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All voices heard: How to modernize voting in Alabama

Alabama forever will be linked to the struggle for voting rights. An important question today is whether our state can shed its legacy of voter suppression, or whether we will continue to be seen as hostile to the idea of equal voting access and broad participation in democracy.

A 2015 report on healthy democracies ranked Alabama in last place out of 50 states and the District of Columbia. A big reason for the low ranking is our election participation policies. Alabama doesn't allow pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds, and voters aren't permitted to register online. We lack early voting, and Election Day is not a holiday. National groups also have criticized waiting times at polling places, practices relating to absentee ballots and Alabama's 2011 "Voter ID law," requiring voters to present an approved form of photo identification before casting a ballot.

The rationale for voting restrictions is usually illusory. Substantial evidence shows the specter of voter fraud is exaggerated, and many of the proposed "cures" have served to discourage voting by legally registered voters. Compounding the embarrassment, the U.S. Department of Justice in 2015 threatened to sue the state over two decades of noncompliance with the federal Motor Voter Act, which allows people to register to vote at the same time they get or renew driver's licenses.

Several proposals have been put forward to make voting easier. Bills introduced in 2014 would have allowed prospective voters to register on the same day as the election, would have given voters five days to cast a ballot, and would have allowed people to cast an absentee ballot without an explanation. An especially effective proposal would automatically register eligible voters who apply for a driver's license, allowing them to "opt out" of voter registration instead of having to opt in.

National voting rights advocates have encouraged states to move to automatic registration of voters. They also have pushed for the digitization of voting records, which would allow records to follow citizens when they change residences within the state. This could allow Alabamians to register to vote online. They also could check and update their voting records there.

Another potentially fruitful area of reform would be restoration of voting rights. The exact offenses that permanently disqualify felons from voting in Alabama remain unclear. Legislation could allow thousands of Alabamians who have paid their debt to society to rejoin the electorate by clarifying the circumstances under which ex-offenders can apply to have their rights reinstated.

BOTTOM LINE: It's time to put Alabama's history of voter suppression behind us. We need to modernize our election system and ensure all eligible voters can register and vote. Engaged citizens energize a healthy democracy. Our laws should maximize participation, not erect barriers.