



# Millions to the Polls

PRACTICAL POLICIES  
TO FULFILL THE FREEDOM TO VOTE  
FOR ALL AMERICANS

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**ONLINE REGISTRATION**

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## ONLINE REGISTRATION

- States should modernize registration procedures by allowing eligible voters to register to vote and update their registrations online.
- Online registration saves states and localities money.
- Registration rates among young voters increase with online registration.

**T**hese days, bank transfers, credit card transactions, and even medical record storage all happen online. These transactions are not only complicated but also highly sensitive, yet technology has managed to evolve to ensure the transactions are safe and secure, as well as convenient. Given the important role voting plays in our lives, it should be as accessible as buying a pair of shoes online. However, when it comes to voter registration, the use of online technology has yet to catch up to other areas of our modern life.

Like many other ways that people use the Internet, voters with access to an online voter registration system can check and update their registration status, as well as check their voting location. Using a computer to update existing voter registrations—to change an address, for example—is particularly easy and efficient. With appropriate security measures in place to prevent unauthorized access, allowing voter registrations to be updated online will help states to maintain current voter rolls, reduce confusion and problems at the polls, and reduce the need for provisional ballots because voter registration are more current and up to date.

Registering voters online also saves states and localities money. Printing and postage costs are typically borne by the government when using paper registration forms. Approximately one-third of the budgets of elections officials are spent on registration.<sup>1</sup> Switching to an online system can result in significant savings at all levels of government. Arizona, for example, saw cost savings of over \$450,000 in Maricopa County alone in 2008.<sup>2</sup> The state first implemented paperless online registration in 2002 and over 70 percent of all voter registrations are now performed online.<sup>3</sup> In switching to an online system, Arizona found that, on average, paper registration costs were \$0.83 per registration, while the cost of an online registration was \$0.03.<sup>4</sup> In addition to signif-

icant cost savings, between 2002 and 2004, the state saw a 9.5 percent increase in voter registrations.<sup>5</sup> Washington and Delaware also report cost savings from using online registration.<sup>6</sup>

Using technology can also help reduce the submission of incomplete forms. Too often a voter thinks he or she has registered but an incomplete form can make for a nonexistent registration. The computer protocol can make it impossible to transmit the form with missing data, enabling voters to have greater confidence in the system. Online registration also 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.

Online registration programs also reach an increasingly Internet savvy population, especially young Americans. Nearly 76 percent of individuals in the U.S. now live in a household with Internet access.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration reports evidence that turnout may be higher among those registering online: "in Arizona in 2008, 94 percent of online registrants voted compared to 85 percent of those who registered by paper."<sup>10</sup>

Currently, nineteen states either offer online voter registration, or have recently passed laws permitting online registration that have yet to be implemented, and five states offer limited online registration.<sup>11</sup>

One limitation of online registration stems from state practices for capturing a voter's signature.—In most states with online registration, the service is offered only to individuals who already have a driver's license or state identification card because their handwritten signature was captured by the DMV. Some states still require a "wet signature" (i.e. a handwritten signature on file) to perfect a registration; some states will accept all the other registration information electronically and then confirm the registration upon its receipt. California allows anyone to register online, but if a valid signature is not on file with the DMV, the individual must print her registration form, sign it, and mail it in; all the information except for the signature is transmitted electronically, and once the signature is received and added to the voter's file, the registration becomes complete.<sup>12</sup> This means that online registration is less convenient for persons who lack a drivers' license.

Delaware allows any individual with a Social Security number to register online. The system transmits the data to the appropriate county electronically, but at the end of the registration process, the user must print, sign, and mail a form generated by the system to complete the registration. The application is incomplete until the signed form is received; however, if the form is not received, the individual can still vote a regular ballot on Election Day by showing ID<sup>13</sup> and providing a signature at the polling place.<sup>14</sup> In Connecticut, a recently passed law will allow online registration for any individuals who have a signature stored in *any* database available to the state, including federal databases.<sup>15</sup>

Ideally, states would implement technology that could electronically capture signatures, similar to signing for credit purchases or signing touchscreens. In 2010, Santa Clara County, California became the first to accept voter registration forms that were signed by hand and submitted electronically using mobile, touchscreen technology.<sup>16</sup> Each applicant's information and electronic signature, captured on a mobile Internet device touchscreen, were integrated into a secure PDF file and applicants were able to email the secure file to the county elections office.<sup>17</sup>

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Implementing online voter registration is the next logical step in integrating technological advances in our electoral system. In particular:

- Online registration should not require a signature on file. Applicants should be allowed to 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.<sup>18</sup> Voters can later perfect their registration at their voting location by supplying a “wet” signature at the polling place.
- Handwritten signatures should be accepted electronically where that technology is available, similar to signing for credit card purchases or using touchscreens on mobile devices. In addition, handwritten signatures can be collected at the time of registration, if voting in person, or from an absentee ballot.
- The online voter registration system should provide immediate confirmation of registration.
- The online system should be continuously available.

- Voters should be able to update their registrations online.
- The online portal should be well designed and with clear steps and easily understandable directions, navigation, and architecture, with appropriate forms and contact information, should they be necessary.
- Opening avenues for online registration should not disproportionately marginalize those without regular Internet access from the electoral process. In particular low-income people, people of color, and people with disabilities tend to be on the wrong side of the “digital divide.” States should ensure that online voter registration access is easily available to all eligible citizens by providing kiosks or other stations where people without regular Internet access can register to vote online.
- The Presidential Commission on Election Administration recommends that online registration systems “allow secure and direct data entry by prospective voters through multiple internet portals.”<sup>19</sup> DMVs, public service agencies, and trusted partners should be given state authorization to provide a secure direct portal to the state’s election site, so that when voters provide information their information is immediately and seamlessly updated in their voter registration file. ■

## ENDNOTES

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3. *Ibid.*
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5. *Ibid.*
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8. Michelle K. Cohen, *Online Voter Registration* (May 2013), available at <http://www.projectvote.org/images/publications/Online%20Voter%20Registration/Policy-Paper-Online-Registration-May-2013.pdf>.
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11. National Conference of State Legislatures, *Online Voter Registration* (Nov. 2013) available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx>.
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19. PCEA, *The American Voting Experience* 27.