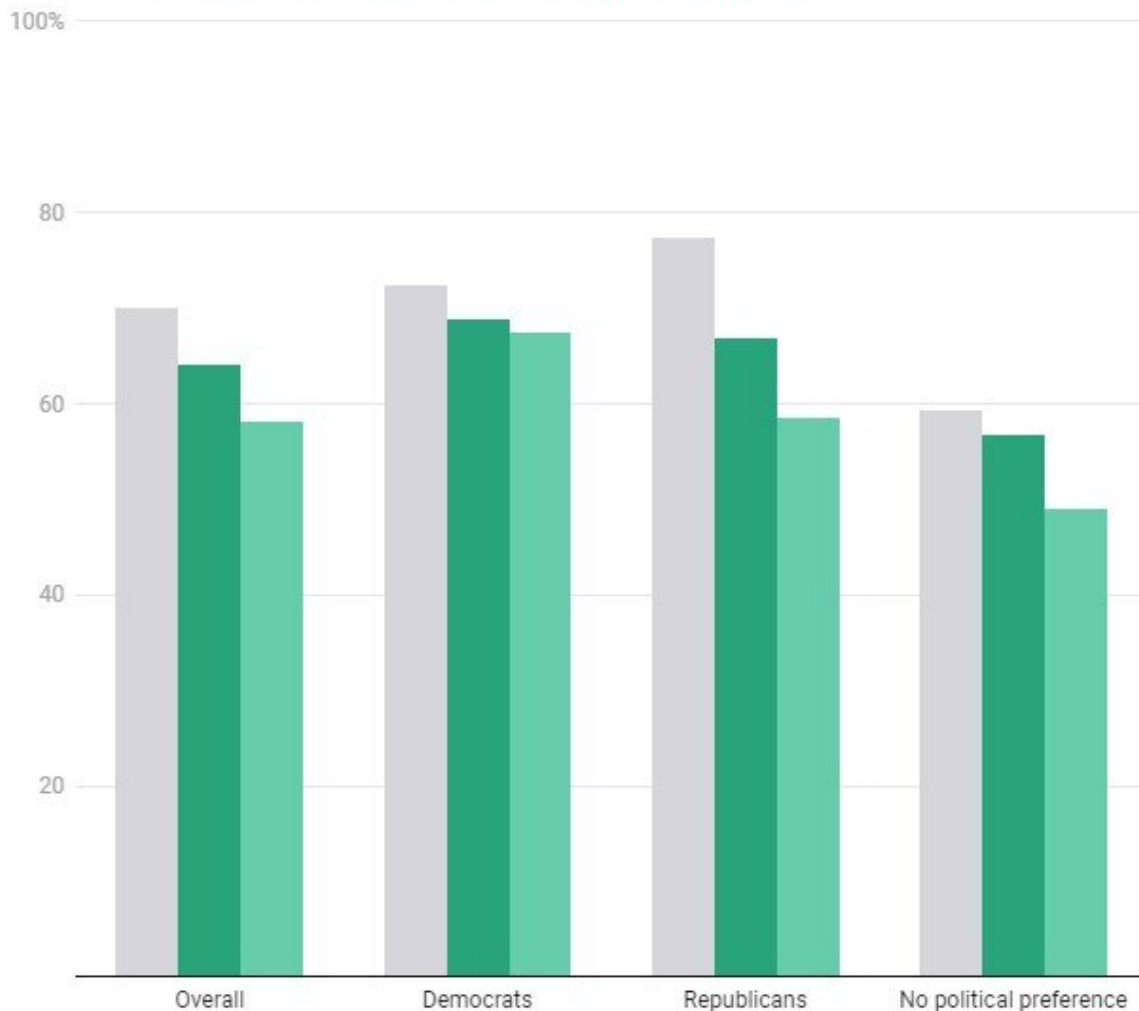


# Automatic voter reregistration can substantially boost turnout

November 7 2022, by Seo-young Silvia Kim

## Automatic voter reregistration boosted turnout in 2018

A study of Orange County, California, voting in 2018 found that **people who did not move** were most likely to vote. But people who moved within the county and **were assisted with reregistering at their new addresses** were more likely to vote than those who moved within the county and **were not assisted with reregistering in their new homes**.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Seo-young Silvia Kim, 2022

Government efforts to keep registered voters on the rolls when they move from one address to another substantially boost those voters' likelihood of casting a ballot, my research has found.

It's long been known that the rules about how and when to register to vote—which [differ by state](#)—present a [significant obstacle for people who want to participate in democracy](#). In many nations, including Germany, Denmark, South Korea, Chile, Israel and others, citizens are automatically registered to vote when they become eligible to vote. Registration is the government's responsibility.

[Some groups](#) have called for the U.S. or its states to adopt similar policies, broadly called "automatic voter [registration](#)." Indeed, it was a major part of the [For the People Act](#), a bill introduced in early 2021 to address various aspects of U.S. election systems.

There is an existing federal law, often called the "[motor-voter law](#)," that allows people who are getting a driver's license to choose to simultaneously register to vote for federal elections.

Automatic voter registration, by contrast, makes the choice for people, and [requires them to opt out](#) of voter registration if they wish. In 2016, Oregon became the first state to [adopt this policy statewide](#), eliminating the need for [voters](#) to take an extra registration step.

In the meantime, some communities are trying to help registered voters keep their registrations active. For instance, in 2018, [election officials](#) in

California contacted people who were registered to vote but who had told the U.S. Postal Service they had moved. I evaluated this practice, called automatic reregistration, to see [how well it worked](#) to keep voters actively participating in democratic self-government.

## **Automatic voter reregistration**

Starting in 2015, the state of California began matching [voter registration](#) data to data collected by the U.S. Postal Service when people ask to [have their mail forwarded](#). When someone was detected as having moved within California, the county where they had been registered to vote would send out a postcard to the new address, [asking them to verify that they had moved](#). Unless they explicitly told the county otherwise, the voter will be automatically reregistered at the new address.

Dear Voter:

According to information we have received, the address where you live OR where you receive mail has changed to the address printed on the attached card.

If your new address is in Orange County, we will update your registration and future election materials will be sent to your address. If you no longer reside in Orange County, your voter registration has been placed in the inactive file. You must reregister in the county in which you now reside. To receive an affidavit call 1(800)345-VOTE.

Within 15 days, return the Business Reply portion of this card notifying us that your change of address is correct or is not a change of permanent residence.

If the information on this card is incorrect and you fail to notify our office, you may not receive your voting materials for future elections and your registration may be permanently canceled.

\*If you need assistance in Chinese, Korean, Spanish or Vietnamese, please call (714) 567-7600.

REGISTRAR OF VOTERS  
PO BOX 11298  
SANTA ANA, CA 92711-1298

Phone No. (714) 567-7600



NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
Santa Ana, Ca  
Permit No. 77

Presorted

**FORWARDING SERVICE REQUESTED**



NO POSTAGE  
NECESSARY  
IF MAILED  
IN THE  
UNITED STATES



**BUSINESS REPLY MAIL**  
FIRST-CLASS MAIL PERMIT NO. 963 SANTA ANA, CA

POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY ADDRESSEE

REGISTRAR OF VOTERS  
PO BOX 11298  
SANTA ANA CA 92711-9839



Dear Voter:

**WE HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED THAT YOU HAVE MOVED.**

Check and sign the correct box below.

Send back the completed card within 15 days.

<input type="checkbox"/>	I live in Orange County and the address(es) above are correct.
Signature: _____	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/>	I don't live in Orange County. Remove my name from the voter file.
Signature: _____	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/>	The information above is incorrect.
I live at: _____	My mail is delivered to: _____
Signature: _____	Date: _____

NCOA

In 2018, election officials in Orange County, Calif., mailed notifications to registered voters whom county records suggested had moved, informing them that they would automatically update the voters' registration information. Credit: Registrar of Voters, Orange County, California

I examined turnout data from Orange County, California, using voters who had moved within the county in June 2018. Voters who moved in the first half of June were automatically reregistered. But those who moved later in the month were not, because they moved too late: A [law requires this type of records update to be completed](#) well in advance of a federal election. Apart from the dates of their moves, these two groups

of voters were very similar. That allowed me to isolate the effect of automatic reregistration on people's voting habits.

Overall, my analysis found that automatic reregistration boosted [voter turnout](#) by [5.8 percentage points](#) over those who were not automatically reregistered.

There were partisan differences. Automatic reregistration had no statistically significant effect on Democrats' turnout but boosted Republican turnout by 8.1 points—and lifted the turnout of people who did not identify with either party by 7.4 points.

## **Voting access is not just for Democrats**

Automatic reregistration is promising because it showed significant effects in a population in which we might expect to have only small effects. These voters had already broken through [the hurdle of initial registration once](#). In addition, they had moved within Orange County, which meant potentially [less disruption to their lives than those who moved farther away](#). Even so, relieving these voters of the reregistration burden effectively boosted turnout.

Voting access has long been a highly partisan issue. Some have even [claimed](#)—without much scholarly evidence—that making voting easier could disproportionately benefit Democrats. Indeed, Republicans and Democrats have very different views about easing voting. In a [Pew Research Center](#) estimate in 2021, only 38% of Republicans supported automatically registering all eligible citizens to vote, while 82% of Democrats supported it.

But in my data, lifting the reregistration burden helped Republicans and independent voters more than Democrats. Of course, the 2018 general election was one in which Democrats in Orange County were already

[highly mobilized](#). This might be why there was not a strong increase in turnout for the automatically reregistered Democrats. Another possibility could be that automatic reregistration disproportionately benefits Republicans and nonpartisan voters for some reason.

Whether the results will hold true in other elections and places remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the results show that automatic reregistration was effective in keeping voters actively participating, and they also show that easing voting in this way does not benefit only Democrats.

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