

October 2, 2019

The Honorable William F. Galvin
Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
McCormack Building
One Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Secretary Galvin:

We are writing to urge you to implement the recently enacted automatic voter registration legislation using a “back-end” approach at the Registry of Motor Vehicles. This approach, which was the clear intent of both the advocates and the legislature, will add the highest number of eligible but unregistered voters to Massachusetts’ rolls while keeping them secure and accurate.

In a back-end system, the agency automatically transfers the data of people who have demonstrated that they are eligible to vote to elections officials. These individuals are able to become registered to vote without requiring additional action from them at the agency, and still have the opportunity to opt out via mail before they are added to voter registration rolls. By comparison, a front-end model requires individuals to make decisions related to registration during their interaction with the agency or else they won’t have the chance to be added to the voter rolls, and opens up the possibility of greater error due to confusion on the part of the applicant or agency worker.

One of the essential goals of AVR is to bring as many eligible voters into the democratic process as possible. Approximately 1.2 million eligible Massachusetts citizens are eligible but either unregistered to vote or inactive.¹ With an efficient, back-end AVR system, 95% of eligible citizens could be newly added to the voting rolls or have their registrations properly updated.² Many of the eligible but unregistered voters are low-income people and people of color. Moreover, a large number of citizens that AVR benefits live in diverse geographies.³

While demographics vary by state, other back-end systems have registered and turned out voting populations that are more reflective of the respective state’s citizenry. In Oregon, which has seen great success from its back-end system, voters who were registered via the state’s AVR policy were more racially diverse. The average AVR Oregon registrant lived in an area that was 1.6 percent less white and 1.8 percent more Hispanic than the comparable area of a traditional registrant.⁴ **If Massachusetts were to implement a model similar to Oregon’s back-end**

¹ TargetSmart Voter File, accessed August 2019.

² See Oregon Secretary of State, Election Statistics, Voter Registrations and Election Participation, available at <https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Pages/electionsstatistics.aspx>

³ Center for American Progress, “Who Votes with Automatic Voter Registration?” 2017, Retrieved October 1, 2019, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2017/06/07/433677/votes-automatic-voter-registration/>

⁴ Center for American Progress, “Who Votes with Automatic Voter Registration?” 2017, Retrieved October 1, 2019, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2017/06/07/433677/votes-automatic-voter-registration/>

system as called for in the law, one study estimated a full 437,072 eligible citizens would be registered in the first year.⁵ Of those, 186,398 people are likely not to have become registered to vote without a back-end system of AVR.

Data and research from states that have implemented AVR policies has shown many more eligible citizens become registered to vote and update their voter registrations with models that utilize back-end systems like the one outlined above. This means fewer headaches for administrators, more eligible voters on the rolls, and a more secure, error-free system.

Conversely, data available from the Secretary of State of Colorado suggests that only 29% of eligible but unregistered voters were captured with a front-end system there, leaving 71% of eligible citizens to be registered by third-party voter registration drives. That is why Colorado moved from a front-end system to a back-end system this year.

Voting reform that expands access to the ballot and closes demographic gaps in voter registration and participation is a racial justice issue. Historically, people of color have faced significant barriers to registering to vote and casting ballots, ultimately leaving them out of our political process. Though one would like to believe these barriers for citizens of color are relics of the past, research shows this is not the case. According to the Center for American Progress, communities of color, young people, and low-income individuals are disproportionately burdened by registration barriers, making it more difficult for these groups to vote.⁶ To this day, differences of race, education level, and income determine gaps in voter participation.

For people of color, the ability to cast a ballot is often the only way to hold elected officials accountable and fight for fair, equitable systems. Every day important decisions are being made regarding our system of bail, discovery, rent regulations, and other laws that have a disproportionate impact on people of color. Far from being abstractions, these policies can be the difference between freedom and unjust incarceration or between shelter and the street. Given these all too real consequences, it is imperative to implement the most effective Automatic Voter Registration policy to achieve full participation of eligible citizens across demographic lines.

As we mentioned, one of the goals of AVR is to increase voter registration rates among individuals in “hard-to-reach” populations, including low-income families, communities of color, and anyone who may not have access to a computer for online registration or access to transportation. To accomplish this, we advocate for using an AVR program with clean data transfer for eligible applicants and the opportunity to decline outside of the transaction at multiple source agencies to ensure that no eligible Massachusetts citizen is left out of our political process, particularly those who are less likely to be registered to vote. If Massachusetts’

⁵ Center for American Progress, “Close Elections, Missing Voices, and Automatic Voter Registration: Projected Impact in 50 States” 2017, Retrieved October 1, 2019, from <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2017/11/27134904/50stateAVR-brief.pdf>

⁶ Center for American Progress, “Increasing Voter Participation in America,” 2018, retrieved October 1, 2019, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2018/07/11/453319/increasing-voter-participation-america/>

results follow the trends in other states, those registered through back-end AVR will be younger, lower-income, and from more racially diverse areas than those already on the rolls.⁷

It's important that Massachusetts does that all it can to ensure that no individuals who are ineligible to vote are added to the voter rolls, particularly with the Trump Administration's heartless deportation efforts. A back-end AVR system is safe and accurate because it relies on clean data transfers between agency databases and documentation-based verification to ensure that only the data for individuals who have provided sufficient information to demonstrate their eligibility moves through the AVR system. This decreases the risk pool considerably and limits the possibility of human error by the applicant or agency worker leading to inadvertent registration of ineligible applicants.

We want to help make the voting process more accessible by eliminating the barriers keeping eligible Massachusetts citizens from exercising their civic duty. We urge you to ensure that a robust back-end AVR measure based on clean data transfer that avoids human error is implemented this year. We know that no legacy could be more powerful than one that ensures citizens from every corner of Massachusetts' diverse population can participate in our democracy.

Sincerely,

cc: House Speaker Robert DeLeo, Senate President Karen Spilka, Attorney General Maura Healey

Pam Wilmot, Common Cause Massachusetts
Cheryl Clyborn Crawford, MassVote
Jonathan Cohn, Progressive Massachusetts
Sophia Hall, Lawyers for Civil Rights,
Frances Moore Lappe, Small Planet Institute
Karen Y. Chen, Chinese Progressive Association
Mass Alliance of HUD Tenants
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Alicia Rinadli, Action Together Massachusetts
Sheila Irvin, Berkshire Democratic Brigades
Evan George, Boston Democratic Socialists of America
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Aaron Agulnek, Jewish Community Relations Council
Noemi Ramos, New England United for Justice
Our Revolution Cambridge
Isaac bears, PHENOM
Noemi Ramos, Right to the City Boston
Unitarian Universalist Mass Action

⁷ Center for American Progress, "Increasing Voter Participation in America," 2018, retrieved October 1, 2019, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2018/07/11/453319/increasing-voter-participation-america/>

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