President Barack Obama emphasized the need to modernize the U.S. election system in his Inaugural Address. One bill to do just that is set to be introduced Wednesday by the civil rights hero Representative John Lewis (D-Ga.) — who knows a thing or two about how to expand democracy.

Under his reform plan, states would have to take responsibility to make sure that every eligible voter is on the rolls. How? By taking existing computerized voter rolls, and expanding them with names voluntarily collected when citizens deal with government — including the Department of Motor Vehicles for drivers' licenses, the Social Security Administration or other agencies. Any voter could opt in with the click of a mouse.

The proposed bill would bring our antiquated system into the 21st century. The "Voter Empowerment Act," introduced by Lewis with Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), could transform the way we choose our leaders.

This proposed plan meets the concerns of left and right. It offers a chance for an armistice in the endless trench warfare over voting. Instead of joylessly repeating the same fights over "voter fraud" and potential suppression, here is a reform that helps solve both problems at once.

It would be fairly easy. Voters could correct their record at the polling place on Election Day. Best of all, when voters move, their registration moves with them. No longer would citizens lose eligibility when they change addresses, as happens so often now in our highly mobile society.

Such a reform could add up to 50 million citizens to the rolls, permanently. It would cost less than the current system — because computers are cheaper than piles of paper. It would also curb the potential for fraud and error on voter rolls.

This would mark a true paradigm shift in the way we register voters. After all, Lewis accomplished a similar feat almost 50 years ago.

Lewis led the voting rights march in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965. When the young minister reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day, police clubs and dogs assailed the protesters before a national television audience. Lewis was badly beaten and ended up in the hospital. But his physical courage and moral tenacity helped spur passage of the landmark, and still vital, Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Last year, Lewis, as a senior member of Congress, powerfully decried the varied efforts to limit voting, such as harsh ID requirements passed in some states. Courts blocked or postponed almost

all these laws. Lewis' answer to these actions goes far beyond simply avoiding new restrictive measures, or seeking partisan advantage.

For it was again clear on Election Day that even at its best, America's voting system is a mess. Polling places veered toward chaos. Thousands waited in long, frustrating lines. In Palm Beach County, Florida, for example, some citizens stood for seven hours waiting to vote, partly because the state legislature had slashed early voting hours. The *Orlando Sentinel* reported that in central Florida alone, some 49,000 voters were deterred by endless queues. Many voters gave up.

Long lines were only the most visible problem, however. In Ohio, hundreds of thousands were forced to cast "provisional ballots" that were never counted. Had the presidential race been close and come down to the Buckeye State, as many predicted, we might still be waiting to know who won. One Obama campaign counsel told me plans were afoot to provide lawyers for individual voters — meaning each ballot would be litigated to the hilt.

The biggest problems stem from our outdated voter registration system. Rife with error, it relies on a blizzard of paper records. The rolls nationwide contained millions of dead people, according to a report last year from the Pew Center on the States, and countless duplicates and errors. If you have ever tried to get your name removed from a voter roll when you move to a new town, you know how hard it can be.

This idea has been supported by Republicans as well as Democrats. Jon Hunstman, the GOP presidential candidate, for example, backed a version when he was governor of Utah. Trevor Potter, a former Republican Federal Election Commission chairman, supports it. Bob Bauer, the Obama campaign's chief lawyer, has long championed the approach.

In recent years, 25 states have implemented some of this bill's provisions, with little partisan fuss. In 2012, hundreds of thousands of voters nationwide were added to the rolls through data transfers from computerized lists. (The Brennan Center, which I lead, first developed the proposal several years ago.)

Could this measure garner bipartisan support in bitterly divided Washington, D.C.? That is less clear.

Already, the Heritage Foundation is preparing to do battle. It convened four conservative secretaries of state for a meeting Thursday to attack the case for modernization. Voting rights advocates are readying a response.

More ominously, conservative columnist George F. Will recently fired a harsh shot. He warned that the Obama administration and Attorney General Eric Holder want to federalize elections as a first step toward forcing every American to vote. That's absurd. We can have universal voter registration while still leaving the choice to exercise that right to individuals.

Will concedes that as many as 60 million eligible citizens are not registered but insists they are merely displaying their satisfaction with the status quo. No doubt some nonvoters are blissed out by our current politics. But it is more likely that many more are frustrated by an inept system. In

2008, according to a [comprehensive analysis](#) by California Institute of Technology and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professors, at least 2 million people tried to vote but could not because of voter registration problems.

Other steps could help ease Election Day problems. National standards should ensure adequate opportunities to vote early everywhere in the country. We need to do more to invest in technology and to train poll workers, who are often earnest volunteers ill-equipped to handle the crush of voters. The federal Election Assistance Commission, now moribund, should be revived to help states.

Nevada's Democratic secretary of state, Ross Miller, has [another approach](#), suggesting that driver's license photos be included in polling place signature books. If voters don't have an ID, a photo could be snapped that would serve as their ID going forward. The plan's success would clearly depend on the details. Done right, it could help point to an end to the divisive voter ID battles of recent years.

All these moves could be vital. But none more so that making sure that all citizens are registered long before Election Day. In 1965, Lewis paid with his blood for the right for every American to vote. Today, digital technology offers a new chance to march forward from Selma.