

VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: OREGON

BACKGROUND

Governor Ted Kulongoski signed a bill authorizing online voter registration in August 2009, and state officials introduced the system to the public on March 1, 2010.¹ It cost approximately \$200,000 to implement.² According to Elections Director Steve Trout, developers did not encounter any notable difficulties, and the online system received approximately 1100 submissions in its first week.³

HOW PAPERLESS REGISTRATION WORKS IN OREGON

1. For Users

Only state residents with a valid driver's license or non-driver's identification card may submit a full online registration. A user navigates to an introductory page on the Secretary of State's website and clicks a "register now" button to begin. On the first page that opens, she must check boxes to affirm that she is a U.S. citizen and at least 17 years of age.⁴

On a second page she enters her first and last name, date of birth, residential ZIP code, and either a driver's license or state identification card number. She also responds to a CAPTCHA test, a distorted image of a series of letter or numbers that a user must decipher and copy, and which is employed to distinguish human users from automated programs.⁵

The online system uses this information to make a real-time search of the Driver and Motor Vehicle Division's (DMV) database to determine whether it has a matching record on file with a digitized signature. If the system fails to find such a match, the user can retype her information and try again. Alternately, she can choose to provide information to populate a paper registration form that she will then print, sign, and mail in—an option also available to users who lack a DMV card number.⁶

If the online system finds a matching DMV record with a signature, it performs a real-time search of the state voter registration database to determine whether the user is already registered to vote, and then opens a third page. Registered voters will find this page pre-populated with the data from their registration file, so that they need only make whatever corrections are necessary. In contrast, a new registrant will need to fill in the required information—residential address, county of residence, and party affiliation. She can also provide information about any previous registration, request absentee ballots, and supply a separate mailing address. At the side of the page a "Common Address Questions" box offers advice on how particularly mobile groups (college students, service members, expatriates, and "snowbirds") should provide information.⁷

Finally, the user reviews a page displaying an attestation of eligibility, a tracking number (for future reference), and a summary of all the information she has entered. She can return to the previous page make corrections, if necessary; otherwise she affirms the attestation and submits her application by clicking a button at the bottom of the page.⁸

2. For Election Officials

The statewide voter registration system retrieves digitized signatures from the DMV on a nightly basis, batches them with each submission, and makes the complete application available to county election officials. The system sorts applications based on the county indicated by the user; if she has made a mistake, the officials who receive the application can electronically forward it to the appropriate county.⁹ After they receive an application, county officials check for duplicate registrations, verify the address, and assign a precinct number. If everything is in order, they then accept the application.¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ 2009 Or. Laws Ch. 914 (H.B. 2386), amending OR. REV. STATE. § 247.012; Bill Graves, *State Voter Registration Now Just a Click Away*, THE OREGONIAN, Feb. 28, 2010.

² Telephone Interview with Steve Trout, Elections Div. Dir., Or. Sec’y of State (March 10, 2010).

³ *Id.*

⁴ The age question includes a notice that states, “If you are 17 years of age, you will not receive a ballot until an election occurs on or after your 18th birthday.” Or. Sec’y of State, Online Voter Registration, <https://secure.sos.state.or.us/eim/vr/register.do?lang=eng>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Telephone Interview with Steve Trout, *supra* note 2.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* Election officials plan to introduce an application that will automatically supply each user’s county based on her address and zip code.

¹⁰ County officials are also normally responsible for attempting to verify an applicant’s DMV or Social Security numbers. But because online submissions are automatically verified against DMV records before they are submitted, county officials do not repeat this step. *Id.*