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Research for a Stronger, More Inclusive Democracy

Effects of Automatic Voter Registration in the United States

Summary Brief

Eric McGhee, Ph.D.
Mindy Romero, Ph.D.

The Growth of Automatic Voter Registration

Increasingly, American states are adopting Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) to register eligible voters during existing interactions with a government agency such as the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Since 2009, 18 states (including the District of Columbia) have implemented AVR, and another three have adopted AVR into law with implementation pending. AVR carries the potential to help states maintain accurate registration rolls, for example updating records when residents move. It can also increase registration, boost voter turnout, and decrease the “turnout gap”—inequities in who votes compared to the broader population.

What is Automatic Voter Registration (AVR)?

AVR programs vary from state to state, but in all cases, the state registers eligible residents to vote unless the resident actively declines. Most typically, this occurs through the Department of Motor Vehicles, an agency that interacts with nearly every person of voting age and in many transactions already collects information needed for voter registration.

Why Do States Adopt Automatic Voter Registration?

Three possible goals of AVR

Improve maintenance of registration rolls

Linking voter registration to routine state agency functions may help states keep voter rolls up to date with accurate information.

Increase registration and boost voter turnout

AVR has the potential to register a larger share of the population, enabling more people to vote in elections.

Decrease the “turnout gap”

Making voter registration automatic may make registration easier for underrepresented groups like people of color or young adults.

Examining the Effects of Automatic Voter Registration on Registration Rates

To date, 18 states have implemented AVR. Because their programs are quite young (only 3 were in place by the 2016 general election, and another 9 by the 2018 general election), systematic effects of their programs are still emerging. However, understanding early results of AVR can inform the development of promising practices for these states and others developing AVR programs. The findings in this brief report are drawn from a new study that examines several questions about how AVR affects registration rates:¹

This brief summarizes findings from “Effects of Automatic Voter Registration in the United States,” a study of the impact of Automatic Voter Registration by Dr. Eric McGhee, Public Policy Institute of California, and Dr. Mindy Romero, University of Southern California, California Civic Engagement Project. Please see the report for a detailed discussion on the study’s methodology. The report can be downloaded at: ccep.usc.edu

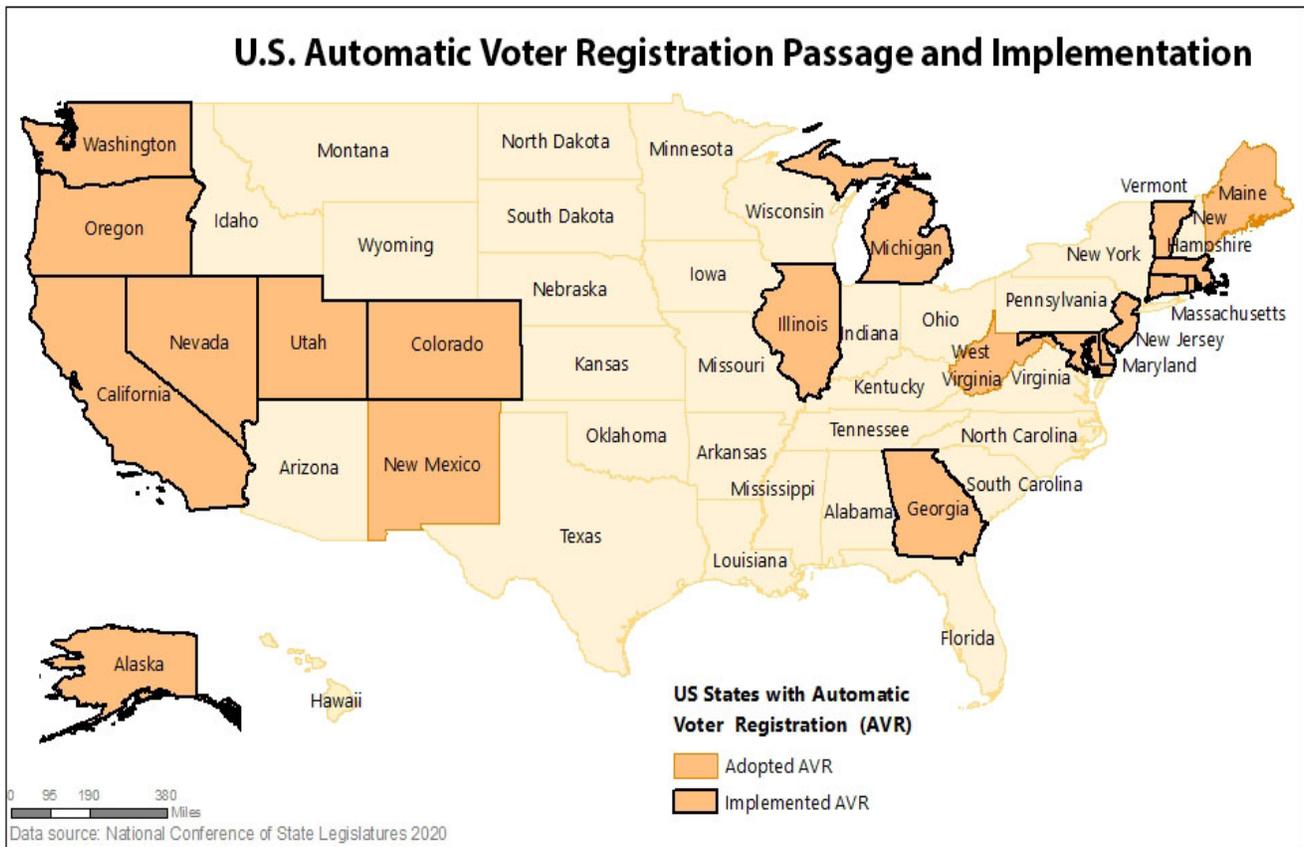
Study Questions

Uptake Do eligible residents tend to use AVR (rather than alternatives) to register to vote?

Effect Does AVR increase the number of registered voters?

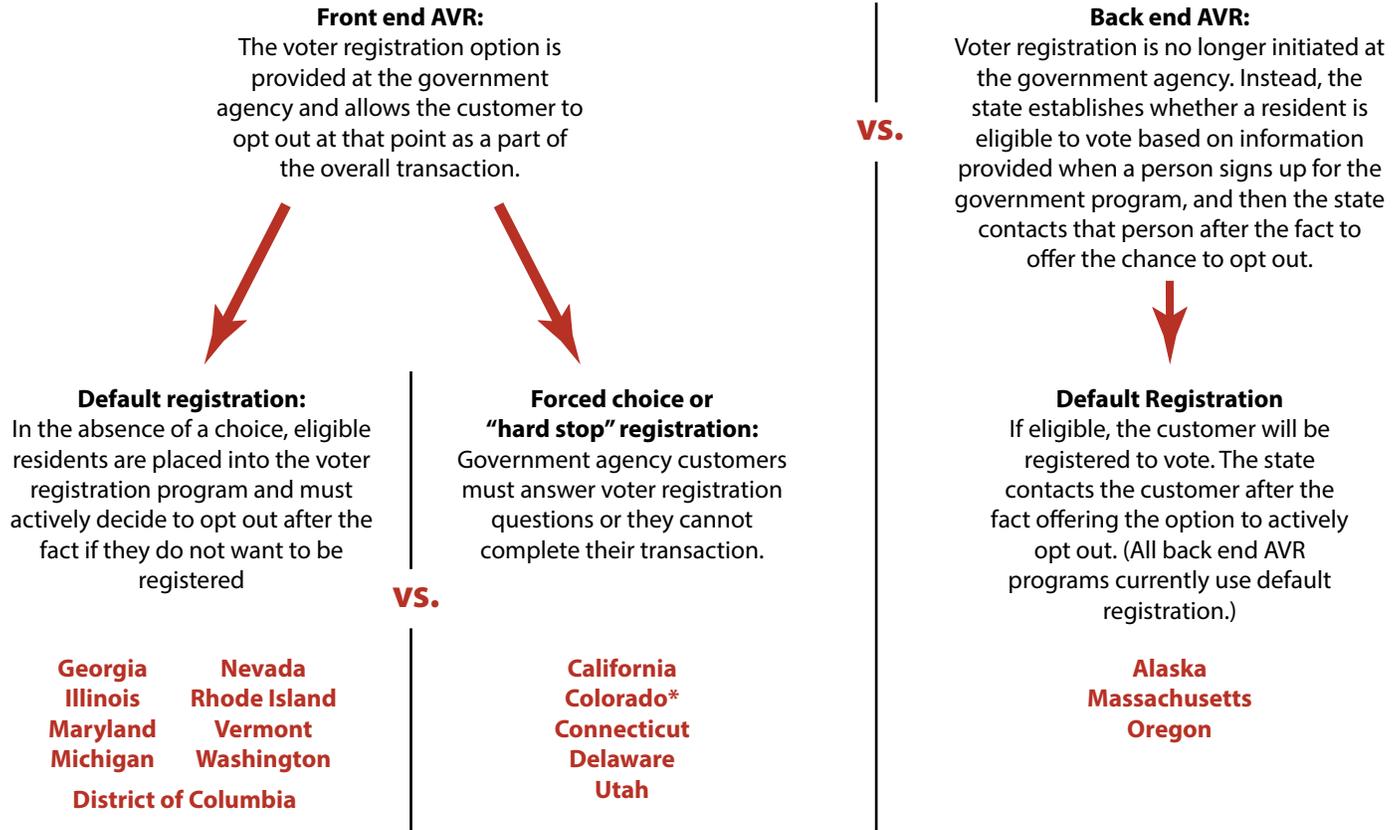
Equity Does AVR improve the registration rates of populations that are historically underrepresented among voters?

This study assesses data from multiple AVR states. Note that a detailed examination of the AVR programs and their results in California, Colorado, Delaware, and Oregon is included in the full study referenced above.



Beyond the varying lengths of time that different states have been implementing AVR, a challenge in studying the effects of AVR is that programs differ in structure from one another. The main distinctions have to do with when the state raises the voter registration option (front end versus back end AVR) and how it makes residents engage with voter registration questions (default registration versus a forced choice), as outlined in the diagram below. Structurally, back end AVR is likely to produce more registrants than front end because newly registered voters must notice and respond to a letter in the mail in order to opt out. Similarly, because it is more complicated to avoid registration with default registration, that approach is likely to produce more registrants than forced choice. Front end AVR with default registration is currently the most common approach adopted by states.

Types of AVR and States That Have Adopted Them



*Colorado is switching to back end AVR in 2020.

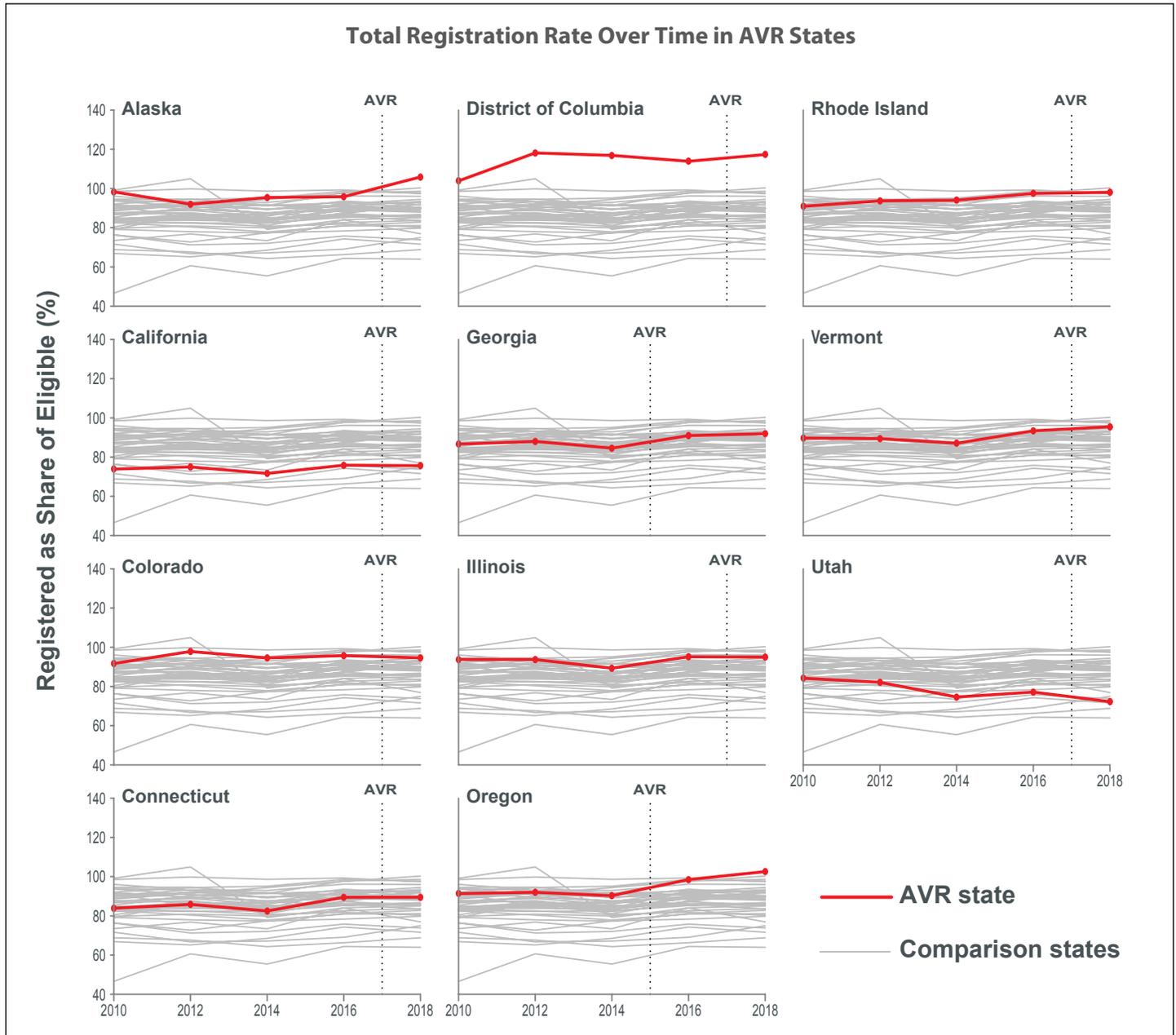
Key Findings

Uptake Early indications show that AVR programs have **strong uptake**. In AVR states, large numbers of voter registrations occur through the DMV.

AVR appears to be very effective at making the DMV a significant method of registration. In all four states examined closely in this study, DMV registrations under AVR have been strong. In California, for example, voter registration had long been available at the DMV, but after registration became automatic in 2018, the number of registrations through the DMV more than doubled. In many cases, the reform has reshaped the boom-and-bust pattern of registration in a typical election cycle by ensuring that registrants are steadily added throughout the year and voter records are kept updated. This will likely have the long term effect of a sizable increase in registration.

Effect So far, the effect of AVR on increasing registration is **ambiguous**. Recent elections have seen enthusiastic registration and turnout even without reform.

Changes in registration rates take time and are likely still emerging. Moreover, early effects of AVR on increasing registration are difficult to distinguish from an overall notable uptick in registration and turnout in recent elections. To look at the effects of AVR, this study compared registration rates in AVR states to a set of similar comparison states that did not adopt AVR (to account for other factors that might drive registration rates). In Alaska and Oregon, the two states with a back end AVR system shown in the charts below, the registration rate did increase substantially after AVR implementation—by 10.5% in Alaska, 9.3% in Oregon. Registration also increased 5.1% in Georgia. However, other states that have adopted AVR have not seen much immediate registration increase.



The table below shows the effect of AVR on the registration rate of eligible voters. In the column labeled “Effect” a positive number indicates that AVR increased the registration rate. The column labeled “Probability of No Effect” shows the probability of seeing that effect by chance, if in reality there were no effect at all. The results are generally ambiguous except in Alaska and Oregon, which show far larger positive effects than other AVR states (Alaska: 9.8%, Oregon 10.1%). Although their probabilities of no effect are still fairly high (Alaska: 0.4, Oregon: 0.3), they are also lower than in most other states and may reflect the limited time under AVR more than anything else. Notably, Alaska and Oregon are the only two states analyzed here with back end AVR systems.

Table 2: Effect of AVR on Total Registration Rate

AVR State	Effect (%)	Probability of no effect
All AVR States	1.5	0.25
Alaska	9.8	0.37
California	-1.7	0.32
Colorado	-2.0	0.77
Connecticut	0.2	0.66
District of Columbia	5.3	0.70
Georgia	4.3	0.21
Illinois	0.9	0.62
Oregon	10.1	0.29
Rhode Island	0.9	0.41
Utah	-8.0	0.49
Vermont	2.8	0.05

Note: Outcome is the registration rate for all registrants. Positive values indicate higher registration under AVR. Estimates for all AVR states comes from a difference-in-differences model; estimates for individual states come from a synthetic control analysis. Model details are in the appendix.

Equity

To date, AVR states have not shown a clear improvement or worsening of equity among historically underrepresented groups.

An important potential consequence of AVR is whether it improves equity of registration among historically underrepresented groups. This study looks at whether AVR disproportionately raises voter registration rates among Latinos, Asian Americans, and young people (ages 18-24), improving their relative share of those registered compared to dominant groups.

Possibly because most AVR programs have not been in place long enough, the comparison of trends in AVR states to other states does not show clear evidence of narrowing disparities (charts available in the full report). There is no sign that AVR has improved the relative registration rate for Latinos in any state that has adopted it. Similarly, among AVR states with large enough Asian American populations for analysis, none show clear signs of a relative increase in Asian American registration. Among young people, some states have seen upward or downward trends in relative registration that pre-dated AVR, and the implementation of AVR has made no clear shift in those trends. In Georgia and Oregon, a narrowing of the registration gap for young people appears to be an improvement more specific to AVR, but overall across these three underrepresented groups, the evidence of an impact of AVR is still too ambiguous to make a firm conclusion.

Looking at a deeper causal analysis, the following three tables display the measured effect of AVR and the probability that that effect is simply due to chance rather than caused by AVR. Positive effects mean the underrepresented group is gaining ground, and negative effects mean the opposite. In the first of these tables, showing effects on Latino registration, results are slightly negative for the nation as a whole (-0.7%), but generally positive when considered state by state. The primary takeaway is that the probability of these results being due to chance is generally high, indicating that more likely than not there is no real effect of AVR. The two states with the most certain findings—Connecticut (probability of 0.16) and Illinois (probability of 0.19)—do have small positive effects for Latino registration.

Table 3: Effect of AVR on Latino Registration Disadvantage

AVR State	Effect (%)	Probability of No Effect
All AVR States	-0.7	0.68
Alaska	-10.3	0.95
California	1.0	0.73
Colorado	-1.3	0.76
Connecticut	2.4	0.16
District of Columbia	-14.3	0.78
Georgia	4.3	0.95
Illinois	0.6	0.19
Oregon	2.6	0.51
Rhode Island	-9.4	0.85
Utah	0.4	0.33
Vermont	---	---

Note: Outcome is the gap between the Latino registration rate and the rate for non-Latino, non-Asian American registrants. Positive values indicate relative improvement for Latinos. Estimates for all AVR states comes from a difference-in-differences model; estimates for individual states come from a synthetic control analysis. Model details are in the appendix.

Table 4: Effect of AVR on Asian-American Registration Disadvantage

AVR State	Effect (%)	Probability of No Effect
All AVR States	1.5	0.43
Alaska	1.9	0.91
California	1.6	0.63
Colorado	---	---
Connecticut	---	---
District of Columbia	0.5	0.63
Georgia	---	---
Illinois	2.2	0.46
Oregon	-3.2	0.80
Rhode Island	---	---
Utah	---	---
Vermont	---	---

Note: Outcome is the gap between the Asian-American registration rate and the rate for non-Asian American, non-Latino registrants. Positive values indicate relative improvement for Asian Americans. Estimates for all AVR states comes from a difference-in-differences model; estimates for individual states come from a synthetic control analysis. Model details are in the appendix.

The effects for Asian Americans (Table 4) are nearly all positive, but also highly uncertain. The largest positive effects are in Alaska, California, and Illinois, but in each case there is at least a one in two chance of seeing such effects by accident in the absence of AVR.

The results for young people (Table 5) show mixed positive and negative effects in different states, but also include some of the positive effects measured with the greatest confidence. In particular, Connecticut (9.9%, 0.10 probability of no effect), Illinois (4.4%, 0.04 probability), and Colorado (3.2%, 0.18 probability) show modest or substantial improvements in the relative registration rate of young people that are reasonably likely to be caused by AVR. A clear trend across states, however, has yet to emerge.

Table 5: Registration Effect of AVR on Youth Registration Disadvantage

AVR State	Effect (%)	Probability of No Effect
All AVR States	-1.6	0.52
Alaska	-8.8	0.55
California	-3.6	0.33
Colorado	3.2	0.18
Connecticut	9.8	0.10
District of Columbia	-4.9	0.68
Georgia	5.5	0.69
Illinois	4.4	0.04
Oregon	6.3	0.40
Rhode Island	-5.6	0.22
Utah	-8.6	0.47
Vermont	6.5	0.53

Note: Outcome is the gap between the registration rate for 18-24-year-olds and the rate for those older than 24. Positive values indicate relative improvement for young people. Estimates for all AVR states comes from a difference-in-differences model; estimates for individual states come from a synthetic control analysis. Model details are in the appendix.

Conclusions

AVR is a promising reform that often becomes the go-to method of registration for a large number of people, including new registrants who likely would not have registered otherwise. However, the effect on overall registration is ambiguous because most estimated AVR increases are small and the reform is still relatively new. At this time, there is little evidence within and across states to show that AVR improves the relative registration rates of underrepresented groups including Latinos, Asian Americans, and young people.

AVR does show notable effects outside the normal election season. Typically, registration rates fall after an election, as states clean their files of outdated records and fewer new people sign up to vote without the motivation of an upcoming election. But in some AVR states, as residents continue to go to AVR agencies like the DMV, they continue to get registered.

Of the types of AVR, back end may produce a larger registration increase than front end, as indicated by strong increases in Alaska and Oregon, both with back end systems. However, back end systems can pose risks of registering non-citizens by accident, which complicates the policy discussion. Regardless of system type, AVR appears to provide a better way for states to handle the normal flow of voter registrations. Repurposing information from an unrelated government transaction for the use of voter registration helps maintain an up-to-date voter file, which can avoid complications that prevent a voter from casting a legitimate ballot.

Key Takeaways for States

- A more efficient voter registration process is likely achievable through any type of AVR system.
- Higher overall registration may require a more assertive form of AVR, such as a back end system, although protections for non-citizens would need to be addressed in each state. If a state pursues some type of front end system, gains in registration may take longer.
- Achieving a more representative electorate that draws in historically disadvantaged groups may require increased voter mobilization, not just implementation of AVR.
- Specific data reporting requirements should be part of any AVR reform, so policymakers and the public can better understand how the new system is working.
 - o AVR agencies should be required to share aggregate statistics (protecting customer privacy) including the number of voting-eligible customers, the number who decide to answer the registration questions, the number who fill out detailed registration responses (such as party or language preferences), and the number who explicitly decline registration. These statistics should be broken down by demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, age, and language preference where possible to make it easier to understand the consequences of the reform for equity.
 - o Reports of AVR activity should establish a set of concepts that can be calculated with data from before and after the reform to facilitate comparison over time. Definitions should be consistent so patterns in the data reflect real changes in behavior.
 - o Federal and state law should clarify rules around identifying AVR registrants in the voter file. Identifying these registrants can help establish AVR's consequences for equity and turnout, but trade-offs must be acknowledged. Revealing a relatively rare or sensitive government transaction—like enrolling in welfare or food stamps—would be a serious violation of privacy. By contrast, revealing a DMV visit is far less consequential because more than 90 percent of Americans make such a visit at some point in their lives.

Endnotes

- 1 McGhee, Eric and Mindy Romero. 2020. "Registration Effects of Automatic Voter Registration in the United States." University of Southern California: California Civic Engagement Project.