

# VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: MICHIGAN

## BACKGROUND

Michigan's Secretary of State oversees motor vehicle business as well as voter registration. Consequently, election officials were able to use the driver's license database as the foundation for the statewide voter registration database system they developed in 1998.<sup>1</sup> The two systems remain closely integrated: they have always shared voter registration data, and in 2007 they began sharing digitized signatures as well.<sup>2</sup>

Officials continue to require individuals to sign paper voter registration forms, which they mail to local election officials. Nonetheless, a person can vote a regular ballot on Election Day even if local officials fail to receive this form, provided she shows I.D. and supplies her signature at the polls.<sup>3</sup>

## OUTCOMES

### Voter Registration

In the 1970s Michigan pioneered the practice of introducing voter registration into motor vehicle transactions, and the program has consistently supplied over 80 percent of all voter registration transactions in the state.<sup>4</sup> These rates do not appear to have changed over the past decade.<sup>5</sup>

### Efficiency

Michigan administers voter registration at the level of cities and townships, resulting in over 1500 local election jurisdictions. This multiplies the risk that officials will mail voter registration forms to the wrong office; but due to automation, these mistakes no longer risk disenfranchising voters. State officials also credit the branch office registration system in large part for the fact that, in spite of the state's multiplicity of election jurisdictions, the number of provisional ballots cast in most years is minimal. Officials further note that their ability to audit electronic transactions makes it easier to address questions from voters.<sup>6</sup>

### Track Record

Automated transmissions and the statewide voter registration database system as a whole have operated without difficulty or incident. State officials are currently at work developing an online change-of-address service.<sup>7</sup>

## HOW PAPERLESS REGISTRATION WORKS IN MICHIGAN

### *1. For Visitors*

Michigan residents apply for driver's licenses and identification cards at branch offices of the Department of State, where employees ask unregistered visitors if they would like to register to vote.<sup>8</sup>

If a visitor responds affirmatively, the employee prints out a pre-populated registration form which the visitor must review, sign, and return. The form includes boxes the visitor must check to affirm that she is a citizen who is at least 18 years of age, or will be before the next election.<sup>9</sup> Interviewers also print out registration forms for registered voters who are updating their address: by law, Michigan residents must use the same address for both motor vehicle and voter registration purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Before 1998, when an interviewer asked a person if she wanted to register and the person said yes, the interviewer would give her a blank voter registration form to fill out and return.<sup>11</sup>

## *2. For Driver's License and Election Officials*

Driver's license records include a field indicating whether a visitor is registered to vote. If she is not, the interviewer is prompted by his computer program to ask the visitor if she would like to register. If she is registered and is changing the address for her driver's license or I.D. card, the programs prompts the interviewer to inform her that her voter registration address will also be updated, and to print a form for her signature.<sup>12</sup>

The driver's license system transfers registration data and digitized signatures to the statewide voter registration system every night.<sup>13</sup> The voter registration system runs a duplicate search on each application and then shares it with election officials in the applicant's locality, which it identifies using a street index that, in almost all cases, is able to verify addresses and assign a voting precinct as well.<sup>14</sup> With precinct assignments, address verification, and duplicate checks already complete, the application does not require a great deal of further review by local officials, whose main task is generally to wait for signatures to arrive in the mail and to issue registration cards once they do.<sup>15</sup>

New registrations remain incomplete without a physical signature. But as noted above, applicants can supply this on Election Day and still vote a regular ballot. Updates are fully valid even if an applicant's signature fails to reach local officials.<sup>16</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Telephone Interview with Brad Wittman, Election Liaison Div. Dir. & Tim Hanson, Dir. of Program Dev., Bureau of Elections, Mich. Dep't of State (Dec. 17, 2009) [hereinafter Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Dec. 17].

<sup>2</sup> Telephone Interview with Brad Wittman, Election Liaison Div. Dir. & Tim Hanson, Dir. of Program Dev., Bureau of Elections, Mich. Dep't of State (Feb. 5, 2010) [hereinafter Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Feb. 5].

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> See the Election Assistance Commission's NVRA Reports, available at <http://www.eac.gov/program-areas/research-resources-and-reports/completed-research-and-reports/national-voter-registration-act-studies>. The page includes a link to older NVRA Reports compiled by the Federal Election Commission.

<sup>5</sup> NVRA Report figures show a large jump in the number of registrations in the state, of all types, between 2001-02 and 2003-04. Election Liaison Division Director Brad Wittman reports that this coincides with a shift in the state's approach to gathering data for the reports, from surveying local officials to reporting figures taken directly from the statewide voter registration database system. According to Mr. Wittman the surveys were not always very reliable; about one-third of local jurisdictions did not respond with data for the 2001-02 NVRA Report. The apparent jump in 2003-04 is thus unlikely to reflect real growth in the number of motor vehicle registrations in the state. Telephone Interview with Brad Wittman (Mar. 5, 2010). See FED. ELECTION COMM'N, THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF ELECTIONS FOR FEDERAL OFFICE 2001-2002, at 44; U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMM'N, THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF ELECTIONS FOR FEDERAL OFFICE 2003-04, at 25, Table 2.

<sup>6</sup> Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Dec. 17, *supra* note 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*; Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Feb. 5, *supra* note 2. Name changes are forwarded to election officials automatically. Michigan does not record party preference in its registration process. *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Dec. 17, *supra* note 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*; Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Feb. 5, *supra* note 2.

<sup>13</sup> The two systems use parallel databases whose servers are housed in the same building in the state capital, and which share information through high-speed cable connections. Telephone Interview with Brad Wittman, Election Liaison Div. Dir. & Tim Hanson, Dir. of Program Dev., Bureau of Elections, Mich. Dep't of State (Mar. 24, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Brad Wittman & Tim Hanson Feb. 5, *supra* note 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*