



MODEL TESTIMONY

Online Voter Registration

Testimony of [*Organization Name*] in Support of HB/SB _____

[*Committee*]

[*Date*]

[*Organization Name*] submits the following comments in support of House/Senate Bill _____, the Online Voter Registration Act of 2011. [*Insert brief description of organization here.*]

Recent elections have made it clear that voter registration is needlessly complicated, costly, and labor-intensive. While passage of the Online Voter Registration Act of 2011 will not solve all of these problems, it will help to bring voter registration into the 21st Century, reducing the cost of administering the system and mitigating some of the most common registration difficulties at the same time.

This bill requires election authorities to make registration by computer available as an option to all applicants. The entire process—filling out the application, transmitting it, and receiving instantaneous acknowledgment of receipt—can be accomplished at one sitting, without the necessity of printing out or mailing a voter registration application. Of course, election authorities must still evaluate the application for eligibility factors, such as age and residency, and they will continue to do so under the online system. But one part of their job that has proven especially onerous and error-prone—deciphering the handwriting of the applicant—will be eliminated with forms that are completed on a keyboard. Further, “incomplete” registration forms will be virtually nonexistent if the computer protocol makes it impossible to transmit the form with missing data fields. In addition, online registration saves the costs of printing and postage that are typically borne by the government when paper registration forms are used.

Testimonials from states that have implemented online registration and “paperless” registration at motor vehicle agencies, an analogous reform, have sung the praises of computer-generated registration as a dramatic time- and money-saving innovation. Maricopa County, Arizona, where online registration is in effect, has reported that the cost per registration fell from 83 cents to three cents! In Delaware, transaction time at the DMV fell from 90 seconds to 30 seconds per registration. The Delaware paperless program has been so successful that it is being replicated at public assistance agencies and the Department of Labor.

The time- and cost-savings of online registration are also realized at the polling place on Election Day. Many of the delays and complications in voting are due to registration problems, such as forms that never reached election officials or weren't processed in time. Such voters are often forced to cast provisional ballots—a process which takes more time for poll workers and for the voter—with an uncertain outcome.

In essence, the online process made available by this bill mimics the process used at agencies, such as the DMV, that are required by the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) to offer voter registration. The content of the online application form will be the same as that used by agencies. The bill also requires that election officials provide online assistance to applicants, if requested. Finally, the application is deemed submitted on the day it is sent from the computer, so that there is no ambiguity as to whether the applicant has met the state's voter registration deadline. (Similarly, an agency registration is deemed submitted when it is given to the agency. In contrast, under the NVRA, a mailed application is deemed submitted on its postmark date, which may or may not be the date on which it was mailed.)

The bill provides that the applicant's "signature," where he attests to the truth of the information supplied on the application, is supplied electronically—that is, by executing a mark in the signature field of the online form. Such signatures are now commonly used for this purpose in online consumer, real estate, and other transactions. The bill further specifies that the state must accept an electronic copy of the applicant's handwritten signature, such as an electronic image stored on a computer or a "smart phone," one year from the effective date of the Act. To respond to security concerns of some election officials, the bill provides that a voter who has registered online will supply a "wet" signature when he appears at the polling place. Alternatively, if the voter elects to vote absentee and has already supplied an electronic copy of her actual signature pursuant to Sec. 1(c)(2), she may provide a wet signature on a form that is returned with her absentee ballot.

Perhaps the most exciting improvement in election administration that would be facilitated by this bill is that it allows already-registered voters to update their registration information online. In a typical year, one in six Americans changes his address. Not surprisingly, a voter who moves is much more apt to notify friends, family, the bank, and credit card companies of his new address. The election board is way down on the list, if indeed the voter thinks of it at all in advance of the next election. With appropriate security measures in place, there is simply no reason why a voter should not be able to update his address or other pertinent information, such as a change in party preference, without filling out a new paper form or appearing in person at the bureau of elections. Online updates will also have a positive impact on polling place

efficiency on Election Day, by increasing the accuracy of poll books and reducing the need for provisional ballots.

In addition to all of its other efficiencies, online updating will inevitably aid states in fulfilling their duty to maintain accurate voter lists. The risk of data entry errors and duplicate registrations will be minimized with the use of electronic records, and transmitting the information directly to the officials responsible for the statewide database will ensure that current information will be available across the state. Online registration and updating of records is also likely to reduce the need for temporary workers frequently hired by election districts to process the glut of paperwork before an election.

[Organization submitting testimony] applauds [bill sponsor] for introducing [bill number]. It is a sensible and timely improvement to our antiquated system of voter registration and will make it easier for millions of our citizens to participate in the electoral process now and in the future. In this era of tight state budgets, it will also modernize the registration system to save time and significantly reduce costs. We urge swift passage of this important legislation.