

Potential Cost Savings of Automatic Voter Registration in Hawaii

Introduction

21 states and the District of Columbia have implemented or authorized the implementation of automatic or automated voter registration (AVR). Unless registrants decline, AVR automatically registers or updates addresses for eligible citizens based on motor vehicle or other government data. This information is electronically transmitted from state agencies to election officials. Hawaii does not yet allow automatic voter registration. However, in addition to improving the integrity and accuracy of voter rolls, research shows that AVR would greatly reduce registration and administration costs. In Hawaii, we estimate that AVR could save more than \$1 million statewide in each election cycle by eliminating paper-based registrations and decreasing undeliverable mail related to registration issues.

Estimated Savings from Implementing AVR in Hawaii, 2018 Election Cycle

Effect of AVR	Estimated Statewide Savings
Eliminated Paper-Based Registrations	\$661,153.52
Reduced Undeliverable Mail	\$357,791.87
Total	\$1,018,945.39

Savings from Eliminating Paper-Based Registrations

Processing paper voter registration applications is labor-intensive and expensive. Among other steps, the process includes data entry, following up with applicants on missing information or errors, and paying overtime and additional temporary staff to process applications in a timely fashion before Election Day.

Previous research shows that these costs are significant, and that there are significant savings from election administration changes that eliminate paper-based forms. For example, after implementing online voter registration (OVR) in 2002, Arizona went from spending at least 83 cents for each paper registration to only 3 cents for each online registration. *See* Washington Institute of the Study of Ethnicity and Race *et al.*, Online Voter Registration (OLVR) Systems in Arizona and Washington: Evaluating Usage, Public Confidence and Implementation Processes, (2010), https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2010/onlinevoterreg.pdf.

AVR goes even further than OVR, eliminating paper forms not only for individuals who affirmatively register or update their address online, but also for any individual who is automatically enrolled or has their registration updated via an AVR agency. The potential cost savings are significant, as shown in the following table estimating the labor costs associated with paper-based registration forms for the State of Hawaii and its five counties. We estimate that Hawaii counties spent more than \$650,000 on processing paper-based registration forms during the 2018 election cycle. Looking at individual counties, the savings are significant regardless of county size. The state's largest county could have saved more than \$230,000 from eliminating

paper-based forms, while even smaller jurisdictions could have saved tens of thousands of dollars if paper-based forms were reduced or eliminated.¹

Estimated Labor Cost Paper-Based Registration in Hawaii, 2018 Election Cycle

County Name	Total Registered	Paper-based forms processed	Est. Avg. Labor Cost per Form	Est. Total Labor Cost
Honolulu	500,163	67,172	\$3.45	\$231,743.40
Hawaii	115,406	38,258	\$5.94	\$227,252.52
Maui/Kalawao	96,721	28,059	\$5.94	\$166,670.46
Kauai	44,461	6,658	\$5.33	\$35,487.14
Statewide	756,751	140,147		\$661,153.52

In this analysis, labor costs rely on 2017 estimates of the average cost of full-time staff processing applications, following up with applicants about missing or erroneous information, and temporary staff processing applications. *See* Doug Chapin & David Kuennen, *The Cost (Savings) of Reform: An Analysis of Local Registration-Related Costs and Potential Savings Through Automatic Voter Registration*, March 2017, https://www.vote.org/wp-content/uploads/registration-related-costs_030817.pdf. We estimate these costs for each county based on survey data of election officials in large, medium, and small jurisdictions regarding the costs of processing registration applications. *Id.* Notably, this estimate does not include the costs of printing voter registration forms, mailings related to duplicate registrations, and the postage of forwarding forms to the proper recipient, meaning that our estimate is relatively conservative.

The registration totals are drawn from the EAC’s 2018 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) data. We calculate paper-based registrations by considering the total number of registration forms received during the 2018 election cycle and subtracting applications reported through the state’s online voter registration system, which are transmitted electronically.

Savings from Reducing Undeliverable Mail

AVR can similarly achieve significant savings by reducing undeliverable mailings to voters participating in Hawaii’s Vote by Mail (VBM) system. Beginning with the 2020 primary election, Hawaii will use a VBM system under which each registered voter will receive a ballot by mail. *See* Haw. Rev. Stat. §§ 11-101, -102(b). Based on evidence from other states, a

¹ Although Hawaii has five counties, one of these counties – Kalawao County – reports its data in the EAC’s Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) with Maui County’s data. Because this analysis relies on EAVS data, we similarly include Kalawao County with Maui County.

substantial percentage of these mail ballots will be returned as undeliverable after election officials have already incurred costs for printing and mailing the ballot. AVR has the potential to mitigate these unnecessary costs. By updating voter address information well in advance of elections, AVR can reduce the number of VBM ballots returned as undeliverable. Indeed, we estimate that AVR has the potential to save Hawaii more than \$350,000 per election on unnecessary VBM mailings.

Each mail ballot requires printing and postage, resulting in costs to election officials. A 2016 study of Colorado, which also uses VBM, found that the state spent on average \$3.94 in printing and postage costs for each mail ballot. Pew Charitable Trusts, Colorado Voting Reforms: Early Results, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2016/03/coloradovotingreformsearlyresults.pdf>. Notably, this estimate is fairly conservative, as it does not include labor costs associated with preparing mail ballots. In addition, based on research from other states, roughly 12% of mail ballots are returned as undeliverable. *See* Maricopa County Elections Department, Early Voting General 2012, <https://recorder.maricopa.gov/voteroutreach/pdf/english/2-2013%20General%202012%20Early%20Voting.pdf>.

Under Hawaii's VBM system, each registered voter receives a mail ballot. *See* Haw. Rev. Stat. § 11-102(b). If VBM has been in place for the 2018 election, when the state had 756,751 registered voters, and 12% of these ballots were returned as undeliverable, these unnecessary mail ballots would have resulted in a cost of \$357,791.87. By updating address information for these voters in advance of mailing, AVR can significantly reduce undeliverable mailings in a VBM system, saving elections officials unnecessary time, effort, and costs.

Conclusion

Although AVR has short-term implementation costs, they are far outweighed by long-term savings. By eliminating additional paper registration forms through AVR, we estimate that Hawaii could save more than \$650,000 per election cycle. Similarly, by updating registration information in advance of elections, AVR can reduce undeliverable VBM ballots tied to out of date addresses, potentially saving more than \$350,000 each cycle.