

Automatic Voter Registration

A STRUCTURAL SOLUTION FROM DÉMOS' 2026 POWER POLICIES



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STRUCTURAL SOLUTION

Automatic Voter Registration



THE PROBLEM

Traditional voter registration systems in the U.S. put the onus on the individual to register to vote.

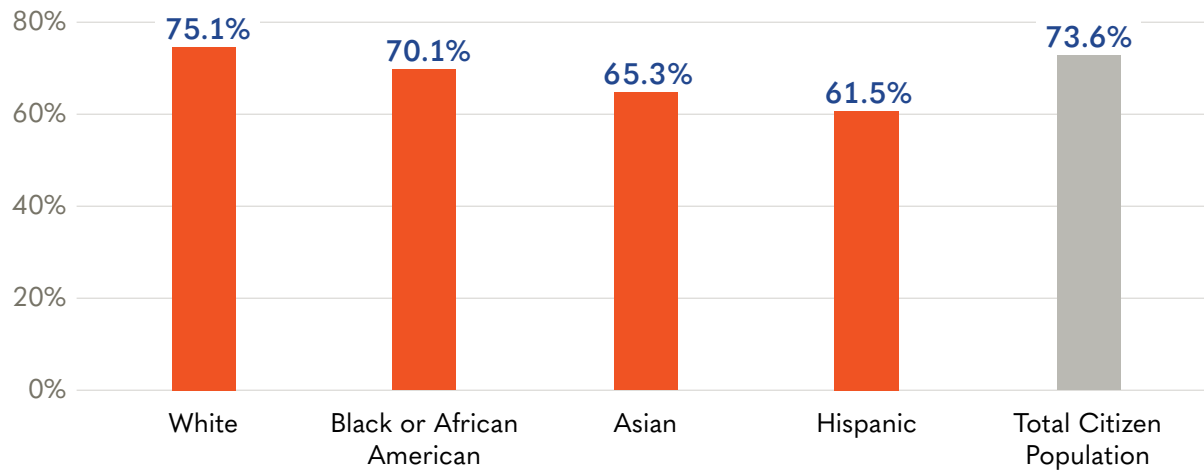
Voters must also consistently check and keep their registrations active, particularly in states that regularly and aggressively purge voters¹ from their rolls. This burden is a barrier to political participation and inclusion.² Moreover, the voter-initiated registration system is burdensome for election officials,³ who must process a deluge of registration applications in the lead-up to each election.

Reducing barriers for voter registration is critically important for all voters but has special significance for voters of color, due to the racist origins of voter registration laws. Voter registration was first implemented in the U.S. after the 15th Amendment granted formerly enslaved Americans the right to vote. Such laws “served—and often were intended to serve—as a means of keeping African-American, working-class, immigrant, and poor voters from the polls.”⁴ Additionally, laws that outright banned Native Americans from registering to vote were not all repealed until 1957.⁵ These structural inequities persist today: As shown in the chart on page 2 these structural barriers mean voter registration rates for non-white racial and ethnic groups trail those of their white counterparts.



Fewer Than Three-Quarters of Adult U.S. Citizens are Registered to Vote, and the Rates are Even Lower for Eligible Voters of Color.⁶

Rate of Voter Registration for U.S. Citizens by Race and Ethnicity, 2024



Source: United States Census Bureau, Historical Reported Voting Rates, Table A-1: Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2024



Fewer than

75%

of adult U.S. citizens are registered to vote, and the rates are even lower for eligible voters of color.

“[Voter registration laws] served – and often were intended to serve – as a means of keeping African-American, working-class, immigrant, and poor voters from the polls.”

Alexander Keyssar in *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in America*



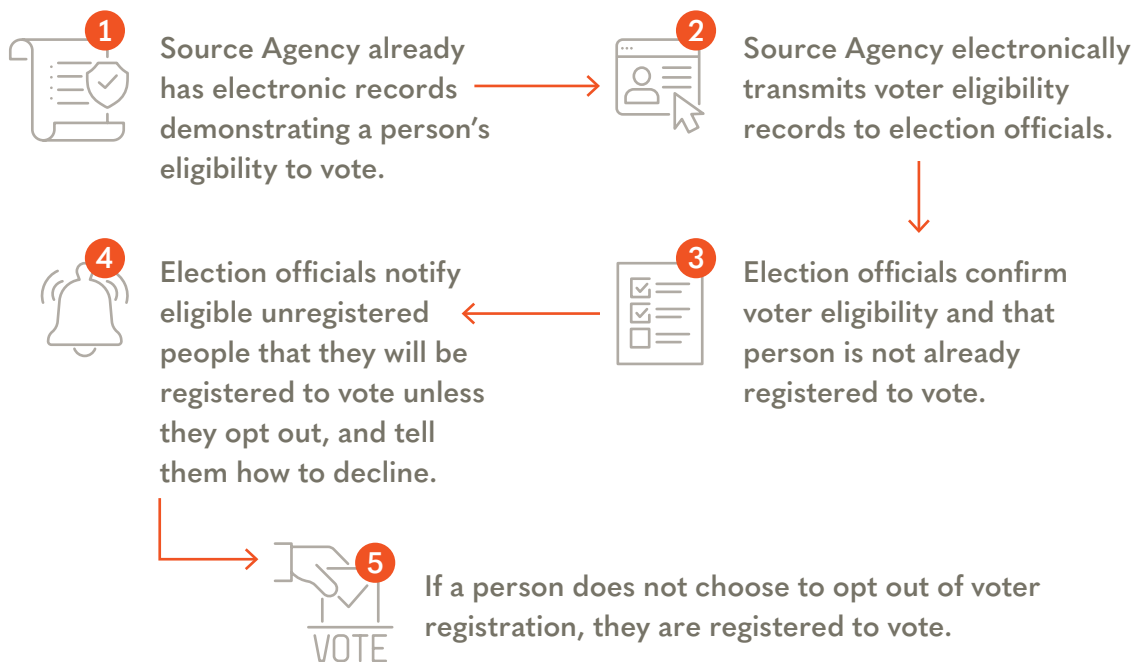
THERE'S A POLICY SOLUTION FOR THAT

Unlike the U.S., most democracies around the world take responsibility for registering their citizens to vote through automatic voter registration (AVR).⁷

Oregon was the first state to implement AVR in 2015; today, 10 states and Washington, D.C., have implemented the preferred method of AVR, known as “secure” AVR.⁸ Fourteen additional states have implemented a more limited form of AVR known as “partial” AVR.⁹

Secure AVR is implemented through public entities—such as departments of motor vehicles (DMVs), Medicaid offices, departments of corrections, and tribal nations—that regularly interact with people and routinely collect information necessary to verify voter eligibility (name, date of birth, residence, and citizenship status). Under this system, agencies directly transmit information concerning voter eligibility to election officials. Election officials then comb through the list from each agency, remove those who are already registered, and confirm eligibility of those who are unregistered. Election officials go on to notify eligible unregistered people that they will be added to the voter rolls unless they decide to opt out of registration. If the eligible voter takes no action, they are registered to vote.

The Five Key Steps for Secure AVR (Best Practice Process)





To reach as many potential voters as possible, multiple agencies in each state should implement secure AVR. While DMVs are often best situated to implement AVR, that is not always the case. For example, in many states, people who have lawful immigration statuses but have not yet naturalized can get driver's licenses. They often become citizens *after* they have interacted with the DMV, and so the DMV records will not reflect that they are newly eligible to vote. For this reason, other entities such as Medicaid offices,¹⁰ tribal nations,¹¹ and departments of corrections¹² should also be included.

It is also critically important that state agencies are able to easily and securely transfer voter eligibility information to election officials. Legislation that establishes AVR systems should also ensure that infrastructure is in place to ensure data privacy and efficient data sharing.

THIS SOLUTION WORKS FOR BLACK AND BROWN PEOPLE

The Institute for Responsive Government has found that secure AVR consistently registers at least 95 percent of a state's eligible population.¹³

Using statistical techniques to identify the impact of AVR in each implementing state, the Brennan Center for Justice found that the practice significantly increased the weekly number of new registrants anywhere between nine percent and 94 percent.¹⁴ When implemented correctly, AVR takes the burden off individuals to continually update and check their voter registration and registers the majority of a state's population, which goes a long way toward counteracting the racist origin of voter registration requirements.

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THIS SOLUTION BUILDS POWER

A just, inclusive multiracial democracy must reflect the voices of all eligible voters.

Yet those who are eligible but unregistered cannot participate in our elections. Simplifying and streamlining the voter registration process is a necessary step toward building political power for more voters. Moreover, being registered to vote correlates with greater rates of voting participation among people of color, young people, and people earning low incomes.¹⁵ By removing the barriers to voter registration, AVR can create the conditions necessary for everyday people to build greater political power.

Simplifying and streamlining the voter registration process is a necessary step toward building political power for more voters.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

- Liz Kennedy, Lew Daly, and Brenda Wright, Dēmos, [Automatic Voter Registration: Finding America's Missing Voters](#), January 20, 2016
- Institute for Responsive Government, [Automatic Voter Registration](#)
- Kevin Morris and Peter Dunphy, Brennan Center for Justice, [AVR Impact on State Voter Registration](#), April 11, 2019
- Allison Neswood and Sonya Schwartz, Native American Rights Fund, [Four states open the door to automatic voter registration for Native Americans](#), August 13, 2024
- National Conference of State Legislatures, [Automatic Voter Registration](#), Updated July 21, 2025

DĒMOS STAFF WHO CAN PROVIDE MORE INFORMATION

Neda Khoshkhoo, Interim Director of Democracy

Endnotes

- 1 As we explained in our 2025 Voter Purge Legislative Resource Guide, “When a state or county conducts a program to systematically remove people from its list of registered voters, this is called ‘voter list maintenance.’ When done correctly, these programs can increase the accuracy of voter rolls by removing people who pass away, no longer live in the state, or have become ineligible for other reasons. However, the lack of clear and uniform standards for list maintenance has resulted in inconsistent standards from state to state, and poorly developed ‘voter purge’ programs have often led to the mass disenfranchisement of eligible voters, disproportionately impacting voters of color, low-income voters, and young people.” Campaign Legal Center, Common Cause, Southern Poverty Law Center, and Dēmos, “2025 Voter Purge Legislative Resource Guide,” https://campaignlegal.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/2025_VPT_Legislative_Resource_Guide.pdf.
- 2 Liz Kennedy et al., “Automatic Voter Registration: Finding America’s Missing Voters,” Dēmos, January 20, 2016, <https://www.demos.org/research/automatic-voter-registration-finding-americas-missing-voters>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (Basic Books, 2009), 253.
- 5 Allison Neswood and Sonya Schwartz, “Four states open the door to automatic voter registration for Native Americans,” Native American Rights Fund, August 13, 2024, <https://narf.org/four-states-automatic-voter-registration-native-americans/>.
- 6 “Historical Reported Voting Rates,” United States Census, Table A-1, accessed April 13, 2026, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/voting-historical-time-series.html>. Data concerning Native American registration rates was not available. See Native American Rights Fund, “Four states open the door to automatic voter registration for Native Americans,” August 13, 2024, <https://narf.org/four-states-automatic-voter-registration-native-americans/> for more information about low rates of voter registration among Native American populations.
- 7 Eve Robert, “Voter Registration: An International Perspective,” FairVote, June 28, 2009, <https://fairvote.org/report/universal-voter-registration-an-international-perspective/>.
- 8 “Automatic Voter Registration,” Institute for Responsive Government, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://responsivegov.org/automatic-voter-registration/>.
- 9 Partial AVR requires individuals to answer a series of questions concerning their voter registration eligibility when they are interacting with a government agency such as a DMV, while secure AVR puts the onus on the

ENDNOTES

agency to use existing documentation to submit potential registrants to election officials for verification. Partial AVR typically registers only between 40-60% of eligible people. For more information, see Institute for Responsive Government, “Automatic Voter Registration,” <https://responsivegov.org/automatic-voter-registration/>.

- 10 “Medicaid Automatic Voter Registration Background and Overview,” Institute for Responsive Government, February 27, 2024, <https://responsivegov.org/research/medicaid-automatic-voter-registration-background-and-overview-2/>.
- 11 Allison Neswood and Sonya Schwartz, “Four states open the door to automatic voter registration for Native Americans,” Native American Rights Fund, August 13, 2024, <https://narf.org/four-states-automatic-voter-registration-native-americans/>.
- 12 Keshia Morris Desir, “Supports HB 1110 Election Law - Individuals Released from State Correctional Facilities—Automatic Restoration of Voter Registration,” written testimony, February 24, 2025, https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2025/wam/1QLKmGXlbiqJq0aU7kAR8d3V9sbeMqK6q.pdf.
- 13 “Automatic Voter Registration,” Institute for Responsive Government, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://responsivegov.org/automatic-voter-registration/>.
- 14 Kevin Morris and Peter Dunphy, “AVR Impact on State Voter Registration,” Brennan Center for Justice, April 11, 2019, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/avr-impact-state-voter-registration>.
- 15 Liz Kennedy et al., “Automatic Voter Registration: Finding America’s Missing Voters,” Dēmos, January 20, 2016, <https://www.demos.org/research/automatic-voter-registration-finding-americas-missing-voters>.