politicians. The money does NOT have to be contributed to a candidate or party first, to be used for ads. The Billions of dallars contributed in the past may dry up leaving candidates high and dry for a change. The game of politics is all about the money, he who controls the money has the power.

One suggestion never heard from politicians is reduce my salary and beniefits to help reduce government costs. Their pay raises always go through and no one notices, not even the media.
I'm still waiting for an answer to my question, ' What happens when taxpayers can no longer afford to pay taxes?'

Anony
2 days ago
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I agree with ch2535. As long as I have to declare a party I will not vote. Simple as that. If they want to see an increase, then that's what they have to do, stop requiring one to declare a party.

Anony
2 days ago
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obscureknight...why should only people who declare a party have a right to vote in 'distinctly party elections, such as precinct committee person, county committee person, Presidential convention delegate and so on? No one should have to put themselves down publicly for one party or another. I vote for the person, not the party. I've wished to vote in several primaries, but I wish to vote for candidates from both parties. So my voice cannot TRULY be heard unless they stop this declaring party stuff and just let me vote for who I want at primaries....and let me do in privately. It's no one's business but my own.

George Ecklund Jr
2 days ago
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Here is a novel idea.

How about both parties try putting up some candidates that are worth voting for instead f the same old warmed over carcuses????

No Unions
2 days ago
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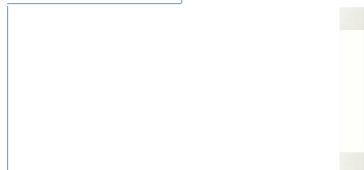
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Anony and Ch2535
Something tells me that your votes won't be missed
godiva
2 days ago
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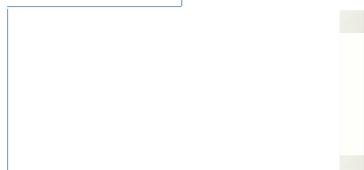
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Its time for an independent ballot. It is nobodies business which party you vote for in the primary. Some of us do not vote party line only.
Anony
2 days ago
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No Unions....
And I won't miss voting. It's no one's business who I wish to vote for. Primary or not.
ch2535
2 days ago
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No Unions - there are many that feel the same way I do and the polls proved it. I vote for the person, not the party. This past primary, like many others had slim pickens at best to choose from. There was no way I was for EVERYONE on the Dems or GOP ballot.

Make the primaries OPEN so we can call exercise our votes and vote for WHO we want, not what party we want.

As for our votes not being missed, you are very wrong. The men running for governor had tight races, it took 2 days before Hynes conceded. Do we have a GOP candidate for Governor yet?????

toc
2 days ago
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Something tells me we are heading back to a certain period of history. Say perhaps when some government controlled every human, every action, every dollar...ring any bells?
Liberals Win
2 days ago

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Anonymous: You want to vote for a party candidate, but you don't want to be in that party? Do you realize the purpose of a primary is for parties to pick their candidate?

ch2435: You also don't seem to realize the purpose of a primary. Would you want me to come into your house and vote on what you have for dinner? Why not? After all, you don't want to limit the decision to your family. You want anyone to decide what you will have.

The only purpose for an 'open primary' [sic] is for the other party to get in to get a weak candidate nominated by the other party. That's it, 100%.

Liberals Win

2 days ago

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When I was in college (ISU) way back when it was easier because there were only 16 letters in the alphabet, 8 digits and we rode to school on dinosaurs I heard one of the Normal councilmen saying he was against us voting because each dorm would be a precinct. It scared him that all those kids that were a little smarter than he was would have any control.

xfarmboy

2 days ago

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Another Democrat move to load the elections with liberal votes. Everyone knows most colleges today have a Liberal agenda forced on students by liberal professors. Dems. figure more college votes = more votes for democrats. If they take dead people off the voter registration list how are democrats going to make up those lost votes? They better think that one over!

Anonymous

2 days ago

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Liberals Win

The reason for a primary is to cut the candidates down to one for each party. I can't stand all candidates for any one party. So why should I have to declare a party just to vote for a couple people in a couple races but then HAVE to vote for people I can't stand in other races just because they're in that same party? Then on top of that, my 'party affiliation' is then out there for the public to scrutinize. Again, it's my business, not anyone else's.

Also, your argument that the only reason for an open primary is to elect a weak candidate from the opposing party is a very weak argument. If both sides did this, then they wouldn't be very good people for their own cause because they'd take away votes from their own preferred candidate. They'd do better just to vote for who they want. I'm not stupid enough to believe people wouldn't do what you are suggesting, but I actually have faith that even if a few do do this, the majority will still vote for their favorites.

The point of this article is that lawmakers would like to see a higher voter turnout. The point that I and many are making in these comments is that if you really want to see a higher turnout, do what the MAJORITY of the public wants and make the primaries OPEN. The suggestions they've made in this article won't change anything much.

Donut Man

2 days ago

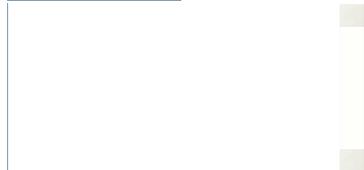
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Lets see, Dems want to encourage college voters, an over 70% Dem demographic. The GOP wants to end 'deadbeat' voting, a notorious Dem alternative to an obit. And dems want govt. to pay for political party nominees, a job that should be 100% funded by the parties. Sounds like the dems are 2 out of 2 in the abuse dept, while the GOP seeks a reasonable ability to keep voter registrations up to date. Of course, this IS Illinois, so no real surprise.

Fullhouse
2 days ago
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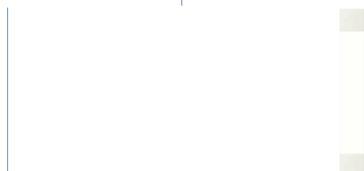

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If someone doesnt know where to vote, do we really want another uninformed voter voting? When I was in college, I always called my County Clerk and they mailed me an absentee ballot. It was not that hard.

If there is a will, there is a way.

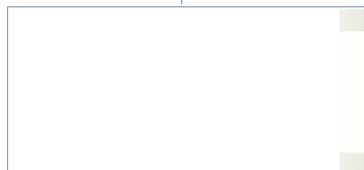
If someone doesn't care enough to find out where they are suppose to vote, then they probably didn't care enough to do some research on the candidates.

Mark Observed
2 days ago
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I think these lawmakers on the wrong track. I think the way to increase participation is to limit who can vote. Just think about it. Pro baseball and football teams had laggin attendance several years ago and they went on a reduction program. Every new stadium since then has been smaller than the stadium it replaced. Now a person has to buy a personal seat license just to get a chance to but a season ticket. This has increased revenues and demand for tickets. Now take a lot at our history. Most every time they have expanded the vote or made it easier to vote, voter participation has decreased.

Liberals Win
1 day ago
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Anony: Your first sentence says it all. There is one purpose of a primary and that is for a party to select their candidates. It has never been designed for someone to cherry pick someone in the opposite party. Of course you have to say what party you are voting in when it is a purely party election. You don't have to vote for anyone in a primary and you can vote in the election for anyone in any party. Or you can write the name in for anyone from any party.

Sorry if you disagree that there is one and only one primary reason to try to vote for the opposite party candidate. Perhaps in some fairie world you have the best intentions, but in the real world it will be for that one purpose of getting the weakest candidate on the ticket of the opposite party.

I am interested in learning more. Want is your source for 'the MAJORITY of the public want' this?

Liberals Win
1 day ago
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Donut Man: I'm always interested in learning. What is the source for your claim that '70%' of college voters are Democratic.

Further, your claim that 'deadbeat' voting is a Democratic characteristic is also very suspect and smacks of a GOP talking point. Do you have a source for no Republicans doing this and all Democrats doing it?

Fullhouse

1 day ago

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No he doesn't. Typical.

ill citizen

24 hours ago

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Make it open without declaring a party. Make it on a Saturday. Then but out. If people do not want to go to the polls then they don't have to.

demopublican

3 hours ago

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Open primary would increase numbers, but then I don't think the legislators want that!

WoW

2 hours ago

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In regards to the open primary discussion count me in, I vote, just NEVER in primary's though I would like to.

I don't know where Liberals Win is coming from I am not interested in voting for a party candidate to weaken a ballot that seems backwards to me and unpatriotic, I would just like to participate in a primary but CANT, because the information is used in unpatriotic ways.

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