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Statement on voter registration of non-citizens in Illinois

In response to reports that the Illinois Secretary of State's office caused non-citizens to register to vote through their flawed automatic voter registration program, Just Democracy Illinois released the following statement:

As nonpartisan advocates for a modern, secure, and robust democracy, the members of Just Democracy are angry that the Secretary of State's Office has apparently sent information on a number of non-citizens to elections officials who then registered them to vote – an unconscionable error that puts vulnerable people at terrible personal risk while undermining confidence in our elections process.

Let's be clear: Automatic Voter Registration or AVR isn't the problem – the Secretary of State's office is the problem. The agency's massively delayed and error-riddled implementation of AVR has undermined the law's intended purpose to make Illinois' voting rolls more fair, accurate, and secure – a mission shared by lawmakers of both parties who passed AVR on a bipartisan and unanimous basis in 2017. Just Democracy has pushed for a timely and well-executed implementation of AVR since that time, while the Secretary of State's office has refused to take action. Illinois has now allowed three elections to take place without a properly implemented system.

The possibility that individuals could be arrested and deported as a result of this mistake is sickeningly real. Community members deserve answers to understand precisely how this unfolded.

Lawrence Benito, CEO/Executive Director of Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), said: “As we try to gather more information, we are deeply concerned that this careless and needless set of circumstances has put so many of our neighbors at risk. While we want every Illinois resident to be engaged in civic life, we remind everyone who is not a citizen that even if they are registered by mistake, they cannot legally vote and can face deportation if they do.”

Over the past 29 months, we have asked the Secretary of State's office for specific safeguards to protect non-citizen and age-ineligible applicants; language assistance; fully trained and supported employees; a streamlined process without unnecessary red tape; and much more. We sent a legal notice letter and then a proposed agreement seeking increased transparency and accountability – all to no avail. The Secretary of State's office has largely declined to take up our repeated offers to improve AVR implementation through direct assistance, community forums, and outside expertise.

It is now time to fully acknowledge and repair the many problems in Illinois' implementation of AVR. State agencies including the Secretary of State's Office and Illinois State Board of Elections must do better to implement this law as it is written – a law that was signed by Republican Governor Bruce Rauner after a unanimous and bipartisan vote that recognized AVR's potential to modernize, streamline, and improve our voting system. Our coalition remains available to assist the state, and we continue to insist that Illinois agencies engage in a meaningful community-informed process to review and test the process early enough to avoid further mistakes from harming Illinois residents.

Jay Young, Executive Director for Common Cause Illinois, said:

“This is a wake-up call for all of us who care about fair and secure elections in Illinois. Automatic Voter Registration can address longstanding racial disparities in voting access and make our democracy stronger and healthier – but we have to work together now to get it right.”

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Just Democracy Illinois is a broad-based and diverse nonpartisan coalition that works to protect and promote the value of a single vote, no matter the geographic, racial, ethnic, or party affiliation of the voter. The Just Democracy Illinois steering committee includes Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Chicago, CHANGE Illinois, Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, Chicago Votes, Common Cause Illinois, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant & Refugee Rights, and Illinois Public Interest Research Group. Our campaign for Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) was endorsed by a diverse constituency of over 65 organizations from around Illinois.