



The Many Benefits of Online Voter Registration

Rachael V. Cobb, Suffolk University

In order to vote, every American must register first – except in North Dakota, which has no voter registration. Making registration secure, efficient, and easily accessible for voters should be a goal for every state. Online voter registration accomplishes all of these objectives. Providing an online tool that eligible citizens can use to register to vote reduces administrative costs, minimizes data entry errors, and increases the accuracy of state voter lists. More accurate lists, in turn, reduce delays and lines at the polls on Election Day or during early voting.

Embracing the Online Era

Every day, millions of Americans engage in commerce online; and governments let citizens conduct hundreds of types of transactions online – from filing taxes to managing Social Security benefits to applying for federal financial aid. But in more than half of the fifty states, Americans still cannot yet use the Internet to register to vote. As of July 1st, 2015, 21 states offered full online registration, and another six states plus the District of Columbia have passed legislation to create online voter registration, but have yet to implement it.

The holdup is not about party politics. In an era of polarizing, vitriolic arguments over election rules, support for online voter registration is strikingly bipartisan. Both Republican states and those controlled by the Democratic Party have adopted the system. Arizona was the pioneer, implementing paperless voter registration in 2002, followed by Washington State in 2008. Interestingly, online registration has been embraced by three of the most Democratic-leaning states in the country – Connecticut, California, and Hawaii – and also by three of the most Republican-leaning states – Kansas, South Carolina, and Utah.

In January 2014, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration – chaired by no less partisans than Robert Bauer and Benjamin Ginsburg, the chief attorneys for President Obama's and Mitt Romney's 2012 campaigns – recommended that every state institute online registration as a part of an overall strategy to improve the conduct of U.S. elections.

Important Advantages for Voters and States

Arizona's experience with online voter registration since 2002 reveals clear advantages:

- Today, over 70% of Arizona voter registrations occur online. The old paper system required clerks for manual data entry and cost the state approximately 83 cents to process each form. Now online registrations cost three cents apiece.
- According to Brookings Institution political scientist Michael McDonald, Arizona online registration increased registration rates for 18 to 24 year-olds from 29% to 53%. Equally important, 94% of online registrants actually vote, compared to 85% in the old system.

For most voters, online registration offers familiar conveniences. Voters can log on to verify their registration status in real time. Registration problems are uncovered before Election Day, because registrants receive immediate feedback to indicate that they are registered or that their registration information has been updated successfully. Online registration likewise reduces the risk of clerical errors caused by the manual transcription of paper forms. This ensures a more accurate voter registration list and makes it much less likely that would-be voters will be turned away or delayed when they attempt to cast their ballots. Online registration also offers registrants better security for their personal information. For groups that traditionally have lower rates of political participation, especially young people and minorities, the online system can be much more accessible and less forbidding – provided that everyone can gain access to the Internet.

For state governments, online voter registration reduces printing, distribution and processing costs, even as it increases the accuracy of voter lists and reduces last-minute problems. Two major pieces of federal legislation place requirements on state management of voter lists, but compliance has eroded in ways that online registration can correct.

- The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, known as “Motor Voter,” says that voter records must be kept “accurate and current” and requires registration opportunities to be offered at various state and local government offices, including driver registration agencies. But the Presidential Commission on Election Administration found that compliance has declined as many motor vehicle offices have shifted their operations online without simultaneously offering online voter registration.
- The Help America Vote Act of 2002 requires all states with registration to develop a “single, uniform, official, centralized, interactive computerized statewide voter registration list defined, maintained, and administered at the State level.” This act also required special procedures for citizens who arrive at the polls to find they are not on the registration lists even though they believe they are eligible to vote. If poll workers cannot find names on the registration list, a provisional ballot must be issued to the voter. In 2008, approximately 50% of provisional ballots were issued because of problems with voter registration lists. Inaccurate lists and the need to issue provisional ballots cause delays and longer lines at polling places on Election Day. And costly post-election disputes often follow, especially in tight contests.

Helping Voters to Sign Up

Voter registration drives are often mounted by candidates, community based civic groups, political parties, and other organizations. Such drives help ensure that all Americans can vote, yet, on rare occasions, sponsoring organizations submit incomplete, damaged, or fraudulent registration forms, or even lose or destroy forms or fail to submit them on time. Errors or abuses can cause people not to be registered when they think they are – leading to delays at the polls and outright disenfranchisement. Online registration helps, because it lets voters readily check their registration status, and allows groups to help citizens register at their doorsteps or during community events, by using smartphones, tablets, or laptops with instant electronic verification.

Voter registration in the United States is intended to ensure reliable voter lists and fair elections – and online systems can greatly improve the process for citizens and officials at reduced cost to taxpayers. States must take care to make online registration simple, intuitive and accessible. Yet as Americans increasingly use the Internet and mobile devices, properly designed online voter registration is an important tool to ensure full access to the ballot for all U.S. citizens.