

Executive Summary: Automating Voter Registration: Review of Research and Analysis of Oregon 2016

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Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is a leading idea to increase voter turnout that has promise. We review research on (semi-automatic) opt-in Motor Voter Registration and recent reports on AVR and conducted a 50 state statistical analyses of opt-out AVR. There is no clear overall evidence that automating voter registration has increased turnout in the average federal election. We offer theory for this counterintuitive finding and suggestions where AVR might work best.

We suggest registration is more than a legal hurdle to voting. It can be a “commitment device” motivating people to vote, a rite of passage, and an event to learn about voting when it is done through traditional means. Traditional means involves registering on one’s own and with family, friends, and neighborhood activists. Automatic registration is less intentional, social, and personal and, thus, less likely to empower and foster mentoring relationship between new and experienced voters. When automated replaces traditional registration, it displaces hundreds of thousands of these GOTV-like experiences for new registrants in the average state that decreases its effect on turnout. Also, research on opt-in vs opt-out suggests that opt-out can decrease participation.

We analyze data from presidential elections in 50 states with linear regression and panel corrected standard errors and *measured a small turnout increase associated with AVR Oregon in 2016 that was not statistically significant*. Much of Oregon’s increase in voter turnout in 2016 relative to other states and years was associated with a decrease in poverty and all vote-by-mail elections. A visual inspection of the data shows that ten states had a boost in turnout comparable to Oregon.

This is consistent with scholarly research on Motor Voter Registration (MVR) that has replaced almost one half of traditional means of registration. Three studies suggest that MVR had no effect on turnout in the average election studied. One study estimated a 2 percentage points (pp.) increase associated with MVR. One estimated a 6 to 7 pp. decrease.

Our conclusions diverge from earlier claims based on misattributed effects and severe missing data problems. We disagree that Oregon in 2016 had the highest increase in turnout and are unconvinced that AVR lead to a half million more registrations and a 7 pp. increase in youth turnout.

While our study is on a single instance of AVR and thus inconclusive, it shows the need for careful analysis of additional election years before further implementation. In our opinion, AVR is not ready to scale up nationwide. Of course, AVR might prove to increase turnout, but there is also a (moderate or small) possibility it will decrease turnout or equity among voters. If AVR is implemented nationwide and has no effect, millions of dollars and volunteer time will be poorly spent. If it lowers turnout, it may contribute to the progressive movement’s next electoral disaster.

Research on MVR suggests that AVR might work well in niche applications. Where there was high levels of inequality on the registration rolls, MVR reduced the inequality of voter turnout. AVR might also. If AVR of new voters is ineffective, automatic updates of existing voters might be better.

Proponents of early voting scaled up early voting programs before these were ready. This was a costly political mistake that likely decreased turnout and the income and racial equity of those who voted. We all now understand how to better design early voting programs, but a more cautious, research driven approach may have avoided those problems from the start.

ⁱ Dr. Bryan E. Burke is the Exec. Dir. of the Eastern Wa. Research Group that studies why people do not vote and pursues solutions mostly on the campaign side of politics. However, they convened an enforcement effort to make state agencies to comply with the NVRA of 1993 to offer registration. Even though registration rates increased in the state, voter turnout did not. This made the Group rethink its own work and AVR.

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