

VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: NORTH CAROLINA

BACKGROUND

After approximately one year of development, the North Carolina Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) began electronically transmitting voter registrations in the summer of 2006.¹ DMV offices now print pre-populated voter registration forms for visitors in order to obtain their physical signatures, then scan these forms and send both the image files and direct data transfers to election officials.²

According to Marc Burris, IT Director for the State Board of Elections, state officials had been considering this step for some time before they were able to proceed using federal funding available under the Help America Vote Act. Development cost estimates are not available, except for approximately \$250,000 purchasing hardware for DMV offices.³

OUTCOMES

Voter Registration

On average, about 7.6 percent of North Carolina's citizen voting-age population submitted registrations or updates at DMV every two years from 2001-02 to 2005-06.⁴ But while 6.8 percent submitted registrations to DMV in 2005-06, 11.7 percent did so in 2007-08.⁵

Efficiency

Automation has reduced processing times at both DMV and county election offices. It has also helped standardize the way in which DMV offices handle voter registration generally, and reduced the number of registrations they inadvertently send to the wrong county. The automated system itself requires fairly little day-to-day oversight.⁶

Track Record and Future Plans

The automated system has not suffered any notable technical problems, though Mr. Burris is aware of one case in 2008 in which a registration failed to reach county officials although DMV officials appear to have duly processed it.⁷

Occasionally, election officials receive data for a registration without the accompanying image file containing the applicant's signature. According to Mr. Burris this can occur because the paper registration form has been lost or misplaced, or because a customer requested a registration form but left without returning it. As with unsigned mail-in forms, these submissions are incomplete, and in order to vote a regular ballot the individual must complete her registration.⁸ Doing so became significantly easier in 2007, when North Carolina began offering same-day registration at its early voting sites.⁹

State officials are in the process of developing an online registration system, which they are awaiting pre-clearance from the Department of Justice to implement. This may occur in 2010. They are also considering adopting a fully paperless system at the DMV, one that would eliminate paper forms through the use of digitized signatures.¹⁰

HOW PAPERLESS REGISTRATION WORKS IN NORTH CAROLINA

1. For Visitors

People apply for or renew a driver's license or identification card at the DMV by going through an interview, during which the interviewer asks if they would like to submit a voter registration or update. If a visitor answers affirmatively, the interviewer prints a pre-populated voter registration form for her signature.¹¹ Prior to 2006, interviewers provided interested individuals with blank registration forms to fill out and return.¹²

2. For Motor Vehicle and Election Officials

DMV employees conduct interviews by following a program on their computers that prompts them to ask about voter registration. As in Michigan, employees note registrations in their computers and collect signed applications from voters; but rather than drop them in the mail, employees scan these forms into their computer system as TIFF files.¹³

Each night the DMV system automatically sends both the image files and the raw data for each registration transaction to the statewide voter registration system, which checks to ensure that each image file is accompanied by a data transfer, and vice versa. The raw data are sent via secure FTP, the TIFF files through an IBM Messaging System.¹⁴

The state's voter registration system uses the data to match the application against DMV records and to check its own files for duplicate registrations. It then provides the data and the accompanying image file to elections office in the county of residence that the visitor reported to the DMV.¹⁵ If she identified the wrong county, local officials will look to her address to identify the proper destination and electronically redirect her application to officials there.¹⁶

County officials are responsible for confirming that each application is complete and that its address matches local records. If everything is in order, they assign a precinct and accept the application.¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Telephone Interview with Marc Burris, Info. Tech. Dir., N.C. Bd. of Elections (Mar. 4, 2010) [hereinafter Marc Burris Mar. 4]. Mr. Burris states that no vendors or programmers were brought in for the project, though contractors then working on the statewide registration system were involved to some extent.

² Telephone Interview with Marc Burris, Info. Tech. Dir., N.C. Bd. of Elections (Dec. 22, 2009) [hereinafter Marc Burris Dec. 22]; Telephone Interview with Marc Burris (Feb. 4, 2010) [hereinafter Marc Burris Feb. 4].

³ Marc Burris Dec. 22, *supra* note 2. The legislature authorized electronic transfers from the DMV in 2001. 2001 N.C. Sess. Laws 319 (H.B. 831) (modifying N.C. GEN. STAT. § 163-82.19).

⁴ FED. ELECTION COMM’N, THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF ELECTIONS FOR FEDERAL OFFICE 2001-2002, at 46; 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; U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMM’N, THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF ELECTIONS FOR FEDERAL OFFICE 2005-06, at 34. These reports are available at <http://www.eac.gov/program-areas/research-resources-and-reports/completed-research-and-reports/national-voter-registration-act-studies> (follow the link to access the 2001-02 report compiled by the Federal Election Commission). For estimates of the voting-age citizen population, see the Census Bureau’s detailed tables for reported voting and registration of the citizen voting-age population by state for federal election years, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20>.

⁵ *Id.*; U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMM’N, THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF ELECTIONS FOR FEDERAL OFFICE 2007-08, at 39, *available at* <http://www.eac.gov/program-areas/research-resources-and-reports/completed-research-and-reports/national-voter-registration-act-studies>. More accurate reporting may have played a role in increasing the percentage of transactions reported in 2007-08. According to Mr. Burris, the state previously relied on county reporting in supplying data for NVRA Reports, whereas now it reports tallies directly from the statewide system. Marc Burris Mar. 4, *supra* note 1.

⁶ Marc Burris Dec. 22, *supra* note 2.

⁷ *Id.* According to Mr. Burris, officials determined that this was an isolated incident and have taken steps to ensure it is not repeated.

⁸ Marc Burris Feb. 4, *supra* note 2.

⁹ *See* 2007 N.C. Sess. Laws Ch. 253 (H.B. 91).

¹⁰ According to Mr. Burris, officials decided to continue collecting physical signatures due in part to uncertainty as to whether North Carolina law allowed them to do without. They are now re-evaluating existing laws and considering an effort to seek new legislation. *Id.*

¹¹ Both new registrations and updates are proposed to the individual, and processed by the DMV, in the same way. Marc Burris Feb. 4, *supra* note 2.

¹² Marc Burris Dec. 22, *supra* note 2.

¹³ *Id.*; Marc Burris Feb. 4 *supra* note 2.

¹⁴ Marc Burris Mar. 4, *supra* note 1.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Marc Burris Dec. 22, *supra* note 2.