

# It's time to get a ballot in the hand of every citizen

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Democracy is a pretty miraculous thing: every few years in this country, we can pick up a pen, fill in a few bubbles and dictate our own future. Truly amazing when you consider that for

most of human history, all our decisions were made for us by kings and what-not. When we started this regular-people-governing-ourselves thing 235 years ago, it was radically bold. One of the boldest ideas

in the history of the world. And as our world changes, history mandates we stay bold – to powerfully affirm not just the right to vote, but the actual ability of all our citizens to do so. Oregon's new National Voter Registration Compliance (NVRA) Council gives us an opportunity to do just that.

Despite the sheer beauty of the democratic idea in this country, our execution has been spotty. There's often been a big ol' gulf between the right and the ability for any American to cast a ballot: from first only offering the right to white, male landowners, to a century of Jim Crow, to the new rash of cynical, hyper-partisan anti-voting laws sweeping the country. Sometimes that's intentional (no doubt laws in Texas, Wisconsin, Ohio requiring photo ID to vote are meant to snatch ballots from the hands of young people and people of color).

But perhaps more often, it comes from a gentle ignorance and the passive assumption that voting is a one-size-fits-all conversation and that no special action is needed to bring democracy to the most under-served among us.

That's the story of Oregon's struggles. Luckily, we can solve them through stark attention and immovable intent and, more specifically, through specific and decisive

action from our state's newly formed NVRA Council.

In Oregon, we pride ourselves on Vote by Mail. Yet, study after study tells us that this mostly helps people who already vote at high levels (to overgeneralize, we're basically talking about older, wealthier white folks). At my organization, the Bus Project, we bust our butts to get young people, people of color and other under-served communities registered to vote where they live. It's no small task.

The average young person moves twice a year, which means four times since the last major election. It only stands to reason that Oregon's unforwardable ballots might not find us. Low-income folks move a lot too and face similar problems, to say nothing of the challenges of mail for the homeless community.

This is not to say that Vote by Mail doesn't have benefits. If we do away with the small (but real) financial barrier of paying postage to vote and use the technology and information that Oregon already has on hand to register all our citizens, we would have the best little democracy in the country.

Enter the NVRA Council. This spring in Salem, The Bus Project worked with Secretary of State Kate Brown (a true badass who really believes in making democracy more accessible), Oregon Common Cause, the Oregon Student Association and others to integrate voter registration with social services at our state's public assistance agencies (plus, big props go to chief sponsors Jefferson Smith and Ben Cannon). The bill created the Council to get the job done, and now it's on us citizen-advocates to make sure it does great things.

Street Roots reported on the Council a few issues ago, but if you missed it, here's the skinny: Federal law requires that if you get public assistance from the government, you must also be offered help registering to vote, and the state has to keep record of if you say yes or no (so that people actually get asked). Every state is required to do

this, but almost nobody does.

In Oregon, the DMV already does it well. Where we need to get a lot better are agencies such as Food Stamps, TANF and the Oregon Health Plan. That's where the real juice is at: to enfranchise under-served populations, find them where they already are. At a time of record need for public assistance, we have a gleaming opportunity to empower the voices of struggling people in our democracy.

The Council is about to start their work. They'll be looking at how each agency is doing and start offering recommendations. If you want to help (and please, please, please do), call the Secretary of State's office at 503-986-1523 and tell them you want the NVRA Council to do the most it can possibly do to enfranchise low-income people.

Secretary Brown is on the side of angels in this, but she is stronger if she can say that a bunch of citizens are asking for her and the Council to be bold.

A few recommendations the Council ought to make: voter registration should be a fully integrated part of the public assistance application (aka all on the same form) and the default should be that you get registered unless you opt-out; regular audits should be done of the agencies to see how they're doing; every month agencies should submit how many people they've registered and how many have declined, and address-updating should be part of each conversation.

These small but systemic steps can really help, but only if we actually do them. So pick up that phone already.

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Henry Kraemer is the Organizing Director of the Bus Project, which engages a new generation of Oregonians to build a better democracy. Find out more at [busproject.org](http://busproject.org)

## Poverty and Privilege: Two Palaces of Pain

By Mad Man Marlon

A sense of freedom on both sides:  
Yet painful because it never lies:  
Eyes that chose only to see images  
intensifies my tears and cries:

Poverty and Privilege: Two Palaces of Pain  
Taken to dark places,  
forced into unwanted places,  
forsaken from one's true self:  
Eyes that commit to convict  
from knowing and loving myself:

Poverty and Privilege: Two Palaces of Pain  
Pockets of pleasure carried  
like a purse full of pain:  
An immediate embrace into a society's arms  
does little insurance that one will stay warm  
isolated from a cold midnight purple rain

Poverty and Privilege: Two Palaces of Pain  
You envy my clothes, can you hear my heart  
beating aimlessly inside them?  
My wallet contains only coins, yet can you see  
my struggle as its precious gem?  
Your eyes fuel with desire at my shoes,  
but would you walk with them when they are torn?

Poverty and Privilege: Two Palaces of Pain  
Poverty, privilege its all the same  
from the day we are born.....  
until the day we are ALL mourned!



## Street Books, A bicycle-powered mobile library, coming to a street near you!

Street Books will use an old-school card catalogue system, checking out and accepting returned books, twice weekly through the summer. You do not need an address to be able to check out books. The website [streetbooks.org](http://streetbooks.org) will feature photos of patrons who wish to be featured with their book of choice, on-line book reviews submitted by patrons, and updates about Street Books news and library hours. At the end of the summer, Street Books will host a reception, inviting patrons to come talk about their favorite books, and share their experiences with the project.

### Library Location & Hours:

Wednesdays, 10-2 Skidmore Fountain.  
Saturdays, 10-2, Park Blocks @ SW Salmon.

To find out more about the project, or to donate paperbacks, contact Laura Moulton: [laura@ideacog.net](mailto:laura@ideacog.net).

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