

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION: WHAT IS IT? WHY IS IT NEEDED?

ONLINE REGISTRATION makes it easier for individual voters to register and vote. If registration by computer is available to all applicants, the entire process can be accomplished in one sitting, without the necessity of printing out or mailing a voter registration application.

ONLINE REGISTRATION is also an ideal system for updating existing registration records. The outdated registration systems in place in most states cannot track a voter's change of address or other information change without some affirmative and timely effort by the voter. The failure to keep registrations current leads to polling place delays, overuse of provisional ballots, and, in some cases, voter disenfranchisement. Current technology offers a simple, modern solution to this old-fashioned problem: the ability to register or update an existing registration online.

ONLINE REGISTRATION reduces the errors inherent in a paper application process, simplifies an election official's work, and saves states money.

THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE REGISTRATION

SAVES MONEY.

Printing and postage costs are typically borne by the government when using paper registration forms. Online registration also eliminates costs associated with data entry errors. For example, Maricopa County, Arizona has saved \$1.4 million in processing registration applications since 2008 by promoting online registration: processing paper registration costs 83¢ per form, compared to as little as 3¢ for some online applications.¹

MAKES REGISTRATION MORE ACCURATE AND EASIER FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS.

Computer-based online registration eliminates one part of election officials' job that has proven especially onerous and error-prone—deciphering applicants' handwriting in order to enter information into the registration system.

USES TECHNOLOGY TO REDUCE INCOMPLETE FORMS.

The computer protocol can make it impossible to transmit the form with missing data fields.

REACHES AN INCREASINGLY INTERNET-SAVVY POPULATION, ESPECIALLY YOUNG AMERICANS.

Nearly 76 percent of individuals in the United States now live in a household with Internet access.² Online registration particularly benefits young Americans who are among the most likely to have Internet access but are the least likely to be registered to vote.³ A recent study of Arizona's online registration system found that young and of-color voters are disproportionately likely to register online. Registration rates among 18-24 year-old citizens rose from 29 to 53 percent after it introduced online and automated registration.⁴

MAKES UPDATING REGISTRATIONS ESPECIALLY EFFICIENT, REDUCING ELECTION DAY PROBLEMS.

Using a computer to update an existing voter file (e.g., to reflect a change of address) is particularly easy and efficient. With appropriate security measures in place to prevent unauthorized access, online updates will help states to maintain current voter lists, mitigate Election Day problems, and reduce the need for provisional ballots.

CONCERNS TO ADDRESS WHEN CREATING AN ONLINE REGISTRATION SYSTEM

ONLINE REGISTRATION MAY NOT HELP ALL GROUPS EQUALLY.

One risk of the shifting emphasis to a computer-generated registration system is that those without ready access to computers are disproportionately marginalized from the electoral process because they're on the wrong side of the "digital divide." Not surprisingly, these are the same demographic groups that have traditionally been under-represented in the electorate: low-income people, people of color, and people with disabilities.

MOST ONLINE REGISTRATION PROGRAMS REQUIRE SIGNATURES ALREADY ON FILE.

Typically, the states that have implemented online registration have done so with the use of signatures from the state's drivers' license database (or other state ID, usually administered by the same agency). States that allow only applicants with signatures in that database to register online exacerbate the digital divide.

TO ADDRESS DISPARITIES, ONLINE REGISTRATION SHOULD NOT REQUIRE A SIGNATURE ON FILE.

Online registration should be open to all eligible applicants, whether or not they have signatures on file with the state. Applicants may attest to the truth of statements in the application by executing a computerized mark, a process that is increasingly common in electronic consumer and real estate transactions. The online registrant will then supply an actual "wet" signature at the polling place. This is comparable to HAVA's provision that a state may require first time voters who have registered by mail to present identification at the polling place if they have not already done so.

Handwritten signatures will also be accepted electronically in the future. Within one year of the effective date of a law, a state should be able to implement the technology necessary to be able to accept an electronic copy of the applicant's handwritten signature, for example from an iPad or smartphone.

ENDNOTES

1. Absentee and Early Voting, National Conference of State Legislatures Wendy R. Weiser, Christopher Ponoroff, "Voter Registration in a Digital Age," Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law (July 13, 2010), available at http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/voter_registration_in_a_digital_age/
2. US Census, 2010 Current Population Survey, Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2010, Table 1, Reported Internet Usage for Individuals 3 Years and Older, by State: 2010, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/computer/publications/2010.html>
3. Id., Table 2A. Reported Internet Usage for Individuals 3 Years and Older, by Selected Characteristics: 2010, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/computer/publications/2010.html>; Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012, Table 4c. Reported Voting and Registration, by Age, for States: November 2012, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/Table04c.xls>.
4. See supra note 1, Report at 18.

PROJECT VOTE

ESTELLE H. ROGERS, ESQ.
LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
EROGERS@PROJECTVOTE.ORG
P: (202) 546-4173, EXT. 310