

THE MINIMAL COSTS OF AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is a key reform that will help to ensure that all Massachusetts citizens have an equal say in our political process, while at the same time modernizing our voter registration system to make it more accurate, secure, and ultimately cost-effective. With AVR, eligible citizens who interact with the Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) and MassHealth will be automatically registered to vote, unless they choose to decline. This simple change from an opt-in to an opt-out system could add up to 700,000 new voters in our state.

Voters' contact information will also be updated during these visits, ensuring our rolls are as up-to-date as possible. The AVR legislation currently under consideration on Beacon Hill requires Massachusetts to further improve the accuracy of its rolls by joining the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). ERIC is a national clearinghouse that collects registration information and compares it with that of other state and federal databases to flag potential duplicate registrations.

Given the data collected in this study, it is clear that Automatic Voter Registration costs have been minimal in the states that have established their programs. Accordingly, we feel confident that AVR will not place a financial burden on the Commonwealth.

Status of AVR

AVR received a favorable report from the Joint Committee on Election Laws in February and is currently in the House Ways and Means Committee. The legislation was originally sponsored by Rep. Peter Kocot and Sen. Cynthia Creem, as well as 22 other Senators and 83 Representatives and is supported by a diverse coalition of 64 organizations.

Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, Washington state, and Washington, D.C. have all adopted Automatic Voter Registration since 2015.

Methodology

This report uses data from other states to estimate the cost of AVR adoption in Massachusetts. Figures for this study were collected from election offices in Oregon, Vermont, and Colorado—three states whose implementation processes are far enough along to provide useful data.

It is important to note that in the Commonwealth, much of the technology required to implement AVR is already in place; a secure databridge between the RMV and the Secretary of State's office has been

established, for example. Additionally, the expenses that Massachusetts is likely incur as a result of AVR adoption are eligible to be covered by the state’s Help America Vote Act (HAVA) funds, of which there are approximately \$43 million remaining. HAVA funds were granted to states by the federal government in 2004 and are controlled by a committee appointed by Secretary of State William Galvin. These funds can be used for upgrading voting systems, registering voters in statewide voter registration databases, improving voter data management, and implementing other improvements to the administration of federal elections.

Oregon

In 2016, Oregon became the first state to implement Automatic Voter Registration. Elections Director Steve Trout provided Common Cause with AVR cost data from the state’s 2015-2017 budget cycle.

According to Mr. Trout, the state sends a mailer to every person who has a qualifying transaction at the DMV but is not on the voter rolls, informing them that an automatic registration process has been initiated and giving them the option to decline or select a party. The Elections Division sends approximately 21,700 notices per month and uses two-page mailers, costing about \$330,217 per biennium. He states this figure of 21,700 mailers has been “pretty stable now month to month,” and he “expects this volume to continue.”

The mailer costs break down as follows:

Itemized Mailer Costs in Oregon	
Item	Cost (per biennium)
Printing	\$166,656.00
Envelopes	\$19,821.00
Postage	\$83,328.00
Return postage	\$60,412.00
Total mailer costs: \$330,217.00 per biennium	

Additionally, Mr. Trout noted, there has been an increase in costs to Oregon counties because the state votes by mail and mails a ballot to every registered voter, of which there are now many more thanks to AVR. Some of these costs have been offset by savings from cleaner voter rolls and less returned undeliverable mail. Since Massachusetts is not a vote-by-mail state, we have not included these costs in this report.

Finally, there were some one-time IT costs to update the state’s voter registration system which fell “in the \$200k range.”

Altogether, Oregon incurred a cost of about \$530,217 that could also be expected in Massachusetts, given that the Commonwealth does not vote by mail.

AVR Implementation Costs in Oregon		
Item	Cost	Sequence
Mailers	\$330,217.00	Every two years
IT	\$200,000.00	One-time
Total relevant AVR implementation costs in Oregon (2015-2017): \$530,217.00		

Vermont

Vermont's Automatic Voter Registration expenses are difficult to isolate because AVR was implemented as part of a broader electoral reform bill passed in 2015. Costs for this reform package were funded by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

According to vendor payment data for FY 2017, HAVA expenditures in Vermont totaled \$434,117.18.

FY 2017 Vermont HAVA Expenditures	
Item	Cost
Data Processing Software	\$228,785.82
Data Processing Hardware	\$4,912.43
IT Professional Services	\$166,298.29
Professional Services Non-IT	\$5,491.81
Office Rent and Supplies	\$19,958.68
Travelling	\$2,029.42
Workers Compensations	\$5,266.64
Others	\$1,374.09
Total Vermont 2017 Annual HAVA Expenditures: \$434,117.18	

Will Senning, the state's Election Director, stated that the cost of Automatic Voter Registration was nominal because like Massachusetts, Vermont already had in place a system for electronic data transfer between the DMV and the Secretary of State's office. He also specified that there has been no need to hire additional personnel.

Colorado

Automatic Voter Registration was adopted in Colorado in 2017 through a change in administrative rules. Implementation tied in with overhauls being made at the Department of Motor Vehicles, which had begun to revamp the state's driver's license system two years prior. This revitalization provided an opportunity to change the way that Colorado residents were registered to vote. According to Judd Choate, Director of Elections, Colorado's Secretary of State Department has not incurred any AVR implementation costs.

The Department of Motor Vehicles does not have data specifically on AVR implementation costs because it was included in an overhaul of voter data software that was already underway. Sarah Werner, Communications Manager at the Colorado DMV, confirmed that AVR-specific costs could not be itemized and were not in excess of the updates that had been previously planned.

Conclusion

Given the available data, it is clear that Automatic Voter Registration implementation costs have been minimal in states that have established their programs. The most significant expenses are typically associated with printing notifications and improving software and IT systems to accommodate the reform.

Here in Massachusetts, a databridge between the RMV and the Secretary of State's office is already in place. Therefore, Massachusetts' main technological costs would likely be upgrades to the current system and expanding it to include MassHealth, as well as updates to the central voter registry, which may be necessary regardless of whether AVR is adopted. These costs, as well as the minimal cost of personnel training, could be covered by the state's HAVA account. Many states have used HAVA funds to fully or partially implement AVR.

According to the most recent Annual Grant Expenditure Report of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, as of September 30, 2016, Massachusetts has received HAVA funding totaling \$58,589,549.00, has earned a total interest of \$10,288,129.86, and has spent \$25,445,441.00. The balance of funds plus interest is therefore approximately \$43,432,238. This means that 63% of Massachusetts' HAVA funds are still waiting to be used to modernize our voter registration system. Automatic Voter Registration is an optimal use of this resource.

In summary, Automatic Voter Registration should not place a financial burden on the Commonwealth. Given the experiences of other states, costs to implement the reform will likely be minimal, and many could be covered by funds available in the state's HAVA account. Automatic Voter Registration is a cost-effective, practical, and effective reform that could significantly improve the voter registration process in Massachusetts.

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