Testimony

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The United States Senate

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Testimony of

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Regarding

FEDERAL ELECTION PRACTICES AND
PROCEDURES

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Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to describe to you the way Washington State has implemented various provisions of the National Voter Registration Act.

Let me begin by saying that our State was an original supporter of the National Voter Registration Act. Our previous Secretary of State, Ralph Munro, testified on numerous occasions in support of the concept of integrating voter registration with the driver's licensing process—a system commonly known as "Motor Voter."

I believe Motor Voter works. It is cost-effective, it is secure, and above all, it is bringing citizens back to the voting booth. Washington's Motor Voter registration program represents a significant step forward in the state's efforts to increase citizen participation in voting. The program, which went into operation in January of 1992, provides greater convenience and accessibility for the public while enhancing the security and accuracy of the voter registration process.

I would like to divide this presentation into three sections.

First, I will discuss the registration process at our driver's licensing agencies. Second, I will present statistical information regarding the effect Motor Voter has had on voter participation in our State. Finally, I would like to share with the committee the security features of the Motor Voter Program.

Under the Motor Voter program, eligible citizens are offered a near-automatic method of registering to vote when they apply for or renew their driver's license. The program streamlines the process by creating a computer link between voter registration and driver licensing records.

Motor Voter takes advantage of the fact that almost all of the information needed for registering to vote – name, address, date of birth – is already in the state Department of Licensing's (DOL) computer system. Whenever someone applies for or renews their driver's license, the licensing examiner uses his or her computer terminal to "call up" the information or, in the case of new applicants, to enter it in the system.

Under Motor Voter, every person applying for a driver's license or state identification card is first asked if he or she wishes to register to vote. When the answer is yes, the examiner verifies that the address information is correct and then "flags" the applicant's record with a simple entry on the computer terminal. To complete the registration, the applicant simply signs a voter registration form affirming that he or she is 18 years of age and a citizen of the United States.

For most people, the voter registration portion of the licensing process takes about **one minute** to complete (slightly longer to transfer a registration or update an address). Motor Voter represents the fastest method of voter registration available.

An Effective Response to Dwindling Voter Participation

Washington's Motor Voter program was developed in direct response to a serious decline in voter participation among the state's eligible citizens. Simply put, voter registration and voting were not keeping pace with the

growth in Washington's voting-age population.

By the 1988 presidential election, voter registration as a percentage of the eligible population had dropped to an all-time low of 73.7 percent. From 1984 to 1988, registrations grew by only 40,000 people, an alarming drop from the usual growth of 100,000 to 200,000 registrations between presidential elections.

The trend was the same for voting. In the 1988 presidential election, only 56 percent of those eligible to vote actually did so. Even worse, the number of people voting in 1988 actually declined from 1984, despite a large increase in the voting-age population.

Under the previous registration system, anyone wishing to register to vote could only do so in person with an authorized registrar. While registrars were available in many locations, would-be applicants still had to find one and then make a trip to get signed up to vote.

In contrast, Motor Voter automatically provides an opportunity to register to the vast majority of Washington's voting-age population. More than one million people visit the state's 62 driver licensing outlets each year; over a four-year period, almost every eligible citizen in the state will be afforded the opportunity to register to vote.

The bottom line is that Motor Voter is working:

- During the first year of operation, the Motor Voter program recorded 218,604 transactions. On average, the program registered 875 people every working day of 1992; at times, Motor Voter registered more than **1,000 people per day.**
- For the 1992 election, a record 2.8 million citizens were registered to vote in Washington state. Registrations rose by nearly 315,000 from 1988, the second-largest increase in state history.
- In **just nine months** of operation, Motor Voter accounted for **58 percent** of the total net increase in registrations from 1988 to 1992.
- In the year 2000, a total of 127,000 voters were processed through Motor Voter. A total of 1.5 million have been processed since the program started in

1992.

- In terms of mid-term elections, voter participation is on the rise. In the 1998 General election, voter registrations surpassed levels set in 1978 and in terms of turnout, participation was at the highest level since 1982.
- While Washington, like many other states, experienced a drop in voter turnout in 1996, it did experience a significant upturn in 2000.

A New Level of Security

By maintaining face-to-face, in-person registration, Motor Voter, combined with an extensive use of mail-in voting, provides a number of new security features to safeguard the voter registration system against fraud and abuse.

One of the most important advances comes through the link between driver's licensing and voter registration. By connecting these two systems, the Secretary of State and local elections officials have several new cross-checks and auditing tools to protect the integrity of the registration process. (For example, it is the only form of voter registration in which the applicant's photo is taken.)

In addition, the Motor Voter law requires all registrants to declare that they are U.S. citizens, it sets forth increased penalties for fraudulent registrations, and it requires that the penalties be clearly set forth on the registration form.

Additionally, this past year, the Washington Legislature passed new legislation which will add even more security to the Motor Voter Process. Not only will applicants be asked if they would like to register to vote, licensing examiners will also remind each individual that they must be a United States citizen and at least 18 years of age in order to vote.

Shifting the Emphasis

There are three basic elements involved in tackling the problem of voter participation: registration, education and turnout. Motor Voter is aimed at the first element. After all, you can't persuade people to go to the polls if they aren't registered in the first place.

Motor Voter is not a cure for all that ails our election process. It does, however, remove many of the administrative hurdles placed in front of those who want to register. Coupled with campaign reform, voter education, and programs to increase turnout, Motor Voter can provide a positive step in promoting a fully representative democracy.