

***National Voter Registration Act Compliance:  
Fulfilling the Promise of Equal Access to Registration at Public Assistance Offices***

*Policy Description:* The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) requires that states provide voter registration services at departments of motor vehicles, public assistance agencies, and state-funded offices serving people with disabilities. States must designate additional offices as voter registration agencies as well. Persons applying for benefits, recertifying their eligibility, or changing their address with respect to public assistance benefits such as SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), TANF, Medicaid, and WIC must be provided with a voter registration application, and be provided assistance in completing the voter registration form if they so desire.

States have largely abandoned their voter registration obligations at public assistance offices over the past ten years. Meanwhile, voter registration rates among lower-income Americans continue to lag behind those of middle- and upper-income citizens.

Lawmakers have a critical role to play in getting state public assistance agencies to re-implement federal law and help close the income gap in the electorate. Legislative oversight over voter registration performance at public assistance agencies, public hearings and other fact-finding efforts will help bring inadequate practices to light and stimulate compliance. Best practices can also be codified in legislation, helping to promote robust compliance in the future. Agency compliance with the NVRA typically requires clear compliance plans, appointment of NVRA coordinators in each agency office, adequate and periodic training of front-line workers, and a strong system of data collection and program evaluation.

*Benefits:* The National Voter Registration Act was enacted with the understanding that opportunities to register to vote must be equally available to all. But racial and socio-economic gaps in the electorate will persist so long as public assistance agencies fail to offer voter registration to their low-income clients. Such individuals, who are less likely to own a motor vehicle, must have a chance to register to vote at public assistance offices as others do at departments of motor vehicles.

Recent U.S. Census data confirm the racial, ethnic and class bias of the electorate: 73.5 percent of non-Hispanic whites were registered to vote in 2008, as compared to 69.7 percent of blacks, 59.4 percent of Latinos, and 55.9 percent of Asian Americans. Only 65 percent of adult citizens in households making less than \$25,000 a year were registered to vote in 2008, as compared to 85 percent of those in households making \$100,000. Effective voter registration programs at public assistance agencies are powerful tools for reducing these disparities and bringing more voices into the democratic process.

*Current Practices:* Several states have dramatically increased the number of voter registration applications from public assistance agencies after they renewed their NVRA-compliance efforts in recent years. Voter registration at Missouri's public assistance agencies jumped eighteen-fold after the state re-implemented the law, pursuant to a settlement agreement following successful voting rights litigation. North Carolina's increased by a factor of six, thanks to successful negotiations between advocates and the state. Positive results have also been seen in Virginia.

*Campaign:* The [Public Agency Voter Registration Project](#) established by Demos, Project Vote, and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, has succeeded in bringing a number of states back into compliance with the NVRA – either through collaborative efforts or through litigation. These organizations stand ready to advise policymakers on efforts that they may undertake to increase voter registration opportunities at public assistance agencies.