

Oregon's new voter registration law will make voting easier—but higher turnout will depend on parties and candidates.

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Last month, Oregon introduced an innovative new voter registration law, which will see people automatically registered to vote when they register with the state's department of motor vehicles. [Jan Leighley](#) and [Jonathan Nagler](#) write that Oregon's new law should be seen against a backdrop of changing voting laws which include measures which make voting easier, such as early voting, absentee voting, and Election Day registration, and voter identification laws which make voting more difficult. They argue that while Oregon's new law- and others like it- should help encourage people to vote candidates must also give them good reasons to do so.



Although the 2016 presidential election is distant on the horizons of most citizens, the “invisible campaign” is well underway, with potential candidates lining up key donors, party leaders and campaign advisors behind the scenes. The more visible part of this early campaign stage is occurring in state legislatures, where laws governing voter registration and how citizens cast their ballots are under consideration.



On March 16, Oregon Governor Kate Brown signed legislation requiring the use of data collected by the department of motor vehicles to [automatically register individuals](#) who are legally eligible (based on age, citizenship and address) to vote. Individuals enrolled in this manner will be [sent a post card notification](#) which allows individuals to opt out; those who do not opt out will be sent a mail ballot twenty days prior to the next election. In supporting the legislation, Brown [emphasized](#) the importance of reducing barriers to full participation in Oregon elections, steering clear of strong claims that the law would lead to universal participation. This careful rationale is an important one, given evidence about the effects of similar reforms suggesting that the effect of this law on overall turnout would be [modest](#).

Between 1972 and 2000, most election laws passed by states were intended to increase voter turnout by making registration and voting easier. These reforms included registering and voting by mail, registering and voting at the same time on Election Day, or voting early, prior to Election Day. With most states adopting some of these innovations, the reforms amounted to near-revolutionary changes in how and when elections are conducted in the states. State legislatures have continued to enact election reforms since 2000, addressing a [wider set of issues](#) in election administration. Although the intent of many of these bills was to make voting easier or more efficient, bills requiring voters to provide identification to cast a ballot were among the most common passed in 2012, 2013 and 2014. Other important reforms focused on establishing online voter registration systems, overseas voter registration and voting, and adjustments to policies governing absentee voting, early voting and election administration.

The logic underlying most of the pre-2012 reforms is that by making registration and voting easier, more citizens will participate. These reforms have accomplished this goal. [Our study](#) of the effects of election laws on voter turnout in presidential elections from 1972 to 2008 demonstrates that voter turnout in states adopting Election Day registration, absentee voting and early voting reported increased voting relative to those states that did not adopt these reforms. We [estimated](#) that adoption of early voting, absentee voting, and Election Day registration would each add about 3 percentage points to a state's level of turnout.

While the effects of these reforms might seem small, even a one percentage point increase in presidential election turnout represents many citizens. And the increase in the number of citizens voting is potentially all the more important when one considers a potential three percentage point increase in local and state elections, where turnout is [substantially lower](#) compared to presidential elections. Those who might expect or wish for dramatic increases in turnout might be discouraged by these results. But state legislators valuing greater citizen engagement should consider this compelling evidence of an effective policy reform.

Some legislators have raised another concern about election reform, that making it easier to vote makes it easier for voter fraud to occur. This argument has been used successfully in a number of states over the past decade or so despite the lack of evidence of voter fraud, resulting in the adoption of election laws making [voting more difficult](#). Currently, 32 states have [adopted](#) requirements for voter identification to register or cast a ballot.



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While research on the specific effects of voter identification laws is limited at this time, the overwhelming body of evidence suggests that it is likely that these voter identification laws will lead to lower turnout. Because the poor are least likely to have the ID's required by these laws, it is also likely that the turnout of the poor will be [depressed more](#) than the turnout of the wealthy.

At a time when citizens hold political candidates, political parties and elected officials in general in disregard, it may be wise for state legislatures to consider how to engage more citizens in the election rituals of democracy. While there are many factors that disengage citizens from politics that state legislators cannot control, how and when citizens vote is clearly determined by these policies.

Will the Oregon law automatically enrolling citizens as eligible to vote increase the number of individuals who actually cast ballots? Probably. But how much it will increase turnout will depend on the candidates and issues surrounding the 2016 campaign. Being registered is a necessary condition to vote, but not a sufficient one. The candidates will need to convince these *potential* voters that there is a reason to turnout. Strong get-out-the-vote efforts are surely critical to getting newly-registered Oregonians to cast ballots. But as [our recent book](#) shows, citizens will also be more likely to cast ballots if the candidates take distinctive positions on issues of importance. If citizens see a difference between the candidates, they will be more likely to vote. And their vote can indeed make a difference, especially in competitive elections.

As with many proposed electoral reforms, Oregon's automatic voter registration law will surely fall short of producing universal turnout. But it will also likely make it easier for some citizens to cast a ballot. As we have learned from Oregon's adoption of all-mail balloting, electoral rules matter, and the adoption of automatic/universal voter registration might well offer another electoral innovation that helps to change the electoral landscape.

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