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Automatic Voter Registration

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Automatic voter registration can be seen as new, or it can be seen as an updated version of processes put in place by the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA).

That law, also known as “motor voter,” pioneered a new way of registering to vote in America. It required most states to provide citizens with an opportunity to register to vote when applying for or renewing a driver’s license.

Now, states are taking this model one step further. Instead of giving someone the choice to register at the motor vehicle agency, some states automatically register that person to vote, unless the person decides to opt-out of voter registration.

As of December 8, 2016, six states and the District of Columbia have authorized automatic voter registration. See the table below for details.

STATES THAT HAVE ENACTED AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION			
State	Year Enacted	Bill Number	Year Implemented
Alaska*	2016	<u>Measure 1</u>	n/a
California	2015	<u>A 1461</u>	n/a
Connecticut**	2016	No legislation	n/a
District of Columbia	2016	<u>B21-0194</u>	n/a
Oregon	2015	<u>HB 2177</u>	2016
Vermont	2016	<u>HB 458</u>	n/a
West Virginia	2016	<u>HB 4013</u>	n/a

*Measure 1 in Alaska uses the Permanent Fund rather than the Department of Motor Vehicles.

**Agreement between Secretary of State and Department of Motor Vehicles without authorizing legislation.

How Automatic Voter Registration Works

Currently, voter registration is an “opt in” policy, where an eligible voter chooses to fill out a registration application, which gets reviewed and processed before the name goes on the voter rolls.

Automatic voter registration is an “opt out” policy in which an eligible voter is placed on the rolls unless they actively decline to be registered.

The process begins at the motor vehicle agency. When citizens apply for, renew or replace a driver’s license, permit or identification card, their relevant information—including name, address, date of birth and signature—is shared electronically with the state election agency. That registration application is then verified for eligibility (citizenship, age and residency), compared to the information with what’s already in the statewide voter registration database and, if there is no existing registration, the person is added to the voter rolls.

States have addressed the ability of voters to opt-out of registration in different ways. In California, West Virginia and Vermont, individuals will be given the opportunity to opt-out at the point of contact with the motor vehicle agency.

In Oregon, the election agency mails the voter a registration notification card after their transaction at the motor vehicle agency. At that time, the voter is assigned a "pending" status for 21 days, in which time they can do one of three things:

- Choose a party affiliation and mail back a completed card.
- Select the option declining to be registered and mail back the postcard.
- Take no action and thus become registered as an unaffiliated voter after 21 days.

What Are the Benefits of Automatic Voter Registration?

Proponents of automatic voter registration say the policy will remove barriers to registration for eligible voters, the first step on the way to voter participation. By registering through a routine and necessary transaction, voters won't have to worry about registration deadlines or application submissions. In a sense, they are automatically enfranchised.

Automatic registration also will lead to cleaner voter registration rolls. This, in turn, will lead to more efficient elections, with the added benefit of reducing the use of costly provisional ballots, which are a fail-safe voting option when there is a discrepancy in a voter's registration status. Some supporters also expect automatic voter registration to lead to higher voter turnout.

What Are the Disadvantages of Automatic Voter Registration?

Opponents of automatic voter registration have concerns that the government should not be in the business of telling citizens what to do or that they have to be registered to vote. They may see automatic voter registration as an infringement upon the First Amendment right to free speech.

They question whether Oregon's opt-out form that is sent and received through the mail, in the electronic age, is sufficient to ensure an individual can decline to register. Fraud is also a concern, as some have questioned whether the process can

adequately filter out noncitizens who are able to obtain state identification cards legally.

Opponents also argue that more voter registration does not necessarily lead to higher voter turnout. Just because a voter is registered does not mean he or she will actually vote on Election Day. Further, some add that automatic registration would not be necessary if states properly implemented the existing National Voter Registration Act. Many states continue to struggle to do so 22 years after it was enacted, due to inadequate information sharing between agencies and a lack of oversight. It remains to be seen whether more voters will get to the polls because of automatic voter registration.

Source: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx>



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