



Center for  
Civic Design

# Automatic voter registration design best practices

Guidelines for writing clear automatic voter registration (AVR) instructions and questions in motor vehicle department transactions

May 2018

[hello@civicdesign.org](mailto:hello@civicdesign.org)

[civicdesign.org](http://civicdesign.org)

[@civicdesign](https://twitter.com/civicdesign)

# Introduction

## Who are these guidelines for?

Anyone writing AVR questions and instructions for motor vehicle department transactions, including:

- state election officials
- motor vehicle department staff
- advocates

## Why follow these guidelines?

Following these guidelines will make your AVR implementation more successful by ensuring:

- voter registration questions don't slow DMV transactions
- people answer questions accurately
- ineligible people don't mistakenly register

## Where are these guidelines from?

These guidelines are based on research in five states with hundreds of people. They are also based on widely held plain language and interaction design best practices.

## What's included?

- Guidelines with annotated examples
- Alternatives
- An implementation checklist
- Instructions for testing your own language

## Guidelines

- At the beginning, tell people what's going to happen and why.
- Ask as few eligibility questions as you can.
- Make opting-out harder than registering and updating.
- Give people who are confused about their status (or hesitant to share it) ways to leave the registration process.
- If you ask people to pick a party, give them options.
- Write privacy statements, attestations, and affirmations in simple bullets.
- Follow plain language best practices.
- Usability test your form.

# At the beginning, tell people what's going to happen and why.

People are less likely to opt-out if they understand AVR's benefits and aren't confused with legal text.

- Make the first sentence of the form or screen an invitation.
- Then explain concisely what AVR means to them.
- Avoid legalisms like "For voter registration purposes"

## Voter registration

Let's make sure you're ready to vote in the next election.

We will use your information to update your voter registration or register you to vote.



Invitation

Simple explanation

Say "We" instead of "the state" or "DMV"

## Invitations, continued

### For a scripted conversation

Note that people can save time by updating their registration while they are at the DMV.

While you're here, let's make sure you're ready to vote in the next election. We will use your information to keep your voter registration up to date or register you to vote. (Pause to allow customer to opt-out.)

"While you're here" implies time savings.

### For forms or screens with limited space

Put "update your voter registration" before "register to vote" to appeal to existing voters.

We will use your information to update your voter registration or register you to vote.



Even a single sentence can imply AVR's benefits by noting how we'll "update your registration."

# Ask as few eligibility questions as you can.

Eligibility criteria are often confusing. Asking fewer questions about eligibility means fewer opportunities for mistakes.

- If the DMV already knows someone's age or citizenship status, don't ask them about it again.
- Ask key eligibility questions as early in the process as you can, and put the rest at the end.

## In main form

Are you a U.S. Citizen?

Yes

No

Decline to answer

Below the question are several horizontal grey bars representing other form fields.

Key eligibility question inline with other form questions

## At end of form or signature pad

I affirm that:

- My residence address is in ST.
- I am not currently in state or federal prison.
- I am not currently found mentally incompetent to vote by the court.

Below the list are several horizontal grey bars representing other form fields.

Other eligibility requirements at the signature affirmation

## Eligibility, continued

If you must ask about many eligibility criteria in the main form

Present requirements as a group rather than as individual questions.

Do you meet **all** the following requirements?

- I am a United States citizen.
- My residence address is in ST.
- I am not currently in state or federal prison for a felony.
- I am not currently found mentally incompetent to vote by the court.

- Yes, I meet all requirements
- No, I do not meet all requirements
- Decline to answer

Single question

Group of criteria

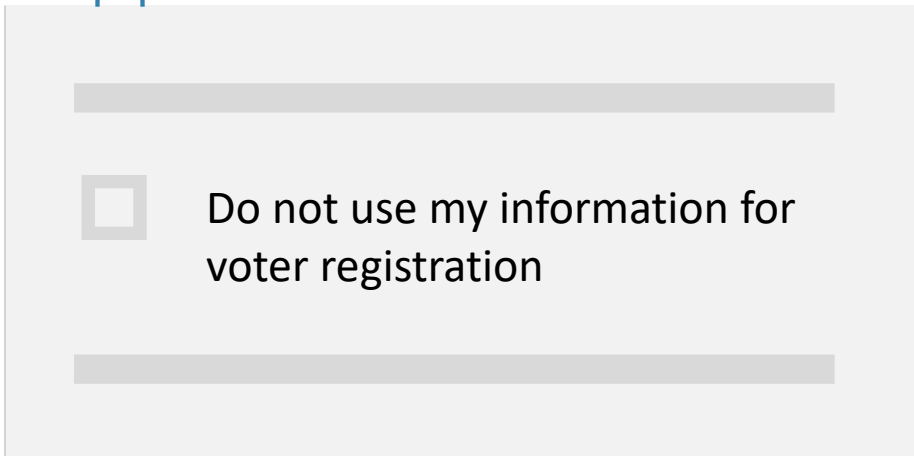
Declining ends voter reg. questions, but doesn't penalize user

# Make opting-out harder than registering and updating.

Nudge people to register (AVR's goal) by making opting-out one step more than staying in.

- Use an extra check box to opt out.
- Say what you're opting out of next to the checkbox.
- If people opt-out, don't show them other voter registration questions.

## For paper forms

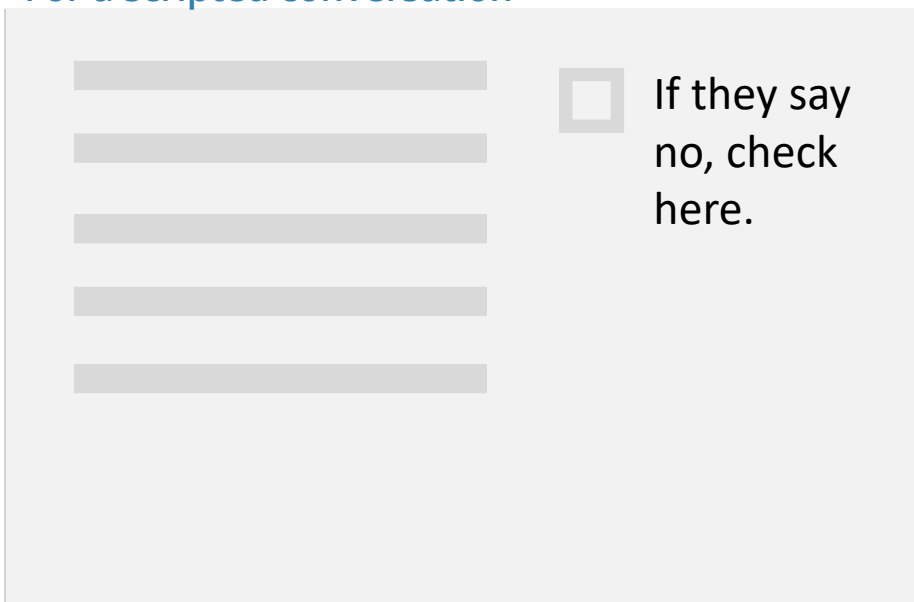


A paper form layout with a single checkbox on the left and the text "Do not use my information for voter registration" to its right. There are horizontal bars above and below the checkbox area.

Single check box

What you're opting out of

## For a scripted conversation



A scripted conversation layout with a list of five horizontal bars on the left representing questions. To the right is a checkbox followed by the text "If they say no, check here."

Don't have clerks read the yes/no question.

Opt-out checkbox outside script so clerk doesn't read it



## Opt-out, continued

For digital forms that ask a question on each screen

If previous screens all ask yes/no questions, present the opt-out as a yes/no question and select “yes” by default.

### Voter registration

We will use your information to update your voter registration or register you to vote.

- Yes, register me to vote or update my registration
- No, do not use my information for voter registration.
- Decline to answer

Back

Next

Select the “yes” option by default

# Give people who are confused about their status (or hesitant to share it) ways to leave the registration process.

If people don't quite understand who can vote, we don't want them to register.

- Offer a "decline to answer" option.
- If people decline, don't ask more voter registration questions.
- Don't penalize people for pushing decline.

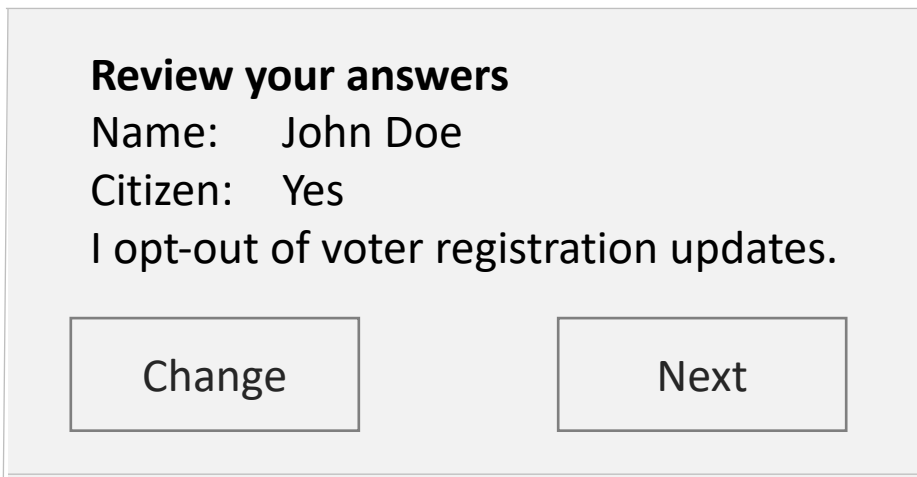
The image shows a vertical form with a light gray background. At the top is a horizontal bar. Below it are three rows, each starting with a small square icon followed by a horizontal bar. Further down are three radio button options, each with a horizontal bar to its right. The bottom-most radio button is selected and is accompanied by the text "Decline to answer".

Declining ends voter reg. questions, but doesn't penalize user

# Leaving the registration process, continued

## On signature pads and tablets

Let people change their answers when they reach the review screen to correct mistakes.



**Review your answers**  
Name: John Doe  
Citizen: Yes  
I opt-out of voter registration updates.

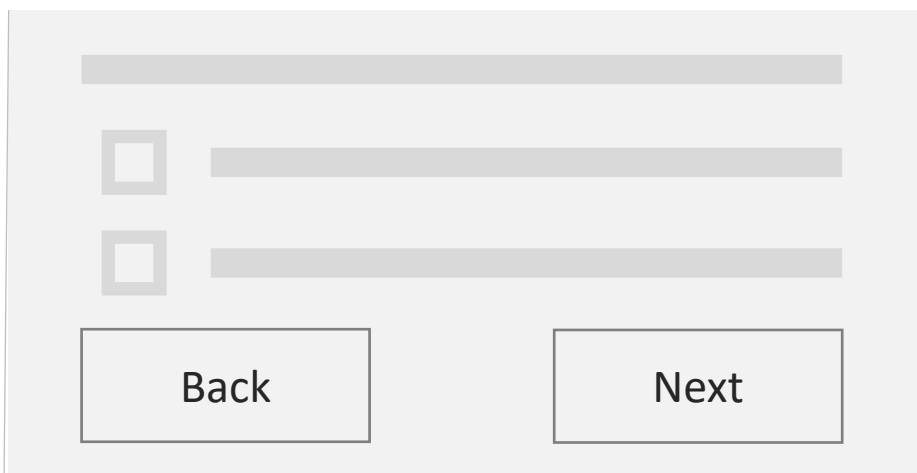
Change                      Next

This is a screenshot of a review screen. It features a title 'Review your answers' in bold. Below the title, there are three lines of text: 'Name: John Doe', 'Citizen: Yes', and 'I opt-out of voter registration updates.'. At the bottom of the screen, there are two rectangular buttons: 'Change' on the left and 'Next' on the right.

Change button lets people modify answers.

## On signature pads and tablets

Let people go back to the previous screen to correct mistakes.



This is a screenshot of a review screen. It features a title bar at the top. Below the title bar, there are two rows of text, each preceded by a square checkbox. At the bottom of the screen, there are two rectangular buttons: 'Back' on the left and 'Next' on the right.

Back button in lower left

# If you ask people to pick a party, give them options.

Many people are new to elections and don't know what "party" means, but might recognize a party's name.

- If space permits, list out the parties they can chose.
- Avoid words like "affiliation" and "preference."

Party:

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- I don't want to chose a party  
(Unaffiliated)

Not "party affiliation" or "party preference"

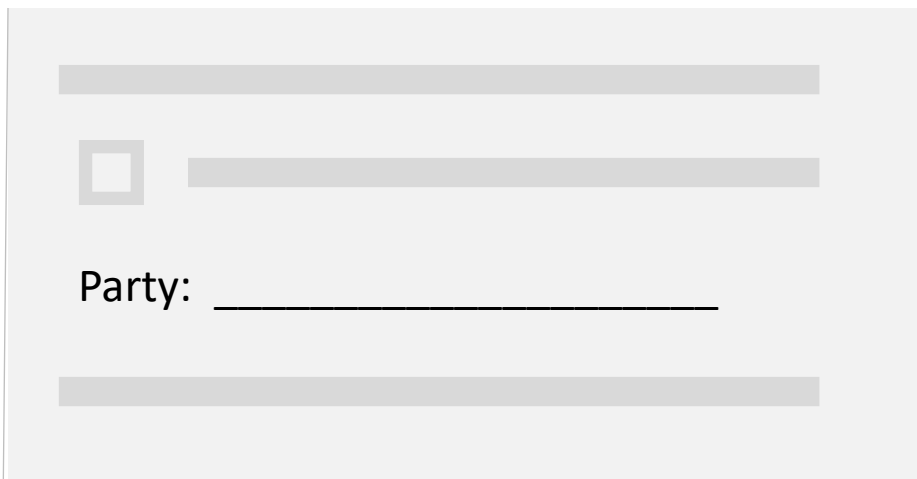
Fewer words are less confusing.

Avoid just saying "unaffiliated" or "no preference"

## Parties, continued

### On paper forms

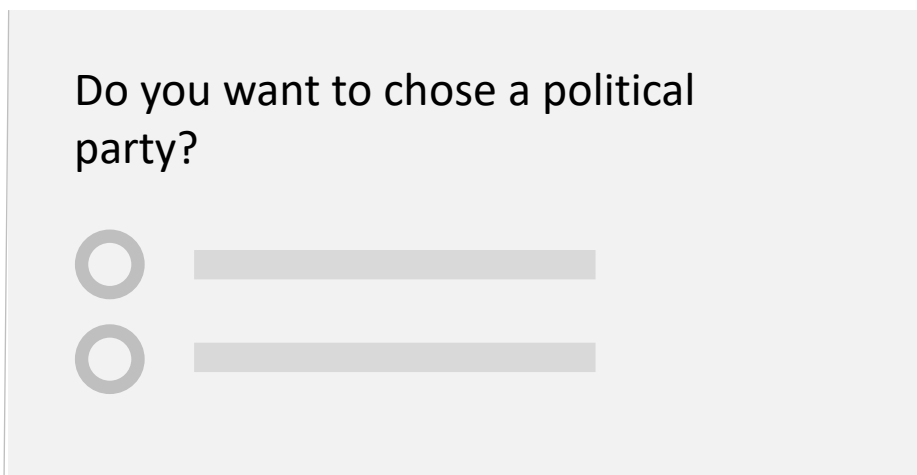
If you have too many parties to list on a paper form, offer a blank line.



The image shows a form layout with a light gray background. At the top, there is a horizontal gray bar. Below it is a square checkbox followed by another horizontal gray bar. Underneath that is the text 'Party:' followed by a solid black horizontal line. At the bottom of the form area is a final horizontal gray bar.

Party blank line

If previous sections start with questions, you may want to phrase this prompt as a question, too.



The image shows a form layout with a light gray background. It starts with the question 'Do you want to chose a political party?'. Below the question are two radio button options, each followed by a horizontal gray bar representing a text input field.

# Write privacy statements, attestations, and affirmations in simple bullets.

People are more likely to read and understand a bulleted list than a paragraph.

- Split big blocks of legalese into bullets.
- Write required statements in the fewest words, like “The place where you register, or your decision not to register, is confidential.”

The form layout consists of several elements: a horizontal bar at the top, a paragraph of text, another horizontal bar, a bulleted list with two items, a third horizontal bar, a fourth horizontal bar, and a large rectangular box at the bottom containing a large 'X'.

NVRA-required privacy statement

Eligibility affirmation from law, or if not included in the voter registration question

Attestation from law

Signature box with X keeps signature in constrained area for accurate scanning

## Bonus: Follow plain language best practices.

### Plain language tips for AVR

Clear, concise and well-organized language helps people answer your questions quickly and accurately. In AVR, we suggest you:

- Say “We” instead of “the DMV” or “the State.” The name and source of the form already tell people who’s talking.
- Say “You” instead of “the voter” or “the citizen.” Readers will better understand who you are talking to.
- Break long paragraphs into bullets. Keep lines less than 60 characters long. Instead of presenting attestations as long chunks of text, break them into bits.
- Avoid passive tense. Instead of staying “Your information will be used to...” say “We will use your information to...”

### Other plain language resources

- Our *Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent*, offer field-researched design techniques about
  - [Writing instructions voters understand](#)
  - [Creating forms that help voters take action](#)
- [Plainlanguage.gov](#) also offers plain language guidelines and examples.



## Bonus: Usability test your form

### What is usability testing?

Usability testing is a tool for learning where people interacting with a design encounter frustration. It's simple: You watch and listen to people who are like your users as they use a design as they normally would.

### Why conduct usability testing?

What's easy to us may not be easy for other people. The only way to know for sure observing how other people use understand your work. Testing AVR instructions (before they're rolled out) has helped several states avoid major misunderstandings and rework.

### How to conduct usability testing

- Our Field guide about [Testing ballots for usability](#) also applies to voter registration forms, screens and instructions.
- Also check out the [Usability testing toolkit](#) from the Election Toolkit.

### We can help.

Center for Civic Design works with election officials, motor vehicle departments and advocates to conduct and coach usability testing. Interested? Send us a note at [hello@civicdesign.org](mailto:hello@civicdesign.org)



# Before you launch checklist

Check that people completing a transaction can be registered to vote quickly and easily.

## Can they...

- understand the questions they're asked?
- get registered to vote by default?
- opt-out if they want to?
- decline or exit if they're confused about their eligibility?
- pick a party?
- understand their privacy protections?
- understand what they are attesting with their signature?
- sign in a clear, constrained place?

## Does the form...

- put a few important instructions in the main form, and the rest near the end?
- break big paragraphs into bullets?
- not repeat questions they're asked in other parts of the form (like age)?



Center for  
Civic Design

[hello@civicdesign.org](mailto:hello@civicdesign.org)

[civicdesign.org](http://civicdesign.org)

[@civicdesign](https://www.instagram.com/civicdesign)