

February 5, 2019

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to prioritizing electoral reform this session. While we are excited to see Automatic Voter Registration included in your 2019 Executive Budget, we strongly encourage you to support a “back-end” model as opposed to the “front-end” model that is currently in your budget proposal, and to include agencies beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Senate Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris introduced AVR legislation (S1278) earlier this session, and his bill is a strong back-end multi-agency measure that we endorse. While different states have advanced different approaches to AVR, our organizations wanted to share critical information to guide your thinking on the inherent benefits of instituting a back-end multi-agency model in New York.

Why Back-End

A back-end approach to AVR automatically adds eligible voters to the rolls without requiring the prospective voter to take any action at the target agency (such as Department of Motor Vehicles or Department of Health). It gives individuals the chance to opt out via mail afterward. A front-end policy asks eligible voters to make decisions about registration including opting out while interacting with the target agency.

Since AVR is now the law of the land in multiple states, we have ample data that demonstrates a back-end system registers a much higher percentage of eligible voters than a front-end system, and thus ensures the voting population is more reflective of the citizenry. Additionally, with its reliance on automation and documentation-based verification, a back-end system has proven to be extremely accurate.

Individuals interacting with agencies such as the DMV universally want to move through the bureaucratic process as quickly as possible. As a result, experience shows that many who are eligible but not registered skip answering questions about voter registration.

A back-end system uses information that individuals already must provide to register people. As a result, in Oregon, which has been utilizing a state-of-the-art back-end system since 2016, a full 94 percent of individuals who interacted with the DMV and were eligible to vote were registered, which is a significantly greater percentage than front-end systems. Oregon’s effectiveness is why New York’s neighbor to the east, Massachusetts--the most recent state to adopt AVR--enacted a strong back-end system with overwhelming bipartisan majorities.

Why Multiple Source Agencies

Our organizations believe New York should look beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles to include other source agencies in order to ensure that segments of the population that do not regularly interact with the DMV can benefit from the state's AVR policy. One especially promising agency is the New York Department of Health, which operates the second largest Medicaid program in the country, with 6.5 million people enrolled as of July 2018. It maintains particularly good data and utilizes strong and secure systems. Both Massachusetts and Washington state are in the process of implementing AVR using both their DMV and Medicaid agency.

Protecting Vulnerable Communities from Being Inadvertently Registered

With the Trump Administration's heartless deportation efforts in full force, it's especially important that New York do all it can to ensure that no ineligible voters are added to the voter rolls. A back-end system relies on automation and documentation-based verification to ensure the voter rolls are accurate, limiting the possibility of human error. Oregon's back-end AVR system, which has been in place the longest, has had fewer than one error per million since implementation in 2016.

New York routinely has some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country, ranking 48th in 2018. Now is the time for a thorough modernization of New York's antiquated voting system that would bolster the security and accuracy of the rolls while maximizing voter registrations. We hope you will take a significant step in strengthening democracy in New York by including a back-end automatic voter registration policy in the final state budget.

Sincerely,

1199 SEIU
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AVR NOW
Center for Popular Democracy
Common Cause New York
Empire State Indivisible
Indivisible Harlem
Make the Road New York
Stand Up America
Working Families Party