

Introduction

The California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) and the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) released [a new paper](#) investigating the effect of automatic voter registration (AVR) on registration rates around the country. Notwithstanding some questions as to their methodology, we are glad that their report adds to the growing consensus: AVR works.

The paper generally comes to the same conclusion as a [2019 Brennan Center report](#): where implemented, automatic voter registration boosts registration. The CCEP / PPIC report, however, uses a different methodology to reach their conclusions.

Accounting for Updated Registrations

The 2019 Brennan Center report asks how many new and updated registration transactions were due to AVR, thus capturing two of AVR's primary benefits. The CCEP / PPIC report asks what share of eligible residents were registered on the date of each federal election after the policy went into effect. This is important, because the ultimate goal of AVR is to make more residents eligible to cast a ballot. Nevertheless, looking only at the share of residents registered misses a key aspect of AVR: namely, the updating of registrations, without which voters would be ineligible to vote.

Confounding Electoral Factors

The Brennan Center report isolated the causal effect of AVR by examining the effect of AVR in the early months of an odd-numbered year – when it is highly unlikely that other factors would be influencing the rate at which voters registered. The CCEP / PPIC report looks at registrations at the time of each federal election. This methodological approach is defensible because being registered to vote matters most at the time of the election. This approach, however, makes it difficult to statistically control for the myriad factors that might influence registrations at the time of the election such as competitive statewide races or voter registration drives. To be clear, the models used in the CCEP / PPIC paper attempt to control for these influences, but the possibility remains that some states had multiple unique influences on registration rates.

Questions about Statistical Significance

In just one of the eleven states studied in the CCEP / PPIC report is the estimated effect of AVR significant at the 95 percent level, the level most commonly used to establish a “real effect” by political scientists.¹ When an effect reaches the 95 percent confidence level, this means there is just a 5 percent chance that the observed increase could be due to random fluctuations from year

¹ See, for instance, Kellstedt, Paul M., and Guy D. Whitten. *The fundamentals of political science research*. Cambridge University Press, 2018; Fay, K., M. J. Boyd, and N. J. Salkind. *Encyclopedia of research design*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2010.

to year. Therefore, the results from their paper may more properly indicate that AVR probably increases the share of eligible residents who are registered, though the models cannot show by how much. The low rate of statistical significance must be factored in when considering their remarks that back-end AVR (where voters opt-out of voter registration after the transaction is over) registers more people than a front-end model.

The Brennan Center is glad that researchers continue to investigate the impact of automatic voter registration on inclusion in our electoral systems.