

Automatic Voter Registration

What is it? Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) describes a process by which eligible citizens who interact with certain government agencies are automatically registered to vote, as the agency electronically sends their relevant information to state election officials, unless they decline. AVR is not compulsory registration, it merely offers every voter the chance to "opt-out" rather than "opt-in." Most AVR occurs based on citizen interactions with motor vehicle agencies, but as many agencies as can participate should in order to maximize effectiveness.

Why is it valuable? AVR makes voter rolls more accurate and more secure by streamlining and automating the process. This is especially attractive in New Jersey because the required infrastructure is already in place and would require minimal additional investment. Fewer mistakes and an opt-out system means more voters are on the rolls with accurate information, and fewer get turned away from the polls due to forgotten or defective registration.

What precedent is there for a law like this? New Jersey has recognized the value of AVR and the legislature has passed it twice, but Gov. Christie vetoed it both times. When AVR was in effect in Oregon for the 2016 election, registrations jumped nearly 10% and over 40% of those newly registered voters turned out to vote. This was seen as a success for that group, many of whom were not engaged voters before. Six states and the District of Columbia have approved AVR, and already in 2017, 28 more states have introduced AVR bills.

Restoration of Voting Rights to Citizens with Past Criminal Convictions

What is it? Rights restoration refers to citizens getting the right to vote back after losing it as a result of a criminal conviction. It is most effective and just when voting rights are restored when citizens return to their communities, and when people who never had to leave their community to serve their sentence do not lose their right. New Jersey currently requires that a citizen complete not only any prison time but also their entire sentence of parole and probation before they receive the right to vote back. This is the same standard as Texas uses and is much more restrictive than other states in the Northeast. It means there 70,000 citizens living freely in their communities in New Jersey without the right to vote.

Why is it valuable? Rights restoration promotes community engagement and civic participation, making it less likely that those individuals will end up back in prison. It also reverses a discriminatory pattern of silencing the political voices of the communities to which they return, which are disproportionately communities of color.

What precedent is there for a law like this? Over the last 20 years, 20 states have made it easier for people with past criminal convictions to vote. In the region, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland restore voting rights when citizens return to the community. Of other nearby states, New Jersey disenfranchises as many people living and working in their community as New York, Connecticut, and Delaware combined.

New Jersey has already recognized the need to ease the burdens of the criminal justice system in recent years, passing common-sense reforms like "Ban the Box," which helps people with criminal convictions get jobs, and bail reform, which ensures low-income individuals don't await trial for minor offenses in jail. Rights restoration is a similarly common-sense reform that would strengthen our democracy and ease reentry for citizens with criminal convictions.