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Joint Committee on Government Administration and Elections
Connecticut General Assembly
Legislative Office Building, Room 2200
Hartford, CT 06106

Re: House Bill Number 5514 – An Act Concerning the Department of Motor Vehicles and Automatic Voter Registration

Dear Co-Chairpersons Cassano and Jutila, and the Members of the Joint Committee on Government Administration and Elections,

I write on behalf of Demos, a public policy organization that works for an America where we all have an equal say in our democracy and an equal opportunity in our economy. Overcoming barriers to voter registration and electoral participation is central to Demos' mission.

In furtherance of that mission, we urge this body to move forward with its consideration of House Bill 5514, a bill to provide for Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) by the Secretary of State through certain transactions within the Department of Motor Vehicles or other state agencies. This legislation takes meaningful strides to modernize voter registration for the way we live now, transforming voter registration from a barrier to a gateway to civic engagement. AVR works by allowing state agencies to use information they already collect – such as age, address and citizenship – to determine if a person is eligible to vote. If eligible, the citizen is added to the voter rolls unless they decline to be registered.

In January of this year, Demos released a report, **Automatic Voter Registration: Finding America's Missing Voters**, which explains how policy reforms such as those proposed in House Bill 5514 can enhance our democracy by streamlining the process of voter registration for eligible citizens, easing burdens on election administration, and reducing paperwork and potential errors in the voter registration process. The report finds that if all states adopted the AVR process that Oregon has implemented, 27 million of America's missing voters could be added to the voting rolls.

Demos' report makes a detailed case for AVR as a critical step forward for democratic participation in the United States, and explains best practices for policymakers considering how to implement AVR. Key findings include:

- There is a significant racial and class disparity in voter registration. Our current system of voter registration leaves millions of Americans without a voice in the political decisions that affect our lives:
 - 41 percent of eligible Latino citizens,
 - 44 percent of eligible Asian American citizens,
 - 46 percent of eligible young adults (18-24 year olds), and
 - 37 percent of eligible people with low incomes (under \$30,000) aren't registered to vote. Higher-income Americans vote at nearly double the rate of the lowest-income Americans.
- Registration is key to turnout: overall, while the rate of voter turnout among all eligible citizens was 64 percent in 2008 and 62 percent in 2012, the rate of voter turnout for people registered to vote was 90 percent in 2008 and 87 percent in 2012.
- Voter turnout gaps are much smaller for registered members of low-turnout groups compared to the groups as a whole. Turnout inequalities shrink dramatically for Latinos and Asian-Americans when they are registered to vote, particularly in presidential election years. In 2014, 4.1 million Americans who tried to register to vote were prevented due to registration deadlines. Another 1.9 million could not add themselves to the voter rolls because they did not know where or how to register.

The report further explains that a properly-designed AVR system will not only empower eligible citizens to vote, but will also significantly decrease the administrative errors that currently plague the registration process. The report lays out how AVR works, and addresses important considerations that need to be addressed in designing an inclusive, protective system.

As Demos supports the goals of House Bill 5514, we also encourage the consideration of provisions to best maximize the enrollment of eligible citizens into the state's voter registration system through AVR. We believe that it is particularly important that voter registration transactions within designated public agencies operate as best as possible to shift the burden away from the individual to complete their voter registration application.



House Bill 5514 includes a process whereupon an individual is asked to affirmatively accept or decline to have his/her voter registration information transferred from public agencies as determined by the Secretary of State. This option is offered before any information is transferred, even though the state may already have collected data sufficient to confirm a person's voter eligibility status. The requirement that an individual take this additional affirmative step before being added to the voter registration rolls constitutes what is referred to as an "opt-in" or "automated" approach to voter registration.

Demos believes that the key to a truly "automatic" system is that an eligible voter is registered to vote or has his/her registration updated with new information after interacting with a public agency, without having to take additional steps; this constitutes what we refer to as an "back-end opt-out" approach. Instead of having eligible citizens opt-in to voter registration, eligible citizens should be registered to vote by the state if (1) their eligibility is clear from data already collected by state agencies, and (2) they do not "opt out" of voter registration when notified of their eligibility and registration. A system that administers voter registration with an opt-out rather than an opt-in approach, through the electronic transfer of eligibility information, can add huge numbers of unregistered but eligible persons to the rolls, enabling further progress towards more robust and fully inclusive participation in elections.

The aforementioned state of Oregon, for example, is the first state in the nation to implement an AVR system, and theirs is based on an opt-out system of postal notification. Upon the reception and processing of records to confirm eligibility and registration status of individuals by state elections officials, elections officials contact eligible unregistered people to alert them to the process for opting out of voter registration before adding them to the voter rolls. Each new potential registrant is sent a mailer with a letter setting out voter eligibility requirements, as well as a postcard that can be returned if the individual wants to decline to be registered to vote. An individual who doesn't want to be registered can return the postcard within 21 days, for which if they do not he or she will be added to the voter rolls without having had to take affirmative action during or after the agency transaction.

In the first month of Oregon's program, the state added almost 4,000 voters through AVR. Less than 7 percent of the people notified through the mail about becoming automatically registered to vote declined the opportunity to become registered. We believe this counsels strongly in favor of using postal notification



to give people more information on their registration and to preserve the opportunity to decline registration should people want to remain unable to participate in elections as a voter.

Demos appreciates the Committee's consideration of our views in support of House Bill 5514. This crucial, achievable reform can help maximize political participation by making election administration more efficient, seamless, and up-to-date. AVR is the right step forward for a democracy that has articulated but not yet fulfilled the promise of equal political representation.

Respectfully submitted,

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Demos