

## Bridging the Gap in Democratic Participation By Molly Parris

On my 16th birthday, my mom took me to the DMV to get my license. While the idea of driving was exciting, being the nerd I am, I was more enthusiastic about being asked: “Would you like to pre-register to vote?” Two years later, I was finally eligible to vote and checked my mailbox every day for a week, awaiting the arrival of my absentee ballot. I even posted pictures mailing my ballot on Instagram. Again, I recognize that makes me a nerd, but I also realized that not only are people my age not posting their ballots on Instagram, they aren’t even filling them out.

Voter turnout is a major problem in the United States. [Less than two-thirds of eligible voters came out to vote](#) in the 2016 presidential election. For those 18-29, that rate was even lower; a dismal [50% of Millennial voters showed up at the polls](#). Yet, [over half of them agree that things in this country are headed off the wrong track](#).

We can look at this in two ways. On the one hand, Millennial/Gen Z-ers are agitated with the current state of affairs. On the other hand, my peers aren’t showing up to the polls, thus not voicing this discontent. This disconnect suggests that there is a barrier to engaging young people in full democratic participation.

There are many components building this barrier, including our complicated registration system. If we can’t even get people to register to vote, how will we get them to actually vote? To appeal to a group of people that are [impatient and in need of instantaneous action](#), we should implement a system of Automatic Voter Registration, thus making registering easy and convenient.

The Automatic Voter Registration Act, introduced in the House on Jan 17, would require every state to institute automatic voter registration for any individual that provides identifying information at the state motor vehicle authority. Once the State receives that information, they will be automatically registered to vote, with an option to opt-out at any time.

Fifteen states and DC have already implemented similar systems and been successful in both registering more citizens to vote and increasing voter turnout. Oregon was able to add more than [242,000 new people to their voter rolls after instituting AVR](#). Because of this, Oregon’s electorate is more representative of the state’s population: **younger**, more rural, lower income, and ethnically diverse. Almost 40% of newly registered voters that went on to vote in the 2016 election were 30 or younger, according to the Center for American Progress. CAP estimates that if we were to apply these results to all 50 states, we could expect 22 million newly registered voters in just one year. While this does not guarantee 22 million additional votes, it represents an important first step.

While it seems like members on both sides of the aisle would support increasing our voter rolls, AVR has no Republican support in the House. Opponents to this system worry that non-citizens could be automatically registered to vote through the DMV, promoting fraud in our elections. In certain states, such as Colorado, driver’s licenses are provided regardless of documentation status, and they worry that their information will just be passed along just as a citizen’s would, and ineligible people would be allowed to vote.

This is an invalid concern, however. It is still illegal for non-citizens to vote in elections and implementing Automatic Voter Registration doesn't change that. In fact, the bill requires that someone's citizenship status be checked before the registration goes through. The real issue is that Republican opposition recognizes the same issue with voter registration as I do: the population of unregistered voters in the U.S. is disproportionately made up of young people and minority groups. As seen in Oregon, automatically registering everyone to vote suddenly brings these people in to the voting pool.

However, this same group of new registrants tend to align themselves with liberal views. In 2016, only 37% voted in favor of a Trump presidency. To this day, the 18-29-year age category has a lower approval rating of Trump than any other age demographic in the country. According to polling done by Politico, where Trump's overall approval rating in March 2019 was about 42%, among young Americans, that number was down below 30%. Perhaps opposition is more afraid of losing seats in Congress and less about a genuine concern for the safety of our elections.

In fact, Republican's should be in full support of this legislation, as it streamlines the election process and cuts down on the federal bureaucracy, key components of the conservative platform. When the State of Colorado implemented a system of AVR, they found that the registration cost one-quarter of paper applications, not including the reduced cost of hiring less bureaucratic workers to process applications.

Many people my age will go to the DMV at least once, if not more, between the ages of 16-29. If they are providing voter registration information regardless, we should take advantage of the convenience factor and register them to vote. Instituting Automatic Voter Registration would start the necessary bridge between the anger felt by young people towards our political climate and their lack of engagement in the democratic process. Registering them to vote automatically, especially at a young age, takes one step out of the voting process, making it simpler and convenient.