

# Safeguarding Democracy: Automatic Voter Registration

## Voter Registration: Opting In or Out?

**Opt-In** : These methods require citizens to initiate the registration process, most often by requesting, completing, and returning documents to a bureaucratic agency. Most states currently employ this type of registration, placing the burden of becoming registered to vote solely on individuals.

**Opt-Out:** These methods result in automatic registration of eligible citizens and require individual action only if one wishes *not* to become registered. This type of registration is utilized by most other democratic countries and transfers the burden of registration from civilians to their governments <sup>2</sup>.

Voting in the United States is a two-step process. It requires one to register prior to being eligible to cast a ballot. For many Americans, the registration requirement presents an unnecessary challenge as they attempt to exercise their right to vote<sup>1</sup>. State governments can alleviate this burden on citizens by establishing systems of automatic voter registration (AVR). Such systems result in the automatic registration of most eligible citizens, eliminating the need for individuals to initiate the registration process. In fact, individual action is only required if one does *not* wish to become registered. By transitioning to an AVR system, governments can reduce a significant barrier to electoral participation and help ensure that all Americans are able to exercise their right to vote.

**Voting** is one of the primary ways citizens interact with their governments and make their voices heard. However, only about half of those eligible to vote turnout to do so.<sup>3</sup> This low participation is due in part to barriers posed by the United State's two-step voting process, which requires citizens to complete a registration phase before becoming eligible to cast a ballot.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, roughly one-third of eligible voters are unregistered.<sup>4</sup> The burden of the two-step process rests especially heavily upon minorities and low-income individuals.<sup>5</sup>

### Burden-Sharing and Opt-Out

One way to mitigate the unnecessary burden put on citizens by opt-in

processes is to transition to an opt-out system. Besides the United States, most democratic nations already use some form of opt-out voter registration.<sup>4</sup> These systems place the responsibility for registering eligible voters with governments, thus minimizing the burden on individuals.

One style of opt-out voter registration is automatic voter registration or AVR. This method streamlines registration by automating it, resulting in increased voter roll accuracy, higher registration rates, and lower overall costs.<sup>6</sup>

### How AVR Works

Automatic voter registration generally functions by establishing data-sharing networks between government agencies.<sup>7</sup> When citizens interact with

such agencies, certain personal information is collected. The networks are then able to analyze data such as individuals' age, residency, and citizenship status to identify eligible voters. When unregistered eligible individuals are detected, they are automatically registered to vote, provided they do not opt-out.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, Oregon became the first state to introduce AVR, resulting in 225,000 new voter registrations in the

first year alone. In addition to providing for an unprecedented increase in voter registration, AVR is also more accurate and cost effective than traditional registration methods.<sup>6</sup>

### Increasing Voter Registration in North Carolina

The type of AVR employed in Oregon could help increase voter registration in North Carolina. Currently, roughly 8% of eligible North Carolinians over the age of 34 are not registered to vote.<sup>8</sup> The rate is nearly twice as high among young voters (ages 18-34).<sup>8</sup> By passing legislation to institute an opt-out system of automatic voter registration, the North Carolina General Assembly could help safeguard citizens' right to vote while eliminating an unnecessary barrier.

**H.B. 881 would not implement truly automatic voter registration.**

#### H.B. 881

A measure like AVR was proposed as House Bill 881 during the NCGA's 2017-18 session, but has since stalled in committee.<sup>9</sup> Despite being branded as an "AVR" bill, H.B. 881 would not create a truly automatic system of voter registration if implemented. Rather, it would institute an in-person registration system, facilitated by technology but ultimately reliant on humans and subject to clerical errors. Additionally, the data-collection proposed in H.B. 881 would not allow government agencies to use and share existing data to identify eligible, unregistered individuals and add them to the rolls retroactively.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the current bill does not provide for a robust and innovative system of automatic voter registration, and substantive revisions are required.

**AVR in OREGON:**  
*how it works*

Government agencies collect and share certain data from interactions with citizens.

This data is processed to identify individuals who are eligible, but unregistered, to vote.

Unregistered individuals are notified by mail that they will automatically become registered, unless they opt-out within 21 days.

21 days

The infographic features a central figure with a starburst, surrounded by icons of government buildings and data labels: age, citizenship status, residence, and name. Below this, a group of five people icons shows some with checkmarks and some with X's. At the bottom, a stopwatch and an envelope with a checkmark are shown next to the '21 days' text.

## Building a Better Bill

- **PROVIDE** for the creation of a robust data-sharing network
- **ALLOW** qualifying agencies to actively identify and register voters based on past interactions
- **REQUEST** oversight of AVR implementation from a central authority, designated by the State Board of Elections

**Given** the shortcomings of H.B. 881, the NC General Assembly should revise the bill to include provisions for the creation of a truly automatic system of voter registration in North Carolina. By making the necessary changes, the Assembly can assure a clear and easy path to voter registration that increases registration rates while minimizing the burden on citizens and ultimately safeguarding one of their fundamental rights.

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- 9 Automatic Voter Registration, North Carolina H.B. 881, (2017).