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### Easing Voter Registration



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Every state in the union has formal voter registration procedures except North Dakota. But a dozen states and the District of Columbia have revamped the process to make it a lot easier—instead of the onus on the voter to affirmatively sign up to vote, they have enacted Automatic Voter Registration. As the name suggests, it requires state agencies to register those who, for example, obtain or renew a driver’s license, and the presumption shifts—a voter must now opt out from registering rather than opt in to vote.

These include a diverse mix of big and small states like California and Rhode Island, and red and blue states, like Georgia and Vermont. In West Virginia, AVR was passed by a largely Republican legislature and signed into law by a Democratic governor. In Illinois, AVR was passed by a largely Democratic legislature and signed into law by a Republican governor. It has been done administratively in some states, like Colorado, without the need for legislative action. In Alaska, AVR was adopted via a ballot initiative. Just this year, AVR has been signed into law in three different states—Washington, Maryland and New Jersey. Legislatures are still in session in many other states, so we may see others join in.

New York state has thus far failed to adopt this reform. In addition to having no early-voting (37 states already have this), Election Day registration or registration during the early voting period (18 states), or no-excuse absentee voting (27 states), we still put the burden on would-be voters to register. No wonder registration rolls are so low. In New York, for example, only approximately 66.5 percent of eligible voters are actually registered according to the U.S. Census Bureau. AVR seeks to turn the system on its head.

Automatic voter registration modernizes the way we register voters in two modest, but transformative ways: (1) It switches the registration opportunity from an “opt-in” system to an “opt-out” system, which means that the information citizens provide at an agency will be used to register them to vote (or update their existing registration) unless the applicants decline to register by opting out, and (2) voter registration information between a government agency, usually the state motor vehicle commission, and the relevant state election administrator is electronically transferred rather than relying on pen, paper, and the post office. Under AVR, humans are not doing the handwriting, deciphering, and data entry of registration forms—the agency computer that already has a voter’s information simply transfers it to the appropriate election administrator.

A lot about Automatic Voter Registration is similar to the way we have registered voters for the better part of 25 years. Eligible citizens can still register when applying for services from certain government agencies, most notably a state’s department of motor vehicles. Of course, individuals can still decide not to register—AVR is not the same as compulsory registration used in certain countries (like Australia, Belgium, and Brazil). And citizens wanting to register still must confirm and swear under penalty of perjury that they meet the eligibility requirements.

But making voter registration the default option is a powerful tool for increasing voter rolls. We have already seen promising results from Oregon, where AVR quadrupled the registration rate at the DMV. Nearly 100,000 people who had registered through the new system cast ballots in the 2016 election, helping to make Oregon the state with the largest percentage increase in turnout relative to the 2012 election. Updating existing registration information also becomes the default under AVR, benefitting both election administrators and voters. As registered voters go about their daily lives interacting with a variety of government agencies, election officials receive updates when a voter’s address has changed. This steady stream of information helps diminish the last-minute flood of registration changes election officials face in the run-up to Election Day. More accurate rolls also means fewer opportunities for voter fraud or administrative mistakes that turn voters away from local polling places. It also fosters smoother voting and shorter lines.

Since 2010, much has been written (including by us in this column) about the ongoing “Voting Wars”—the intensive disputes that have been playing out in the statehouses, the courts, and at the ballot box over laws and policies that make it more difficult for some otherwise eligible Americans to vote. AVR is a broadly-backed change that can help bridge that divide. It has been embraced in a bipartisan manner—after all, adherents of all political parties routinely use a variety of state agencies. Thus, all stand to benefit, and, as such, we could have more robust elections.

AVR is but one proposed reform that could ease voter registration in New York—and increase the likelihood of increased turnout.

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