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Shapiro's Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) Initiative Amplifies Need to End Closed Primaries

AVR will swell the ranks of independent voters who currently can't vote in Pa.'s primaries

HARRISBURG, Sept. 20, 2023 --- Gov. Josh Shapiro's administration on Tuesday rolled out a new initiative to make it easier for someone to register to vote when they get or renew a driver's license in Pennsylvania. **But many of those new voters will register as independents who will then be shut out of the state's closed primary system.**

Based on data from other states, automatic voter registration (AVR) has consistently accelerated the growth of independent voters. This suggests Pennsylvania could see a spike in independents, which is already the fastest growing segment of voters in Pennsylvania. The latest Department of State data show that just in the last two months the [number of registered independents rose by more than 9,000](#), almost three times the growth of Republican voters and 13,000 more than Democratic voters.

In 2015, Oregon became the first state to adopt AVR. Back then, registered independent voters were 20% of the Oregon electorate. Today, they are 35% of the electorate and the largest group of voters in the state. Since automatic registration was adopted, more than three quarters of new Oregon voters registered as independents. Observers tie the increase to young voters getting their first license at the DMV.

Nationally, over half of 18-to-24-year-old voters choose to be political independents.

[Oregon's experience is by no means unique.](#) A few years after adopting AVR, 60% of new registrants in Nevada have been independents and they are now the largest group of voters in the state, while the ranks of Democratic and Republican voter registration have fallen. Since Massachusetts adopted automatic registration, 77% of new registrants have been independents, and like Oregon and Nevada, independents are now the largest group of voters in the state.

Without question, [AVR has helped increase voter rolls and voter turnout.](#) Research also shows it has added to the [rapid increase of independent voters across the country.](#)

"As more and more states adopt AVR, and the ranks of independent voters continue to skyrocket, our political leaders are going to be forced to grapple with the simple question: Do you really believe in letting all voters vote? If the answer is yes, then you must repeal closed primaries," said Jeremy Gruber, J.D., Senior Vice President of the national group Open Primaries Inc.

Pennsylvania is one of only seven states to completely exclude independent voters from voting in primary elections. That means nearly 1.2 million voters who are registered as unaffiliated with a political party or independent are denied the right to vote, even though their taxes pay for the primary election, which costs roughly \$50 million to run.

David Thornburgh, who chairs Ballot PA, the Pennsylvania-based nonpartisan effort to end closed primaries, applauded the AVR initiative, but expressed the frustration of all independent voters.

"We all want more folks to participate in the voting process," he said. "But it seems like an unfortunate bait and switch to make it easier for people to register and then turn around and tell them they can't vote in what is often the most important election of the year."

As many as half of young voters --- those who inevitably will gain political power with time --- identify as independent today. With AVR in Pennsylvania, the state can expect even more independent voters like them and others who will be disenfranchised every spring.

But there is a bipartisan effort to change that.

Sens. Dan Laughlin (R-Erie) and Lisa Boscola (D-Lehigh & Northampton) introduced their bipartisan legislation (S.B. 400) in the spring. Since then, similar measures have been introduced, including a bill (H.B. 976) by Rep. Marla Brown (R-Lawrence) and legislation (H.B. 979) by Reps. Jared Solomon (D-Philadelphia) and Chris Rabb (D-Philadelphia).

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