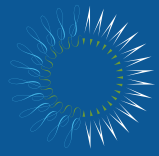
Issue Brief



THE PEW CENTER ON THE STATES

AUGUST 2009

Bringing Elections into the 21st Century: Voter Registration Modernization

America's current voter registration system is outdated, costly and inaccurate. Citizens and election officials alike experience the burdens of a paper-based, voter-initiated process that fails to leverage new technology that could result in more legitimate votes being counted and ensure the integrity of our elections.[1]

The impact on our democracy is significant. A recent study estimates that more than two million voters were unable to cast a ballot in the 2008 general election due to registration problems.

In December 2008, the Pew Center on the States hosted "Voting in America," a Washington, DC summit that initiated a discussion among state and local election officials, policy makers, technology experts and election scholars about the critical need for voter registration modernization. As public dialogue on the issue increases in the media and in Congress, Pew continues to gather data, analyze research and work with election officials to expose the underperformance of the current system and propose fact-based, practical solutions to guide the modernization process.

The Pew Center on the States supports policies, practices and technologies to improve the accuracy, cost, efficiency and security of U.S. elections. Pew's Voter Registration Modernization Initiative aims to improve the nation's outdated voter registration system by examining options for building a system that is more efficient and accurate, while reducing costs and administrative burdens.

Today's System: Inaccurate, Costly and Inefficient

A 21st century election system should not rely upon 19th century methods such as collecting voter information on paper forms; entering handwritten data manually onto

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voter lists; requiring today's mobile population to update addresses and information with every relocation; and relying on unregulated, third party groups to distribute, collect and submit handwritten registration cards. These outmoded practices and procedures create a system that is susceptible to human error from start to finish, and results in massive piles of registration cards inundating election offices immediately before Election Day.[2]

The system's inefficiencies render millions of eligible citizens—even those who have tried to register—unable to vote and create bottlenecks at the polls on Election Day. One partial solution to these registration challenges is the use of provisional ballots, issued when individuals assert they are registered, but their eligibility cannot be confirmed. Yet this is imperfect at best: Pew's recent study of 2008 provisional balloting confirms that nearly half of all provisional ballots for which data was available were rejected and thus uncounted due to voters not appearing on the rolls.[3]

Records are frequently inaccurate, often with incorrect address or name information. According to the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) in which Pew and numerous academic institutions participated, recent relocation is one of the most relevant factors in predicting whether voters will have a registration problem. Individuals who have moved within the two years preceding an election are much more likely to encounter registration difficulties at the polls.[4] This particularly applies to students and young voters who are new to the process and are most likely to move compared to other age groups.[5]

Almost half of all voters are unaware that they can register or update their registration at motor vehicles offices.

To complicate matters, many voters do not understand how the registration process works. The CCES report indicates that more than one in four respondents either do not know how to change their registration information or think that the postal service or election office automatically updates it for them when they move. Furthermore, almost half of all voters are unaware that they can register or update their registration at motor vehicles offices.[6]

The difficulties experienced by the average voter are even worse for men and women serving in the military. Members of our armed forces were almost twice as likely to experience registration problems as the general public.[7]

Maintaining the current voter registration system is costly. A forthcoming Pew study on the costs of voter registration in Oregon finds that in 2008, voter registration alone cost Oregon taxpayers more than four dollars per voter, for a total of nearly $9 million.[8] Additionally, political campaigns and organizations spend millions of dollars on registration activities that could be shifted to educate and engage voters.

Toward A Modern System of Voter Registration

A 21st century, data-driven registration system would build upon the innovations already in use in several states[9], allowing election authorities to retain control over their lists, while adopting common standards to allow for data exchanges across state lines. Ideally, the system would provide each eligible voter with only *one voter record* for a lifetime, which would update whenever they change names, party affiliation or marital status, and follow them wherever they move, including state to state.

Voters deserve a contemporary registration system that is compatible with the way they live, and meets the highest standards of accuracy, cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

Improved Accuracy

Both federal and state governments currently have the

capacity to acquire data from several official sources to ensure they have accurate voter records. States that extract information from other databases—such as motor vehicles records—are able to eliminate duplicate, ineligible and invalid registrations, providing greater accuracy and fewer opportunities for fraud.[10]

In Delaware, a new E-Signature system automatically requires every visitor to the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to register to vote, update their registration or decline to do so. Updated data is immediately downloaded directly into the voters' files, eliminating the need for data entry and reducing the possibility for human error.[11]

More Cost-Effective

In evaluating solutions, we must consider how the system serves Americans not only as voters, but also as taxpayers. Although some startup costs may be associated with implementing a modernized system, cost savings would be realized in a short time, as experienced in Canada, Arizona and Delaware. Canada's system cost $13.3 million (CAD) to implement in 1996, but is estimated to have saved Canadian taxpayers approximately $150 million since its introduction.[12] In Maricopa County, Arizona, a paper registration form costs at least 83 cents to process, versus an average of 3 cents for a registration completed online and data-matched against their DMV database.[13] Delaware reduced labor costs alone by $200,000 annually due to the enhanced efficiency created by E-Signature.[14]

Enhanced Efficiency

Eliminating handwritten paper forms and using technology in conjunction with existing government databases to regularly populate and update voter rolls would significantly reduce the burdens on election officials. Additionally, gains in efficiency and accuracy in the process would lessen the number of provisional ballots, reduce polling place problems and delays, decrease the number of lost votes and eliminate controversial third party groups from voter registration tasks. Also, election administrators would spend less time on National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) lawsuits because almost *all* eligible voters would be included on the rolls or able to correct their registration and cast a ballot via a failsafe mechanism.[15]

Recommendations for Voter Registration Modernization

The complex problems with the current voter registration process point to the critical need for comprehensive, fact-based solutions that position both voters and administrators for success. A modernized system that uses existing data sources to populate the state voter rolls and updates registration files would not only result in more accurate data, but would potentially save millions of dollars for local and state election officials.

In Maricopa County, Arizona, a paper registration form costs at least 83 cents to process, versus an average of 3 cents for a registration completed online.

Based on our research and work with election officials thus far, Pew recommends that a modernized voter registration system should:

- Utilize multiple official data sources to put eligible voters on the rolls and ensure the accuracy of lists;
- Make voter registration more portable for voters who move or change status;
- Establish a failsafe method for eligible voters who are omitted from the rolls or whose records contain an error to cast a ballot; and
- Ensure states maintain control of their voter rolls, while allowing for common standards and data exchanges across state lines.

We recognize that any effort to modernize our nation's voter registration system must take into account the experience of those who administer our elections and consider how the new system will work when it is implemented. Pew will continue to work with state and local election officials, technology experts and election scholars to rigorously assess innovative programs, design comprehensive plans to modernize voter registration and pilot new systems to determine the best solution for each state.

Contact Us

We welcome your advice and participation. For more information on Pew's Election Initiatives, please visit our Web site at *www.pewcenteronthestates.org* or contact:

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1 Ansolabehere, Stephen, R. Michael Alvarez, Adam Berinsky, Gabriel Lenz, Charles Stewart III and Thad Hall. "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections," p. 59, March 2009.

2 Johnson, Rob and Michael Sluss. "11th-hour applications flood registrars' offices," *The Roanoke Times, Oct. 22, 2008*.

3 Pew Center on the States. "Provisional Ballots: An Imperfect Solution," July 2009.

4 Ansolabehere, Stephen, Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2008: Common Content. Release 1: February 2, 2009. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Washington, DC.

5 United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Current Population Survey, "Geographical Mobility: 2007 to 2008," Detailed Tables, Table 1, March 2008, www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/migrate/cps2008.html.

6 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2008: Pew Charitable Trusts Content. Washington, DC.

7 Ibid

8 Lindback, John. "Oregon case study: The costs of voter registration," Pew Center on the States. Forthcoming. Oregon, which relies entirely on mail for voting, tends to have a much higher level of accuracy in its addresses, due to multiple mail contacts annually and voters incentive to make sure election officials have their address correct, without which they won't receive a ballot. Depending on the election and county, Oregon counties tend to have between 3 and 7 percent undeliverable rates.

9 Arizona, Kansas and Washington have implemented registration that can be completed entirely online, and a cadre of other states are in the process of implementing online registration systems in the coming years; Minnesota uses the National Change of Address database to automatically update registrations when voters move; Michigan and Delaware link their registration lists to a voter's motor vehicle file; and Canada utilizes existing government databases to populate and regularly update the rolls with eligible voter information.

10 Barreto, Matt A, Loren Collingwood, Francisco Pedraza and Barry Pump. "Online Voter Registration (OLVR) Systems in Arizona and Washington: Evaluating Usage, Public Confidence and Implementation Processes," p. 66. Forthcoming.

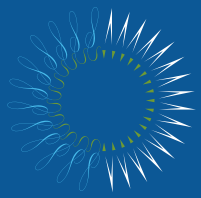
11 Elaine Manlove, state election commissioner, Delaware (Email correspondence, July 28, 2009).

12 Molnar, Rennie. "Operational Aspects of Canada's National Register of Electors," *Voter Registration Modernization: A Case Study of the Canadian Systems of Voter Registration.* Hosted by the Pew Center on the States in cooperation with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Toronto, Canada. PowerPoint, Slide 8, June 4-5, 2009.

13 Op. Cit. Matt Barreto, supplemental appendices. Each online registration costs $0.33 cents to review. Only 5 to 10% are reviewed, thus costing $0.03 on average.

14 Op. Cit. Elaine Manlove.

15 The NVRA, among other requirements, mandates states provide individuals the opportunity to register to vote at the same time that they apply for a driver's license and offer registration opportunities at public assistance and disability agencies. Recently, several states have been sued for lack of compliance with the requirement to create voter registration programs at public assistance and disability agencies.



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The Pew Center on the States (PCS) is a division of The Pew Charitable Trusts that identifies and advances effective policy approaches to critical issues facing states. By researching emerging topics, PCS highlights innovative policy approaches to complex problems for states. When the facts are clear, PCS advocates for nonpartisan, pragmatic solutions.

Election Initiatives seeks to foster an election system that achieves the highest standards of accuracy, convenience, efficiency and security.

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