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<div align="center">Midpoint Assessment</div>

The reality that voter registration is more difficult than it needs to be is what prompted me to design this project. The framework for election laws throughout the United States reveals an unbelievably opaque picture of how one can register and vote. Some states have very restrictive voting registration requirements while others tend to be more open to citizens having ample access to the ballot box. In North Carolina, one may register in person at a Board of Elections office, on the DMV website if licensed, or one may mail in their voter registration application. Voters can also register and vote at an early voting site in North Carolina, which is a positive step forward. However, most of these methods exclude those without or limited transportation, those without internet access, and citizens with limited means. However, a closer examination reveals that this is the way it was intended to be.

From its inception, voter registration has been used as a means to exclude eligible voters from the process. In 1800, Massachusetts established one of the first recorded forms of voter registration. This action brought about the first Supreme Court case dealing with voter registration, *Caper v. Foster*, a man was denied the right to vote because he was not on the voter rolls. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court ruled that this form of exclusion was constitutional (Rotham). And so began the nightmare of exclusion that prevails today.

From the *Caper* decision, voter registration efforts spread throughout the nation although mostly concentrated in New England. Bureaucrats would register people at their doorsteps, much

how the census is conducted and similar to the census, this effort excluded tons of poor people from the process. Poll taxes, literacy tests, and residency requirements were then put in place with the sole intention of targeting poor and black voters in order to ensure their suffrage was denied. The right to vote exists, but the process by which election officials go about registering voters and election law is complex and often intentionally designed to exclude (Litt). It is critical to remember that the voter registration issue translates into real, electoral outcomes.

Modern day, higher income people are more likely to vote than those with lower incomes. In 2020, Those who made $30,000 - $39,999, voter turnout was at 63.6%. For those with incomes from $100,000 - $149,999, voter turnout was at 81%. This translates into a 17.4% difference (Census Bureau). This gap was similar for nonwhite and white voters. Again, during the 2020 general elections, white voters turned out at a rate of 71%. Nonwhite voters turned out a rate of 58% which is a gap of 13% (Morris, Grange). As illustrated above, these gaps were the intended practice of disenfranchisement. The system is not broken, it was designed to work this way.

I am not arguing that voter registration would solve the disparages listed above in full. Like most problems, the issue of voting is interwoven with many other systems in the formation of a wicked problem. However, if it is believed that voting is a fundamental right of our republic, then it must be a lot easier and must simultaneously recognize the historic practices that led us to the unfair situation today.

Any solution must account for the historic injustices that are rooted in the electoral system while factoring in other factors. One strategy to incorporate voters into the process is to meet them where they are. States, or federal standards, must find eligible voters. The current system is the other way around where voters must seek out information in order to register. This

strategy would include implementing voting registration in everyday processes to ensure that the maximum number of voters are registered.

Another strategy is to work within the existing system in order to create some level of change. In exchange for safety and a level of protection, the citizenry must yield some rights to the government to truly live free. By doing so, we are accepting the social contract to live in a society of laws, not anarchy. Given this, any strategy to expand the electorate must factor in the existing structure. Although the voter registration system in the United States was created to exclude certain voters, there is no feasible way to start completely over. Any effective way to reform the system must correct past injustice in a purposeful way. Dismantling segments of the wrongs is how to create lasting change.

Finally, any strategy implemented must factor in the political climate of the current moment. More than 400 anti voting rights bills have been introduced in 48 states throughout the country (ACLU). This is an issue that quite clearly is defined by which political party is in control of state legislatures. Voting rights activists and those that register communities to vote have to work within the existing laws that oftentimes constrict the ability to make reform possible. Federal standards would go a long way to resolve the states led effort to disenfranchise millions, but that too, has its unique set of challenges. This strategy is the most difficult but is also an appreciation of reality.

Automatic voter registration is one solution to incorporate more Americans into the electoral process. 16 states plus the District of Columbia have implemented Automatic Voter Registration (Rakich). When a potential voter uses any public service provided by the government, they are then registered to vote. Applying for Social Security benefits or disability, registering at the Department of Motor Vehicles, paying state and local taxes, paying utility bills,

applying for SNAP benefits, applying for affordable housing, or any other conceivable source of government to people interaction, that person is immediately registered to vote. It is, as the name implies, an automatic process. This strategy takes into account the historic disparages while also attempting to include every person into the voter rolls and therefore, the democratic process.

Another strategy to curb voter differences, is to allow for same day voter registration. 20 states plus the District of Columbia have incorporated same day voter registration into the process (National Conference of State Legislatures). This remedy allows for voters to register and vote all on the same day. This factors in a multitude of historic factors and contextual ideas by allowing for the citizenry the opportunity to cast their ballot and place their name on the voter roll simultaneously. I would estimate that this would drastically improve the number of voters on election day.

My project's strategy is, admittingly, a temporary solution to the larger effort to expand voting rights. My project's solution is to implement voter registration at the City of High Point's seven Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites. VITA clients must make less than $57,000 a year and High Point's average client makes around $16,000. Our clients represent a wide variety of race and ethnic groups but that data is not entirely conclusive because demographic information is optional for client input. When a client is completing their intake documents, they will be asked by a trained volunteer if they would like to register to vote. I or a member of city staff, will turn in completed voter registration applications to the Board of Elections. This will eliminate the need for the client to remember to register come election time and will also meet them where they are and not requiring them to seek out how to register themselves.

I hypothesize that each of the solutions listed above will yield positive results and incorporate more and more people into the electoral process. None of them are perfect, but we are living in an imperfect system and incremental change is better than nothing at all. Each factor in the reasons why people are disenfranchised and how to eliminate the barriers that are preventing large swaths of the electorate from participating in the building block of any functional democracy adjacent government which is allowing the people to vote. Each solution also attempts in good faith to include as many people as possible without regard to race, income status, political party, or any other conceivable identity that has been intentionally excluded in the past.

Automatic voter registration is implemented in a manner that allows for easy access for participation. Most automatic registration processes register someone to vote without having their opt in. Instead, most of automatic voter registration strategies force a voter to opt out of the process. This process almost makes voter registration obsolete because almost every person interacts with some form of a government apparatus and when they do, they are automatically registered to vote. This system could exclude those that are homeless or are experiencing a transient housing crisis, but for the most part this solution is implemented in a way that maximizes the number of people registered. Of course, this strategy requires a legislative solution to be implemented. Unfortunately, many politicians view voting as a threat to their ability to retain public office, so lobbying state and federal lawmakers to implement is the only plausible path toward successful implementation.

Same day voter registration is another solution that is implemented in a way that incorporates every conceivable group into the process. Any time a person approaches a polling place unregistered, they will be able to register and vote all in the same day. This method almost

eliminates the need for preregistration and turns the system on its head. Any eligible voter will have the opportunity to do this method without any sort of penalty. This solution is also demographically neutral, meaning that anyone can participate no matter their identifiable characteristics. Again, this strategy similarly involves getting legislatures to implement this method. Given this, there is a long way to go in getting this strategy implemented nationally.

My solution will be implemented in a manner that gives every single High Point VITA client the opportunity to register while also providing them free tax preparation services. Each client will be presented with the opportunity to register, and it will be their choice as to whether or not they wish to do so. They will only have to provide their details, which should be relatively easy because they already have their information needed for tax filing purposes. The client will not have to turn in the form themselves as I will turn in their paperwork to the appropriate Board of Elections office. Every volunteer will be trained on how to register a client to vote so that mistakes to the form will not occur and if they do, I will be able to follow up with the client to correct any invalid information on the form. Implementation will be inclusive to every person that uses VITA services.

Luckily, all of the solutions proposed have been conducted, some marginally throughout the United States and the preliminary data suggests that each one has made productive inroads into closing the gaps of who votes in this country. Automatic voter registration (AVR), in the 16 states plus the District of Columbia that have implemented it, has registered more than 2.2 million people onto the voter rolls. An additional 6 million voters had their registrations automatically updated if they moved or changed addresses. It should be noted that these numbers cannot factor in the number of voters that would have registered themselves with or without automatic voter registration (Rakich). In any case, these numbers suggests that AVR has the

potential to greatly increase the number of those that are registered voters. In addition, this method is grounded in including the most people as possible.

Same day voter registration numbers are a little trickier to analyze. This is due to the fact that many of the states who implement same day voter registration also have automatic voter registration. Given this, the two numbers are conflated in a way that makes analysis next to impossible. Concrete data may not be available, but one does not need a mathematician to understand that incorporating this method would include more people into the voting process. By definition, allowing citizens to register and vote on the same day would not exclude anyone but rather allow for any person who desires to vote the opportunity to do so.

VITA voter registration allows for citizens to register to vote while they are already engaging in another civic process of paying taxes. In a small study, voter registration increased by 8.8% among all participants and saw a 10-point increase in those 18-34. Not only does voter registration increase voter registration, it also increases the likelihood of voter participation because "voter registration at tax time could leverage this positive experience of government to increase civic participation" (Williamson). Many VITA filers receive the benefits of government including the Earned Income Tax Credit as well as the Child Tax Credit. These positive interactions with government and registering to vote at the same time could yield increased voter turnout in the long run. My project will also focus on allowing clients to think through why voting matters and why their vote is critical to the survival of the American experiment.

Overall, any solution designed to reform or work within existing voter registration law must start at a place of inclusivity. Each solution and strategy outlined does just that. It will not solve the entire problem, no reasonable solution ever would, but each goes a long way in remedying past injustice in favor of a more inclusive and representative electorate.

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