



October 25, 2005

Presentation to the United States Election Administration Commission  
Effective Voter Registration and Submittal of Completed Applications

Good Morning. My name is Holli Holliday. I am the National Director of Project Vote. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to protect the work of third party voter registration activities. In 2004, third party registration groups registered over 5 million people. In the next few minutes, I hope to impress upon you the important role that third party registration groups play in our democracy and the need to prevent guidelines or regulations, which restrict their important work in under-represented communities.

### **The Project Vote Model**

Project Vote is the leading technical assistance and direct service provider to the non-profit, non-partisan voter engagement and civic participation community. Since 1982, Project Vote has provided professional training, management, evaluation and technical services on a broad range of issues related to voter engagement in low-income and minority communities. Over the past 23 years, Project Vote has registered 4 million voters in low-income and minority neighborhoods, 1.15 million in 2003-04. By partnering with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), we had 102 voter registration and get-out-the-vote projects in 26 states in 2004. Our strategy to empower citizens typically left out of the democratic process, including

people of low and no income, people of color, ex-offenders, youth and new citizens, is based on face-to-face, neighbor-to-neighbor outreach, focused on connecting the electoral process to issues important to the voter's daily life.

Project Vote prides itself on its ability to work with community organizations seeking to develop voter registration programs in all 50 states. As a service provider, Project Votes helps organizations develop relationships with local clerks, train volunteers and staff; and review each voter registration card received to achieve the highest possible quality. Before any card is collected, Project Vote staff and the voter registration drive coordinator meet with local and state election administrators for training and guidance. Project Vote recognizes the importance of ensuring that third party registration efforts are well versed in the voter registration requirements of that particular jurisdiction. To ensure this level of professionalism, we focus on training and quality control. In each state, we research the laws, rules and regulations to thoroughly incorporate state-specific information relating to the registration process.

Training sessions cover everything including:

- Assisting applicants in completely and accurately filling out applications
- Reviewing cards for errors
- Coding voter registration applications so individuals gathering the applications can be traced in case of future questions
- Emphasizing the responsibility of each individual program to adhere to voter registration laws and regulations, including, returning registration application in a timely fashion.

In addition to training, Project Vote further advocates that its partners use extensive quality control procedures, designed to reduce the submission of inaccurate or fraudulent voter registration applications. Our quality control protocol, ask each program to engage the following measures:

- Review each card individually at the time of collection for accuracy and completeness;
- Subsequently, check each batch of applications submitted again for accuracy and then for fraud: similar signatures, alphabetically ordered names, addresses in same community or consecutive, etc.
- Place a quality control call to cards with phone numbers, inquiring about their voter registration experience and confirming accuracy of submitted information.

These procedures, which are designed to assist our organizations in producing the highest possible percentage of valid voter registration cards are particularly vital in an increasingly regulated voter registration environment.

Given the thoroughness of our procedures and those of other major voter registration programs, we must emphasize that short turn-in time periods pose substantial compliance challenges. These challenges are no less significant for smaller registration efforts. Consider the church that promotes registration among its congregants and agrees to forward applications to the county. The church would have to institute a system of daily application turn-ins, which would strain most churches' administration capacity. Or perhaps, the civic association with no paid staff, which asks members to register their friends and neighbors, under the most restrictive frame, as in

Georgia which has a 72 hour submission deadline, this type of organization would likely opt not to register voters under these conditions.

## **... The Impact of Community Voter Registration Programs**

Voter registration is used as the centerpiece of a community development/empowerment campaign that has as its goals the development and nurturing of: a shared political awareness; effective local organizations; and strong grassroots leadership.<sup>1</sup>

In this statement, Richie Perez, then at Columbia University, was speaking of the vital role voter registration placed in Puerto Rico. He could have easily applied this same principle to any one of the community groups in the United States seeking to expand democracy in disenfranchised constituency. In 2004, at least 5 national organizations registered at least 350,000 voters each over that cycle, with three registering over one million. Collectively these organizations registered over 5.5 million voters. Specifically, the following groups report the following voter registration results:

- 1.15 million Project Vote and ACORN
- 1/2 million USAction Education Fund
- 1 million Unity '04 ( including the efforts of NAACP Voter Fund, Tom Joyner Morning Show, Universoul Circus, BET, NCBCP, Urban League and National Pan-Hellenic Council)
- 1.4 million Rock the Vote
- nearly 350 thousand PIRGs New Voter Project

These combined projects represent over 5 million voter registration applications. During this same time period 2003-04, public assistance offices reported a mere 1,050,479 voter registration applications collected under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). In essence, this sampling of organizations collected five times the number of

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<sup>1</sup> Voter Registration As A Vehicle For Organizing And Mobilizing The Puerto Rican Community, presentation by Richie Perez to the Second Chapter Convention Massachusetts Chapter - National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights Sept. 25 - 27, 1992

voter registration applications in roughly half the states, as public assistance offices reported collecting in 50 states.

Inevitably within operations of this magnitude, enlisting thousands of volunteers and part-time employees, mistakes were made and deadlines missed. However, the number of applications affected by these mistakes represents a small percentage when compared to the whole numbers of citizens registered through the efforts of community based third party organizations.

### **Recommendations**

In our work across the country, working with election administrators in well over 100 different jurisdictions, we agree that each registration collected should be submitted timely. We simply suggest that this effort to increase timely registrations be weighed against the value of community organization continuing contribution to democracy. In these current times of national disasters, war and large budget deficits, the states often don't invest in registering their citizens, even when required by federal law (i.e. NVRA), so communities need independent third party organizations to be able to reach out to the least represented citizens in our communities.

America deserves a full democracy, not further restrictions or barriers to voting. As such, we support a timeline for submissions which is no more restrictive than the guideline placed on state government agencies. Therefore, we recommend:

**Recommendation #1:** The timeline for submission of complete voter registration applications should be no shorter than 10 business days from the time the applications are completed.

As you are familiar with the National Voter Registration Act, you will note that this is the same timeline for state agencies to forward completed applications from the

departments of motor vehicles, public assistance, and disability offices to the elections offices. Project Vote supports guidelines and regulations which foster faith in our democracy, particularly in communities most likely to be excluded. We believe that all entities engaged in voter registration owe a duty to the voters to diligently place all citizens seeking to be registered on the registration rolls. As NVRA, supports a 10 day guideline to forward completed applications and as Project Vote supports a submission deadline no shorter than 10 days, we further support guidelines for election administrators to be accountable to potential voters. As such, we recommend:

**Recommendation #2:** Election administrators responsible for collecting voter registration applications validate receipt of registrations to the voter within 10 business days by mailing of a voter registration card or notice of failure to register with instructions to cure, prior to closing registration.

## Summary

Despite our deep commitment to thorough trainings of volunteers and employees, we fear that tightened timelines will dramatically increase error rates in submitted voter registration applications and could in several cases prevent third party voter registration organizations from operating at all.

These efforts are crucial to the inclusion of the excluded in our democratic processes. With over 40% of the voting age Latino population and 35% of the voting age African American population unregistered, according to the Census Bureau, it is clear that government at all levels has not risen to the challenge of creating a fully registered populace. For the sake of ensuring that our country lives up to its democratic promise, it is vital that organizations committed to registering the unregistered be allowed to operate 3<sup>rd</sup> party registration programs both large and small.

In short, by just looking the work of a sampling of national organizations, we acknowledge the significant contribution made by organizations across the country, large and small, to the 15 million new voters who voted in 2004 and it is in this spirit that Project Vote respectfully submits the above stated recommendations for the Committee's consideration.

Thank you.