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**TESTIMONY BEFORE DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM COMMITTEE**  
**PHOENIX, AZ**  
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today -- to urge a Democratic Party Platform that unambiguously commits to bold democracy reform as a core national goal. At the heart of this agenda: automatic, universal voter registration to ensure that every eligible American can vote.

It is now 240 years since the Declaration of Independence launched the nation with a vision of political equality, with government continually bound to earn the “consent of the governed.” Yet today American democracy faces severe stresses and strains. Seventeen states will have new voting restrictions in place for the first time in a presidential election. It is the first presidential contest in a half century without the full protection of the Voting Rights Act. It is the first election in which we face the full impact of *Citizens United* and other misguided Supreme Court decisions. In the last federal election the top 100 federal donors gave almost as much as the 4.75 million small donors combined – a level of concentrated political wealth not seen since the Gilded Age. It should not surprise that voter turnout in 2014 plunged to the lowest level in 72 years.

Plainly, voters are angry about the state of American politics. They are demanding change. This Party was founded on the promise of an expanded democracy. Now it should commit to renewal of our democratic institutions as a core governing strategy. We urge you to go on offense, to work to increase participation and secure a full voice for all citizens. A broad democracy agenda should encompass small donor public financing; a new constitutional jurisprudence on money in politics; a restored Voting Rights Act; uniform standards for early voting; and the restoration of voting rights for those with past criminal convictions. And it should go further – to tap the potential of technology and advance innovative ideas to transform voter registration.

Universal, automatic voter registration has powerful potential to expand the electorate and increase turnout. No change would do more to dramatically improve the way Americans vote. It would mark a paradigm shift. Going forward, government would automatically register eligible citizens, unless they affirmatively choose not to be on the rolls. Fully implemented, it would add fifty million people to the rolls. It would cost less. It would improve accuracy and security.

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This approach has gained strong momentum. Over the past two years, Oregon, California, West Virginia and Vermont have enacted automatic registration at their DMVs. Connecticut officials last month announced that the state would take this step – and we appreciate the leadership of agencies led by Gov. Malloy. Illinois’ legislature has sent a measure to the Governor’s desk. If he signs, 62 million Americans will now live in states with automatic registration. There is growing support to extend it to other states, and to other agencies beyond the DMV.

Secretary Hillary Clinton has proposed a strong plan to implement this vision. It would automatically register citizens when they turn 18. “We should modernize our entire approach to registration,” she declared. “The current system is a relic from an earlier age.” As we noted at the time, her proposal would be a “game changer” for democracy. Others, including Sen. Sanders, have put forward positive proposals as well. The House Democratic leadership has pledged to introduce a federal bill in the coming weeks. This should become a clear commitment. The 2016 Democratic platform – for the first time – should call for universal and automatic voter registration. It should be an early and emphatic priority for the next President of the United States.

### **HOW AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION WORKS**

American elections are marred by a ramshackle voter registration system. Today about one in four eligible Americans is not registered to vote, and one in eight records has a serious error, according to the Pew Center on the States. Today we deposit checks on our iPhones and push a button to start our cars, yet many states and localities still rely on piles of paper records to maintain voting lists. Civil servants who perform data entry from paper-based applications must interpret citizens’ chicken scratch handwriting. Typos are common. And the current system poorly reflects today’s hypermobile society. More than 26 million voting-age Americans move each year. Because of residency requirements, many fall off the rolls, even if they move within the same state. “Motor-voter” under the 1993 National Voter Registration Act helps, but it is a paper-based, opt-in system. Data from would-be voters often does not filter through to the registration file. All this is a chief cause of long lines on Election Day. Every cycle, millions of Americans had trouble casting ballots or were unable to vote entirely due to problems with registration.

Automatic registration digitizes the process and shifts from an “opt in” to an “opt out.” When an eligible citizen gives information to the government—for example, to get a driver’s license, receive Social Security benefits, apply for public services, register for classes at a public university, or become a naturalized citizen—she is automatically signed up to vote unless she chooses to opt out.

This small tweak makes a big difference. As behavioral science shows, our brains are hard-wired to to choose the default option. Even those who want to register put it off to the future, when it may be too late. This helps explain why states with Election-Day registration have 5-7 percent higher turnout. Automatic registration could make an even bigger difference. It would let political parties, candidates and civic groups touch and mobilize a far wider group of voters. It would, in the the words of California Secretary of State Alex Padilla, extend “an invitation to the democracy party” to many who now are left out.

Any plan should include a real opportunity for people to decline and stay off the rolls. Election officials must maintain the privacy of records certain protected groups, such as domestic violence survivors, peace officers, and judges. And although automatic voter registration will be better than traditional systems at ensuring that only eligible citizens are signed up, effective rules should

safeguard people who may be registered by accident against negative legal consequences. These policy points are important, but solvable.

We have hard evidence that automatic voter registration boosts turnout. Oregon became the first state to implement it, starting in March. Since then, the rate of new registrations at the DMV has nearly quadrupled. More important, these people actually vote: in the May primary, voting rates were *higher* among automatically-registered voters than those who signed up through other means, across many demographic groups.

Benefits go well beyond increased registration. Electronic transfer of voter registration saves money, and increases accuracy. The most appropriate agencies for automatic registration already collect citizenship information and the other information needed for voter registration—so the data being used has already been vetted. Whether the priority is a broader franchise, smarter government, saving money, or safeguarding election integrity, automatic voter registration advances that goal.

### NATIONAL MOMENTUM

Two years ago, no Americans lived in a state with automatic registration. Since Oregon moved first in March, 2015, California, West Virginia, Vermont, and Connecticut followed suit. Illinois may soon join. In the span of 16 months, one in five Americans could live in an automatic voter registration state—up from zero.

Increasingly, this approach is garnering bipartisan support. The West Virginia Republican-controlled legislature passed it by wide margins in the House (77-21) and Senate (26-8). Vermont's bill passed the House 125-1 and the Senate unanimously. Illinois's legislature, in an otherwise contentious session, passed automatic voter registration with dozens of Republican votes.

Wide enfranchisement and a modern election system should become a *national* goal. The next President should fight for federal reform and a national standard. A federal law should require states to automatically register all eligible citizens. It could do so with a mandate, akin to the National Voter Registration Act, or with accompanying funding, as the Help America Vote Act did. This would be legally strong, constitutionally sound, and in the long tradition of successful federal legislation to improve access to the ballot.

### A DEMOCRACY MOMENT

In the *Federalist*, James Madison offered a timeless definition of democracy. “Who are to be the electors,” he asked. “Not the rich, more than the poor; not the learned, more than the ignorant; not the haughty heirs of distinguished names, more than the humble sons of obscurity and unpropitious fortune. The electors are to be the great body of the people of the United States.” For two centuries we've struggle toward that goal.

Today that basic premise is under threat. Citizen anger reflects an understanding that too often, the institutions of American democracy do not reflect that “great body of the people.” The public deeply cares about inequality and its challenge to American ideals and identity. We care, too, about the unequal ways in which political power is deployed. Citizens see the connection. They know that they will not get a government that works better, or that addresses long delayed challenges, unless the system is made to work for them. They see the direct line between a broken democracy, a damaged government, and a diminished future.

We've faced these challenges before. At other periods of American history, at our best, demand for change has kindled renewal and reform. The 2016 Platform no doubt will address climate change, economic policy, criminal justice reform, gun safety, the fight against terrorism, and more. These ambitious policy goals will be far harder to achieve unless our broken democracy is itself a central policy topic. We cannot solve America's problems if we do not fix our systems. Automatic and universal voter registration is one key step toward that goal. We urge you to enthusiastically embrace it in the 2016 Platform—and to make it a key policy priority going forward.

We urge the Democratic Party to put the fight for democracy at the heart of its strategy and the center of politics, where it belongs.