

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

STATE ADMINISTRATION AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS INTERIM COMMITTEE
PREPARED BY REBECCA C. POWER - MAY 2026

OVERVIEW

WHAT IS ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION?

Online voter registration (OVR) provides a supplement to the traditional paper-based voter registration process. OVR follows essentially the same process, but instead of filling out a paper application, the voter fills out a form via a secure website, and that paperless form is submitted electronically to election officials. In most states the application is reviewed electronically; if the request is confirmed to be valid, the new registration is added to the state's voter registration list.

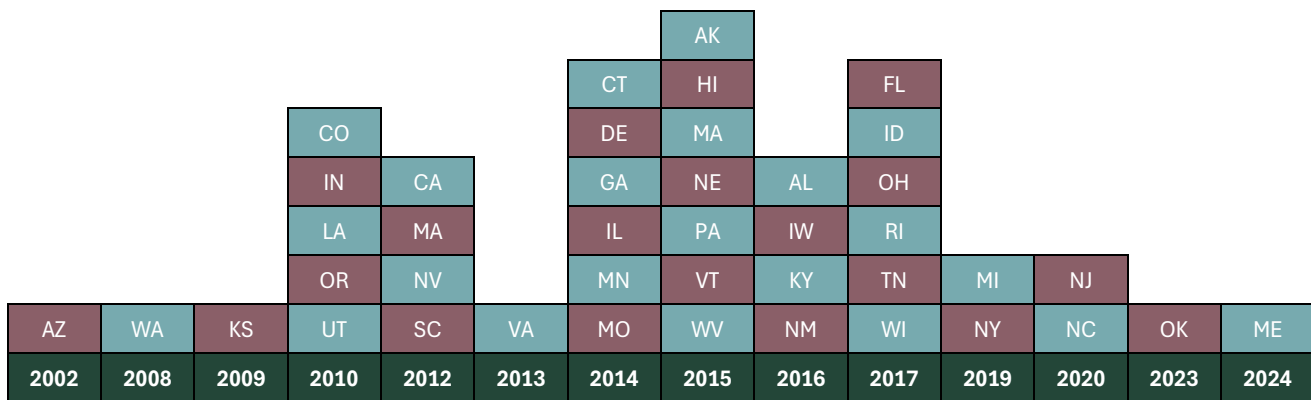
The validation step is done by comparing the information on the online registration form against the information provided by the same individual when they were issued a driver's license or other state-issued identification card. The signature already on record with the state becomes the signature on record for voting. When the information does not match, the application is sent to officials for further review or action.

IS ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION THE SAME THING AS AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION?

No, online voter registration is not the same thing as automatic voter registration. Automatic voter registration (AVR) is a process in which eligible individuals are automatically registered to vote when interacting with certain government agencies, such as a department of motor vehicles. Information gathered from participating government agencies is transmitted to election officials, who use it to either create a new voter record or update an existing registration. About half of the states in the U.S., along with Washington, D.C. have AVR.

HISTORY

Arizona, in 2002, was the first state to implement online voter registration. Washington followed with authorizing legislation in 2007 and implementation in 2008. Today, forty-two states, as well as Washington, D.C., Guam, and the Virgin Islands, use OVR. While most states have enacted specific legislation to authorize online voter registration, some have made OVR available without enabling legislation. The states without OVR include Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota (does not have voter registration), South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming.



POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

There are several policy considerations associated with implementing online voter registration, including accuracy of voter information, accessibility, security, and cost.

POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES

The possible advantages of online voter registration include increased accuracy of voter information, increased access to voter registration, and a more even distribution of registrations throughout the registration period.

With OVR, voters can access the system at any time during the registration period, meaning they can update their voter record if they move, election officials don't have to try to decipher handwriting on paper forms, and don't risk accidentally inputting information incorrectly from a paper form. Additionally, an online system can offer accessibility options for eligible voters with disabilities.

Because online voter registration is available 24/7 during the registration period, eligible voters can apply to register anytime and not have to worry about mailing their registration form or visiting their local election office during business hours. Given the increased access, it is likely that the registrations will be more evenly spaced over the course of the registration period, potentially preventing a last minute flurry of registrations for election administrators to process.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

The biggest potential challenges for implementing online voter registration are the identification requirements, the startup and ongoing costs, and developing and maintaining a secure system.

A 2014 Pew study of 13 states that had implemented OVR showed that the average cost to build a system was \$240,000. This did not include any of the ongoing operating costs associated with the systems.

There are several approaches that can be used to ensure system security and prevent fraud or breaches by hackers, but bad actors are constantly looking for new ways to compromise systems and technology changes quickly.

MONTANA

SB 8 (2025)

Towards the end of the 2023-2024 interim, the State Administration and Veterans Affairs received a request to consider sponsoring a committee bill to implement online voter registration in Montana. During the July 2024 SAVA meeting, the committee heard presentations and public comment about online voter registration and then directed staff to draft a committee bill. During the September 2024 meeting, the committee reviewed the draft, amended it to include a provision regarding signature verification, and approved it for introduction as a committee bill with a 7-3 vote. Senator Wendy McKamey was assigned to carry the bill. SB 8 was introduced and assigned to the Senate State Administration Committee. The bill was heard and subsequently tabled by the Committee.

HB 557 (2019)

HB 557 was introduced during the 2019 Legislative Session by Representative Tom Winter. The bill was heard in the House State Administration Committee and subsequently tabled by the Committee.