

# CHALLENGES to Fair Elections



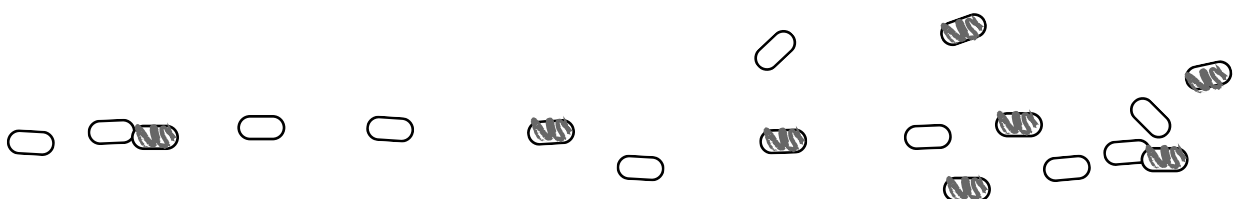
## The National Voter Registration Act: A Key Tool To Increase Turnout Among Low Income Voters

### Representational Inequality: Bad for Democracy

Economic inequality in America has been spiraling out of control in recent decades. The income gap between the rich and the poor in America has steadily increased since the early 20th century and is at its largest in 40 years. Unfortunately, this also translates into political inequality. According to the 2004 U.S. Census, 59 percent of citizens in households making less than \$15,000 a year were registered to vote versus 85 percent of those in households making \$75,000 or more.<sup>1</sup>

A vibrant democracy is one in which all individuals, regardless of income, are able to have a voice in the democratic process. When the electorate is disproportionately made up of wealthy voters, elected officials are more likely to address the needs of their high-income voter base. It is easy to see how ordinary Americans become disaffected and decide to opt out of the political process altogether. In fact, a recent Gallup poll found that 41 percent of respondents agree with the statement, “I don’t think public officials care much about what people like me think.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1993, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) with the purpose of establishing “procedures that will increase the number of eligible citizens who register to vote in elections for Federal office.”<sup>3</sup> The NVRA is often called the “Motor Voter” law because of its well-known provision requiring state motor vehicle departments to offer customers the opportunity to register to vote. Recognizing that low-income citizens are among the least likely to own cars and therefore not as likely to frequent motor vehicle offices, Congress deliberately included a provision requiring public assistance agencies to offer voter registration services to applicants and clients. Yet implementation of the NVRA in public assistance agencies has been inconsistent at best. Full implementation and rigorous enforcement of the NVRA would reduce a significant barrier to democratic participation in America.



## Where to Watch

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### Progress

#### Iowa, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, North Carolina

After adopting a series of simple changes, Iowa was able to increase the number of voter registration applications coming their public assistance agencies by 3000 percent.<sup>4</sup> New Jersey and Pennsylvania have also taken significant steps to register low-income public assistance recipients. After the documentation of widespread problems in North Carolina, the Executive Director of the State Board of Elections quickly proposed and is now in the process of implementing a ten point plan to improve NVRA compliance.

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### Problems

#### Ohio, Arkansas, Maryland, Missouri

A lawsuit is currently pending against officials in Ohio for that state's failure to provide voter registration services to low-income people in compliance with the NVRA. Ohio's own data indicate that public assistance agencies in ten counties failed to register a single voter between 2002 and 2004 and agencies in another 17 counties registered ten or fewer voters during the same two-year period. Moreover, data collected by federal agencies indicates that Arkansas, Maryland, and Missouri all experienced over an 80 percent decline in the number of voters registered in their public assistance agencies over the past 10 years.<sup>5</sup>

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### ***The Importance of Effective Voter Registration Procedures***

- Because voter registration is a pre-condition to voting in all but one state,<sup>6</sup> registration is a major determinant in whether or not someone turns out to vote in an election. In recent presidential elections, more than 80 percent of those registered went to the polls.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore imperative to get eligible voters registered.
- Public assistance agencies are the government offices most likely to be frequented by low-income Americans and are therefore the ideal locations to register low-income citizens to vote. According to the U.S. Census, there are 16.7 million households making less than \$15,000 a year.<sup>8</sup> Data from the United States Department of Agriculture indicates that there were over 42 million applications and recertifications for Food Stamp benefits in 2003-2004. That only 59 percent of low-income citizens are registered to vote is a strong indicator that states are not registering their low-income citizens.
- Despite the law's good intent, most states have failed to adequately implement the public assistance requirements of the NVRA.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the number of voter registration applications from public assistance agencies has fallen by almost 60 percent between 1995-1996 and 2003-2004, while applications from all other sources—like the state departments of motor vehicles—increased by 22 percent.<sup>10</sup>

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### ***Simple Steps Can Lead to Increased Voter Registration and Full Compliance with the Law***

Experience has shown that the number of low-income citizens registering to vote can be significantly increased through several simple procedural changes, including:

- Ensure that the opportunity to register to vote is offered to all individuals applying for, recertifying, or changing addresses with respect to public assistance benefits.
- Distribute with each application, recertification, and change of address form a "declination statement" with the question, "If you are not registered to vote where you live now, would you like to register to vote here today?"
- Offer voter registration in office waiting rooms.
- Regularly train public assistance office caseworkers on voter registration procedures.
- Use posters, videos, and buttons to promote voter registration services throughout public assistance offices.

A truly representative democracy can only be achieved by increasing the number of all citizens registering and turning out to vote in our elections, particularly those so long underrepresented, and ensuring that those votes cast will be properly counted. Proactively registering these citizens is a necessary first step in guaranteeing adequate access to the right to vote. Full implementation of the NVRA is a proven and effective way to ensure that low-income citizens are provided with this opportunity.

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### References:

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004, Table 8," <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting/cps2004.html>.
  - 2 See <http://www.galluppoll.com/content/default.aspx?ci=5392>
  - 3 42 U.S.C. Sec. 1973gg (b)(1)(3)
  - 4 See "Ten Years Later, A Promise Unfulfilled" by the NVRA Implementation Project, available at <http://www.demos.org/pub634.cfm>.
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 North Dakota does not require voters to register prior to an election.
  - 7 According to the Elections Assistance Commission, 105,586,274 ballots were counted for president in the 2000 general election. See U.S. Election Assistance Commission; "National and State Voter Registration and Turnout in the Presidential Election – 2000," [http://www.eac.gov/election\\_resources.00to.htm](http://www.eac.gov/election_resources.00to.htm).
  - 8 According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 129,549,000 said they were registered to vote in the 2000 census. See U.S. Census Bureau; "Current Population Survey: Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000, Table 1," <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/p20-542/tab01.xls>.
  - 8 U.S. Census Bureau, "Selected Characteristics of Households, by Total Money Income in 2005," [http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032006/hhinc/new01\\_001.htm](http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032006/hhinc/new01_001.htm).
  - 9 See "Ten Years Later, A Promise Unfulfilled" by the NVRA Implementation Project, available at <http://www.demos.org/pub634.cfm>.
  - 10 Ibid.
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Scott Novakowski, Policy Analyst, Democracy Program | [snovakowski@demos.org](mailto:snovakowski@demos.org) | (212) 389-1415  
Lisa Danetz, Attorney, National Voting Rights Institute | [ldanetz@nvri.org](mailto:ldanetz@nvri.org) | (617) 624-3900

Media inquiries: Timothy Rusch, Communications Director | [trusch@demos.org](mailto:trusch@demos.org) | (212) 389-1407

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220 Fifth Avenue, 5th fl., New York, NY 10001  
T. (212) 633.1405 F. (212) 633.2015  
[info@demos.org](mailto:info@demos.org) | [www.demos.org](http://www.demos.org)