Automating Voter Address Updates

Summary:

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is a technological modernization to the current voter registration process at agencies required to offer voter registration opportunities under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). AVR is a common-sense reform that makes voter registration more efficient, improves the accuracy of voter registration data by reducing human error, saves time for customers at agencies, and can save money for agencies that register voters. AVR is a modern system that supports the shift from paper processes to electronic processes between agencies to properly register or update voters.

This guide will introduce the efficiency, cost-savings, and security advantages of automated voter address updates and provide a state-by-state comparison on how to approach implementation of automated voter address updates. Key takeaways for this guide will be to meet and develop a relationship with your motor vehicle agencies, collect data in an easier way, and to make the process more voter-centric.

Important Terminology:

Electronic Data Transfer: the ability to transfer voter registration data quickly and accurately between state agencies through an electronic system, instead of through paper forms.

State Voter Registration Database Structures: There are generally two ways that data can flow in a state, which impacts the implementation of automated address updates:

> Top-down system: A system designed to send voter registration data to the Secretary of State's office first. Voter registration data is then sent to county offices. This system approach is used in Georgia.
>
> Bottom-up system: A system designed to send voter registration data to the county clerk office's first. Following that, voter registration data is then sent to the Secretary of State's office. This system approach is used in Colorado.

Key Topics in this Guide:

Advantages of automating address updates:

There are many advantages of automating voter addresses. The advantages outweigh the cost of implementation and it is a flexible system that benefits multiple agencies. This process can be a good start to beginning the implementation of modernization of voter systems.

> "Through automating our list maintenance, we have saved our counties money in mailing ballots and mailing their elections related documents because the lists are better. They are sent to an address where people live and **has reduced the number of ballots bouncing back in the mail from 9% to 3%."**
>
> *Judd Choate, Director of Division of Elections at Colorado Department of State*

Motor Vehicle offices will see advantages such as a decrease in wait times at the agency because interactions are more streamlined. Through a stronger partnership with the elections office, a seamless and automated system will transmit information to both agencies to have the most accurate information on addresses for voter registration. Information is more secure and less prone to human error because manual entry of information will no longer be necessary. Election offices will see advantages by having an accurate address for voters. Both offices will experience improvements in client satisfaction as the public already anticipates that the government should keep their information up-to-date.

Broad Strokes: How automating address updates works

> "When talking about the benefits, one of those are happier and more confident voters, which leads to a voter that will cast a ballot. There is a streamlined interaction between the Secretary of State's office and the elections office and now we are getting the most accurate data from a trusted source that has verified everything they got."
>
> *Chris Harvey, Elections Director at Georgia Secretary of State*

Electronic data transfer is the key to modernizing the voter registration process. States using electronic data transfer have transitioned away from sharing voter registration data between agencies via paper forms and instead send data

electronically on a regular schedule or in real time. (See our guide to Secure Data Transfer for more details on establishing such a system.)

Automating voter address updates creates a simpler process for both voters and election offices. This simpler, more voter-centric, process makes it easy for voters that update their address at the DMV and to have their address automatically updated on their voter registration record at the election office and vice versa. States can transition to updating addresses automatically through an administrative change rather than requiring legislation, and there is flexibility in how the system is designed based on the status quo in the state. This is a straightforward change that any state can make to optimize their election system.

How to transition to an electronic automated system:

Transitioning to an electronic automated system can be easy but does require some legwork to make sure that the system update is seamless. There are a couple of crucial steps that need to be taken to ensure the success of the new automated system.

1. Research and Make a Plan
    a. Understand the current flow of information from the agencies and the current method of transfer (paper or electronic).
    b. Research any legal and infrastructure constraints in your state around information sharing between agencies.
2. Meet with Relevant Stakeholders and lay out a design
    a. Develop an agreement with target agencies, such as the Motor Vehicles Office and agree on how data will be transferred.
        i. There is flexibility in the design as you can take a top-down or bottom-up approach.
    b. Design a digital system that works for the data being transferred
        i. This will include creating a schedule of data transfer that will be reflective of the amount of data that is collected.
        ii. A couple of technical changes that can be made to help with the design of the system. One change can be to incorporate an electronic signature pad to collect signatures and switch the interaction from an opt-in to voter registration to an opt-out.
3. Test the System
    a. Provide adequate testing of the new system before going live. This will ensure that everything goes smoothly and issues can be resolved before going live.

State-by-state approaches

Each state takes different approaches to designing their new system and administrators should work with design experts to ensure that their plan fits with the current data flow in the state. There is no single “right way” to automate address updates, but there are examples of states with radically different structures who have been able to implement the updates effectively.

Colorado and Georgia have different systems in place, and both were able to implement automated address updates within the last decade. Both systems still accomplish the same goal of having the voter rolls as up-to-date and as accurate as possible. This benefits both agencies and gives many advantages.

Colorado’s Bottom-Up Approach:

Colorado has a **bottom-up approach** that works with the voter registration information being sent to the county clerk offices first and the information is then sent to the election offices. All address updates at the Motor Vehicles office are sent over for voter registration purposes. Below is a quick timeline of the process in Colorado.

- ➔ 1994-2009
  - Colorado didn’t have a relationship with Motor Vehicle offices and there wasn’t any electronic transfer of data
- ➔ 2009
  - DMV partnerships were created and a start of data transfer begins with paper voter registration forms being scanned by the DMV and sent to election offices
- ➔ 2010
  - The creation of an online voter registration system occurred and electronic data was beginning to be transferred
    - Most of the data came from the back end and helped to determine eligibility. People had to opportunity to look up their registration status online and update addresses.
- ➔ 2011
  - The discussion of a multi-year plan continues to automate voter address updates
- ➔ Present
  - Working towards completely automating address updates and making a two-way transfer of data so that the DMV can know if someone is registered to vote.

Georgia's Trickle Down Approach: planned via batch

Georgia's **top-down approach** works with voter registration information being sent to the Secretary of State's office. The timeline of implementation varies from Colorado, but both systems accomplished the same goal.

- ➔ 2011
  - Voter registration system was taken from an old main frame to a new online web based model which was a significant step toward a user friendly model
- ➔ 2013
  - Online voter registration implemented and an electronic signature pad was added to the Motor vehicles office that made it easier to compare signatures for voter registration
- ➔ 2015
  - The accuracy of voter registration information improves because the information is collected straight from the voter
- ➔ 2016
  - Top-down system at the Motor Vehicles Office becomes what it is presently from the Secretary of State's office to the county offices for voter registration

Conclusion:

There are various ways to set-up and accomplish an automated system. We can use Colorado and Georgia as key examples of the difference and the flexibility of each system to be shaped into one that best fits for your state. Automating address updates makes updating voter rollsmore voter-centric and accomplishes this by creating key partnerships with state and elections offices and by collecting data in an easier way that benefits all agencies.