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A bipartisan chance to repair an antiquated registration system

Monday, August 31, 2009

ONE WAS general counsel to John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign, the other held a similar post with Al Franken's campaign for the Minnesota U.S. Senate seat. It's hard to imagine Trevor Potter and Marc Elias agreeing on much. Yet the experiences of last fall's political campaigns helped convince both men that there is something fundamentally wrong with how America votes -- or, more precisely, how America registers to vote. The result is a unique, bipartisan effort that we hope will prod Congress and the states to action.

The Committee to Modernize Voter Registration will be formally launched Monday. Its aim is to replace the country's cumbersome, paper-based system of voter registration with one that uses new technologies and government databases to build a more lasting roster. It wants to shift the burden so that states try to register all eligible voters, rather than waiting for individuals to come to them. Co-chaired by Mr. Potter and Mr. Elias, the group is composed of election administrators, former elected officials, campaign professionals, and experts on voting and elections. Among its members are former U.N. ambassador and senator John C. Danforth (R), former Senate majority leader Thomas A. Daschle (D), and former representatives Susan Molinari (R) and Harold Ford Jr. (D).

It's significant that different types of people -- not just academicians or election officials - - are agreeing on the drawbacks of the current, voter-initiated system of registration. Those drawbacks are legion: blocking many voters (an estimated 2 million in 2008) from casting ballots; relying on the often-erratic efforts of third parties to register voters; diverting local election officials from more critical tasks. What is far trickier for the group is fashioning legislation that provides for a practical and workable alternative.

The group rightly does not want to impose an unfunded mandate on states. Instead, it believes that Congress should outline goals, set standards and use federal funds to encourage states to modernize. Important work on how states could compile a list of eligible voters from existing databases is being done by the Pew Center on the States, also a member of the new committee. The center has looked at states that are pioneering new methods, such as Delaware, which requires all eligible visitors to the Division of Motor Vehicles to register to vote, update their registrations or decline to do so. Information is automatically downloaded into voters' files, eliminating the need for human entry and reducing the chance of error. Equally promising is the center's look at cost implications. Canada, which implemented a new system in 1996 at a start-up cost of \$13.3 million, has realized about \$150 million in savings.

Formation of a group will not, in itself, bring about change. But by helping to foster a national conversation, the committee performs a valuable function, particularly because its voices are not encumbered by the partisan rancor that too often accompanies election reform. Congress ought to pay attention.