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■ FEAR OF FRANCHISE

Detouring the Motor-Voter Law

PETER DREIER

In August, California Governor Pete Wilson announced he would defy the federal government and refuse to implement the National Voter Registration Act—the so-called motor-voter law. And in September he vetoed a bill, passed by the state legislature, that would have set up a computerized system to carry out the federal law. But Wilson's explanation—that states should not have to pay for mandates issued from Washington—is a political smokescreen. So is his claim that the new law will increase voter fraud, encouraging ineligible people (including undocumented immigrants) to vote.

The immediate goal of Wilson's demagoguery was to inflame fiscal and anti-immigrant fears to help his re-election bid against State Treasurer Kathleen Brown. But looking beyond November, the Governor and his fellow Republicans fear that the new law will increase registration primarily among groups who tend to vote for Democrats. Wilson's decision could have a significant impact on California and even national politics—including the 1996 presidential contest, in which the state will play a crucial role—and on Wilson's own rumored hopes of a place on the G.O.P. ticket.

Signed by President Clinton in May 1993, the new law requires all states to streamline their voter registration procedures. It compels states to allow voters to register when they apply for or renew their driver's licenses at state Departments of Motor Vehicles, or D.M.V.s; to enlist voters at social service, military recruitment and other public agencies; and to permit voters to register by mail. It also orders states to implement these provisions by January 1.

Several states already use their motor vehicle agencies to register voters; most others are moving quickly to implement the law. New York State's implementation legislation, enacted in August with Governor Mario Cuomo's strong support, is considered a model for other states, according to Human SERVE, a key voting-rights group. Only eleven states have failed to comply so far with the implementation process. And only in California and Michigan have the governors (both Republicans) used the "unfunded federal mandate" excuse to defy the law.

Wilson's estimate that it will cost California \$35.8 million

Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

to implement motor-voter is wildly inflated. John Mott Smith, chief of the California Secretary of State's Election Division and the official in charge of overseeing the details of putting the law into effect, says that it will cost no more than \$5 million.

Hunger for votes—not money—is the real reason for Wilson's civil disobedience. In the midst of a tight re-election campaign, challenging Washington to pay for voter registration and saving taxpayers money in this fiscally strapped state makes him look tough.

Wilson's claim that the new law will promote election "fraud" is also hokum. In fact, experience in other states, as well as common sense, suggests that the motor-voter approach reduces fraud. The D.M.V. and social welfare agencies have a much higher standard in screening applicants than the current system of registering voters at sidewalk tables and City Halls. Raising the specter of illegal aliens flooding the polls is just the latest example of Wilson's ongoing immigrant-bashing.

Wilson knows that the G.O.P. must win California, which has one-tenth of the nation's Electoral College votes, if the party is to recapture the White House in 1996. According to the Field Institute, 65 percent of California's 19 million eligible voters are registered to vote. By contrast, about 90 percent of eligible voters have driver's licenses or D.M.V. photo identification cards. Thus, the motor-voter law could increase voter registration to at least 90 percent—adding almost 5 million new registrants. Additional citizens would be registered at social welfare and unemployment offices, disability agencies, libraries, schools and other organizations.

The United States has the lowest voter turnout of any Western democratic nation. Typically, about half the eligible voters go to the polls in national elections; even fewer vote in most state and local contests. By contrast, between 80 percent and 90 percent of qualified voters cast ballots in Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe. Most experts believe that our nation's crazy-quilt voter-registration laws, rather than apathy or satisfaction with the status quo, account for the low figures. Motor-voter addresses two of the most problematic obstacles directly: Most voters start paying attention to campaigns only

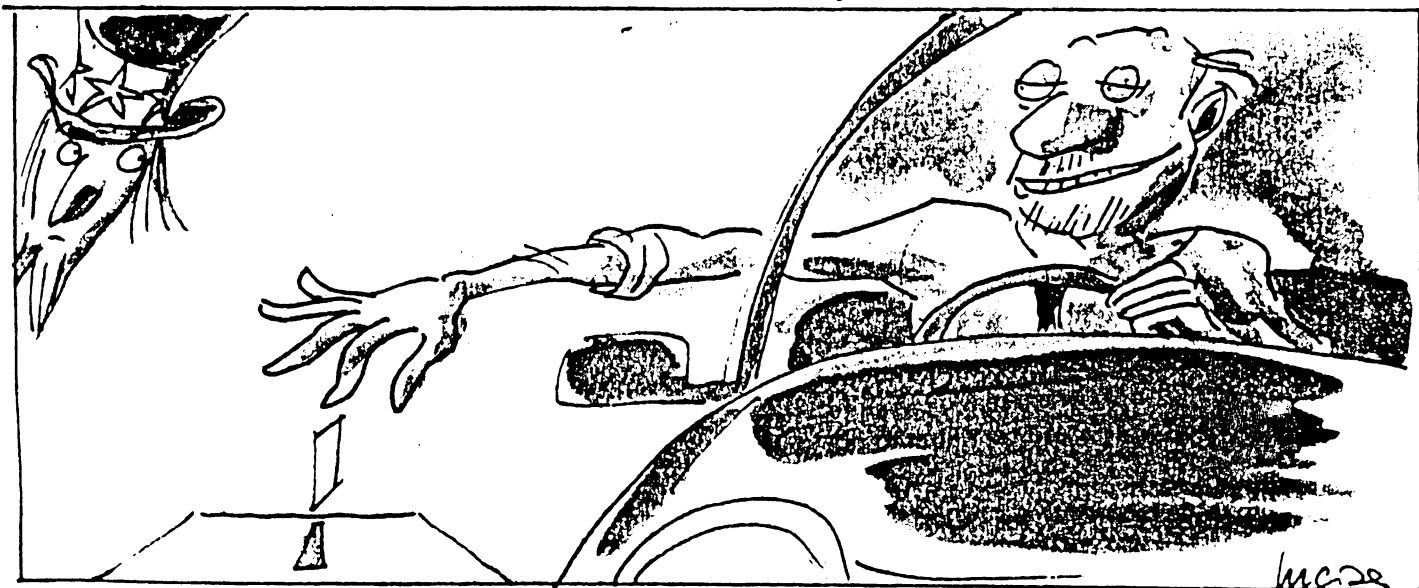
a few weeks before Election Day—after registration deadlines have passed. But under the new law, citizens will already be registered ahead of time. Also, in our highly mobile society, people are now dropped from the voting rolls every time they move. With motor-voter, these citizens will no longer be purged, because their registration will be updated when they renew their driver's licenses.

To most Americans, expanding voter registration is a basic "good government" reform. That's why nonpartisan groups such as the League of Women Voters and Common Cause—along with senior-citizen and labor organizations, civil rights activists and Rock the Vote, the voter-registration youth group—worked hard for a decade to enact the motor-voter law. But most Republicans (and some conservative Democrats) don't want to see a lot more poor and minority people casting their votes, so they've fought the motor-voter reform every step of the way. President Bush vetoed it in 1992 but President Clinton fulfilled a campaign promise right after taking office by pushing Congress to approve motor-voter again.

The motor-voter law has the potential to alter dramatically the terrain of American politics. Expanding voter registration among the poor and people of color would make it easier to get out the vote for candidates and causes in tune with their concerns. And candidates for office would have greater incentives to address these concerns.

Currently, about 75-85 percent of registered voters actually cast ballots in national elections. What proportion of the newly registered voters will go to the polls? That will depend on whether either party addresses people's concerns and spends resources to get out the vote. "Even when barriers to registration are lowered, people still have to be mobilized to vote," explained political scientist Bernard Grofman, a voting-rights expert at the University of California, Irvine.

In the past decade, the Republicans have devoted considerably more resources than have the Democrats to both voter registration and voter turnout. The motor-voter law essentially nullifies the G.O.P.'s advantage in terms of registering voters, but the Republicans can still have an edge in mobilizing voter turnout unless the Democratic Party, the unions and



the progressive citizen groups devote more money and people to the task.

Still, even a modest increase in overall registration—especially among the poor and minorities who are currently the least likely to be enlisted—could help elect progressive candidates, particularly in close races. If the motor-voter system had been in place four years ago, Harvey Gantt, the African-American former Mayor of Charlotte, almost certainly would have defeated the reactionary incumbent, Senator Jesse Helms. Senator Paul Wellstone owes at least part of his unexpected 1990 victory to Minnesota's model motor-voter system, which partly accounts for the state's high voter participation. Multiply these examples in races across the country for local, state and federal offices and it's clear that the motor-voter law could have a significant political impact.

How the law is implemented can make a big difference. For example, D.M.V.s that use one form (rather than multiple forms) for registering drivers and voters (as New York is doing) will increase voter sign-up. If states routinely register people at places like unemployment offices or public housing projects—which is optional in the federal law—it would help enfranchise the poor.

Low-income tenants are currently less likely to register, and to vote, than almost any other group in society. In 1992, 75.4 percent of homeowners were registered, compared with 51.8 percent of renters; 69.1 percent of the former actually voted, compared with 43.6 percent of the latter. The motor-voter law guarantees that renter registration—including those who live in subsidized and public housing—will increase significantly. Once implemented, motor-voter will make get-out-the-vote efforts much easier, since grass-roots groups and progressive candidates can now assume that most people, including the poor, are already registered; thus they won't have to divert their energies to that phase of the election. One national citizen group, ACORN, has had success mobilizing low-income voters as part of its grass-roots organizing campaigns around issues such as bank redlining, municipal services and housing-code enforcement.

Republicans like Governor Wilson obviously aren't interested in trying to fight for the hearts and minds of newly registered voters. They'd rather keep them disfranchised—where they can't do the G.O.P. any harm.

State officials may not pick and choose which federal laws—such as the Clean Air Act, Medicare or the Occupational Safety and Health Act—to observe. Federal election laws—which require states to set up the machinery for citizens to exercise their democratic right to vote for President and Congress—should be the most sacrosanct of all.

The Clinton Administration, however, has not focused much attention on enforcing the motor-voter law. This past May, under pressure from voting-rights groups, Attorney General Janet Reno's office sent letters to states that had not yet passed legislation to carry out the federal law, threatening to sue those that refused to act. But there's been no follow-up.

Wilson may have deliberately plotted to force such a show-down to enhance his political image. Whatever his motives,

Reno should move quickly to sue the State of California and force Wilson—and other renegade states—into line.

Progressive activists who want to pressure their state officials to implement fully the federal law should contact Human SERVE (622 West 113th Street, New York, NY 10025; 212-854-4053), the major force in the motor-voter movement. It will put them in touch with groups in their state working to enforce the law.

Like the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the motor-voter law removes a major barrier to political participation. Along with campaign finance reform, it has the potential to level the political playing field between corporate America and ordinary citizens. Whether it fulfills its potential depends on progressive movements mobilizing citizens to take back their government from big business and the radical right. □