FPI Fiscal Policy Institute

BRIEF LOOK

Automatic Voter Registration in New York: Good for Democracy and Sound Fiscal Sense

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VOTER REGISTRATION REMAINS CHALLENGING FOR MANY NEW YORKERS who may not know how or where to register to vote, or whose minor errors on voter registration forms may prevent them from participating in an election. In response to such problems, sixteen states, and the District of Columbia, have taken the initiative to help voters by legislating automatic voter registration (AVR) programs.[1]

Automatic voter registration simplifies the process of getting on the voter rolls by using an automated system to register individuals to vote when they complete a transaction with the Department of Motor Vehicles, and other state agencies. When processing a transaction, the agency establishes whether the client is eligible to vote but not currently registered. One approach, as used in Oregon, is that the person receives a follow-up post-card in the mail with the options to "opt-out," remain unaffiliated, or register with a political party. Another, as used in California, is that in the process of conducting an electronic transaction people are guided through a series of screens establishing eligibility and asking if they want to be registered. In implementing the right system for New York, careful attention must be paid to making sure that individuals who are not eligible to vote are not registered inadvertently.

For just $1.9 million New York could take a real step toward a more participatory democracy.

The need for action on voter registration is pressing. New York has chronically low registration and turnout rates, with just 66 percent of citizens registered to vote and just 57 percent turning out to vote in the 2016 election—that makes New York 46th of the 50 states in the U.S. for registration and 43rd for turnout.[2] New York should enact automatic voter registration as one important and simple step toward improving these very low rates.

As with any new proposal, it is worth examining the fiscal cost of implementation of this system. In this case, however, the first-year costs are estimated to be a modest $1.9 million, on top of the current cost of voter registration of $3.2 million. The costs could vary some depending on the type of system chosen, but this establishes the order of magnitude of the initial investment needed. Over the long run, the costs will likely be gradually reduced as the current system is shifted to an automated system so that more people can be reliably registered at a lower overall cost.

Since some of the cost of the transition to a new system will be borne by counties, a system should be put in place for counties to be reimbursed by the state for reasonable costs they incur. In the long run, counties will likely also realize a savings from an automated system, and in the process get more accurate voter rolls.

The benefit is clear: implementing a system of automatic voter registration will enroll hundreds of thousands, over time even millions more voters, with minimal up-front costs and likely long-term savings.

The Modest Cost of Implementing Automatic Voter Registration

Automatic Voter Registration is quickly catching on around the country as a way to ensure that the voting rolls contain everyone who wants to be registered and is eligible to vote. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have enacted AVR, all of them in the past three years, starting in 2015.[3]

The start-up cost is easily manageable. It is projected that New York can potentially reach 1.5 million new registrants with the adoption of AVR. The start-up cost for putting this in place is estimated to be $1.9 million.[4]

Estimated Cost of Implementing Automatic Voter Registration in New York: $1.9 Million

Estimated Number Registered Through AVR in First Year	Cost Per Person Registered Through AVR	Estimated Cost of AVR in First Year
1.5 million	$1.29	$1.9 million

Figure 1 Sources: Center for American Progress, "Close Elections, Missing Voices, and Automatic Voter Registration Projected Impact in 50 States," 2017. See text below for cost per registrant.

While there are different approaches to how to put automatic voter registration in place, our cost estimate is based on the experience in Oregon, the first state to put AVR in place and the one with the fullest data available. This means our analysis is implicitly based on a "back-end" system (where the agencies determine whether or not a person is eligible to vote) rather than a "front-end" system (where the applicants themselves choose whether or not to register as they go through the DMV application or other government interaction). Data about a "front-end" system are not available, but we have no reason to believe the costs would be dramatically higher or lower, though expenses would be different.

Oregon's total implementation costs included a one-time expense of roughly $200,000 for the information technology infrastructure and programming, and an estimated cost of $165,000 in the first year for printing, sending, and return postage of postcards.[5] The number of people registered in the first year was 283,152.[6] We can thus estimate that the cost per registrant amounts to $1.29 ($365,000/283,152).

Holding the per-registrant costs constant, the total cost of the AVR system implementation in New York is thus estimated to be $1.9 million ($1.29×1.5 million) in the first year.

After the initial start-up, ongoing costs should be gradually reduced since the system will be automated, computers and networks will already be in place, and the large share of people currently eligible but not registered will already have been registered or had the opportunity to opt out.

Voter Registration Costs in New York State Today

The current system of processing voter applications requires staff to complete data entry, follow up with applicants about errors and missing information on forms, and sometimes to work overtime to ensure completion prior to Election Day. We estimate the total cost of both agency-based registration and registration by county boards of election was $3.2 million during New York's 2018 election cycle.[7] In the initial year, we envision the two systems functioning side by side, thus requiring a total outlay of $5.1 million ($1.9 million plus $3.2 million). In the long run, there would likely be some savings achieved by automating many registration-related costs, even as more people are registered and voter information is updated more frequently.[8]

Current Cost of Voter Registration: $3.2 Million
Estimate of 2018 Registration in New York State

Number of People Registered in 2018	Estimated Cost per Person Registered	Estimated Cost of 2018 Registration
664,160	$4.78	$3.2 million

Figure 2 Source: New York State Board of Elections data about the number registered in 2018 provided to the Fiscal Policy Institute. Estimates of were calculated using per unit cost estimates from "The Cost (Savings) of Reform: An Analysis of Local Registration-Related Costs and Potential Savings through Automatic Voter Registration." See Footnote 7 for details.

Most Agency-Based Registration is Currently from the DMV or Public Assistance Agencies

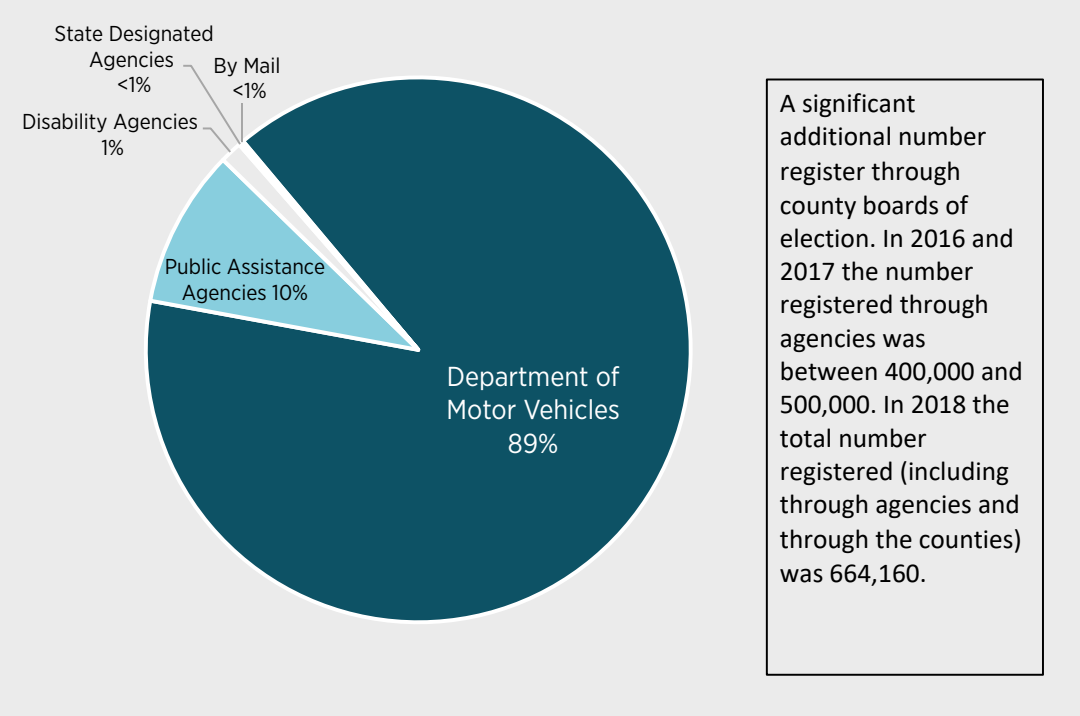

Figure 3 Source: New York State Board of Elections Annual Report, 2017.

This cost estimate is based on the number of people registered in 2018, as provided to the Fiscal Policy Institute by the New York State Board of Elections, and includes both people registered through agencies and those registered through county clerks' offices.

Among those people registered by agencies, by far the largest share are registered by the DMV offices, and most of the rest are through public assistance agencies—89 percent and 10 percent of the total in 2017.

Long-Term Advantages

The advantage of automated voter registration is the improvement it could make in the electoral process in New York. The fiscal impact is modest, and is neither a reason to support nor to oppose it.

There is good reason to think that the impact on voter registration and also on voter turnout would be substantial. In just the first year of implementation, Oregon's AVR program registered 260,000 residents, and 43 percent of those who registered through the program voted. Those registered through AVR accounted for more than half of all registered voters in 2016. The new system quadrupled the registration rate at Oregon's DMV, and nearly 100,000

automatic registrants cast ballots in 2016.[9] AVR not only increased the number of voters, but it reversed the voter registrant decline that Oregon experienced between 2014 and 2015 from 2.19 million to 2.17 million registrants, a loss of 402,000 voters. The program also increased the age, racial, and income diversity of Oregon's voters, and an estimated two to three percentage point increase in voter turnout from 64 percent to 68 percent after implementation can be attributed to AVR.[10]

Currently, New York State has an online voter registration system that lets citizens fill out their voter registration forms electronically. Adopting AVR will reduce staff costs related to data entry and following up on registration form errors. Additionally, AVR will help reduce affidavit voting, by keeping voters' information updated consistently.[11] Most importantly, it would increase access to the polls and increase voter participation. AVR will increase registration rates among individuals in "hard-to-reach" populations: the elderly, low-income families, and anyone who may not have access to a computer for online registration, or transportation to resources with information on how to register to vote.

New York Ranks 46th out of 50 States in Share of Citizens Registered to Vote

	State	Population of U.S. Citizens 18 Years and Older (in Thousands)	Total Registered (in Thousands)	Percent of Citizens of Voting Age Who Are Registered
	United States	224,059	157,596	70.3%
	District of Columbia	512	420	82.1%
1	Maine	1,038	830	80.0%
2	Mississippi	2,170	1,725	79.5%
3	Minnesota	3,985	3,055	76.7%
4	Washington	5,104	3,906	76.5%
5	Wisconsin	4,354	3,323	76.3%
6	Virginia	5,829	4,399	75.5%
7	Nebraska	1,336	1,008	75.5%
8	New Hampshire	1,012	763	75.4%
9	North Dakota	564	424	75.2%
10	Maryland	4,158	3,114	74.9%
11	North Caroline	6,960	5,194	74.6%
12	Missouri	4,486	3,333	74.3%
13	Illinois	8,970	6,665	74.3%
14	Colorado	3,895	2,893	74.3%
15	Michigan	7,332	5,434	74.1%
16	Massachusetts	4,967	3,660	73.7%
17	Montana	790	581	73.5%
18	Oregon	2,929	2,147	73.3%
19	Louisiana	3,353	2,446	73.0%
20	Delaware	669	487	72.8%
21	Iowa	2,292	1,657	72.3%
22	Ohio	8,499	6,128	72.1%
23	Pennsylvania	9,596	6,909	72.0%
24	Vermont	488	351	71.9%
25	South Carolina	3,598	2,575	71.6%
26	South Dakota	612	437	71.4%
27	Alaska	502	358	71.3%
28	Wyoming	427	304	71.1%
29	Utah	1,969	1,398	71.0%
30	Connecticut	2,483	1,763	71.0%
31	Kansas	2,029	1,438	70.9%
32	Rhode Island	766	538	70.3%
33	New Jersey	5,958	4,165	69.9%
34	Nevada	1,975	1,371	69.4%
35	Kentucky	3,246	2,253	69.4%
36	Georgia	7,048	4,892	69.4%
37	Alabama	3,651	2,526	69.2%
38	Arkansas	2,116	1,456	68.8%
39	Indiana	4,795	3,298	68.8%
40	Idaho	1,150	790	68.7%
41	Arizona	4,585	3,145	68.6%
42	Oklahoma	2,746	1,861	67.8%
43	Texas	17,378	11,724	67.5%
44	Tennessee	4,872	3,251	66.7%
45	Florida	14,428	9,604	66.6%
46	New York	13,751	9,142	66.5%
47	New Mexico	1,396	916	65.6%
48	California	24,890	16,096	64.7%
49	West Virginia	1,425	913	64.1%
50	Hawaii	974	530	54.4%

Figure 4 Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of November 2016 Current Population Survey. District of Columbia is shown but not included in count of states.

A generation ago, in 1993 Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) or "Motor Voter" law to address voter registration challenges by using the most advanced technology available at the time. With this legislation, more eligible citizens were registered to vote than ever before.[12] Twenty-five years later New York has the opportunity to modernize its voter registration system, keep voter registration rolls up-to-date and remove obstacles to voter registration while saving tax payers' money. It's time for New York State to embrace this opportunity to create a more robust and inclusive democracy.

By: Cyierra Roldan, Shamier Settle, David Dyssegaard Kallick and Jonas Shaende

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[1] See National Conference of State Legislatures, http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx

[2] Figure 4 shows the registration rates by state. For data on the voter turnout rate by state in the parallel time period, November 2016, see: https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html

[3] "Automatic Voter Registration," National Conference of State Legislatures, December 3, 2018, http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx#states%20auto%20reg

[4] Sources for Figure 1: Number of New York residents who are U.S. citizens over 18 but not registered to vote from FPI analysis of November 2016 CPS. Current number registered to vote each year from Figure 3, below. Number registered to vote in first year of AVR from Center for American Progress, "Close Elections, Missing Voices, and Automatic Voter Registration Projected Impact in 50 States," 2017.

[5] "The Minimal Costs of Automatic Voter Registration Implementation" from Common Cause, https://www.commoncause.org/massachusetts/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/05/AVR-Cost-Report-May-2018.pdf

[6] Data from the office of the Oregon Secretary of State, available at https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Documents/OMV/omv-statistics-2016.pdf

[7] The typical cost of registration per person registered was calculated from "The Cost (Savings) of Reform: An Analysis of Local Registration-Related Costs and Potential Savings through Automatic Voter Registration" by Dough Chapin and David Kuennen. This study surveyed 420 localities in 49 states and the District of Columbia. The Fiscal Policy Institute summed the average per unit costs for full time staff ($3.53), temporary workers and overtime pay ($0.67), paper registration forms ($0.06), staff time and materials used to follow up on errors ($0.51) to estimate the cost per person registered ($4.78).

[8] See "Potential Cost Savings of Automatic Voter Registration in Nevada." Oregon has a two-year budget cycle. To get the annual cost of sending post cards, we took the two-year estimate and divided by two.

[9] Oregon Secretary of State December 2014 & 2015 statistics. https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/pages/electionsstatistics.aspx

[10] See https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2017/06/07/433677/votes-automatic-voter-registration/

[11] See "Automatic Voter Registration" from the Brennan Center for Justice, https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/automatic-voter-registration

[12] Federal Election Commission, The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 on the Administration of Federal Elections, https://www.fec.gov/about/reports-about-fec/agency-operations/impact-national-voter-registration-act-1993-administration-federal-elections-html/