

VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: RHODE ISLAND

BACKGROUND

Rhode Island developed a statewide voter registration system in 2004, and election officials seized this opportunity to adopt a new process for collecting voter registrations at the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and transferring them to local election offices. According to Director of Elections Janet Ruggiero, the old paper-based approach produced an unacceptable number of lost registration claims, and officials hoped that electronic data transfers would prove more reliable¹

Because work on the automated system was bundled into the larger project of developing a statewide voter registration system, a total cost estimate is not available. However, Ms. Ruggiero estimates that the state incurred separate costs of \$20,000 for hardware and \$50,000 for programming at the DMV.² The new automated system debuted in August 2005.³

OUTCOMES

Voter Registration

DMV voter registrations have increased significantly following automation. In 2005, the state recorded 10,870 registrations at the DMV, compared to 26,043 in 2006, and a yearly average of 23,650 from 2006 through 2009.⁴

Efficiency

Ms. Ruggiero reports that the automated system saves time and improves accuracy at the local level by eliminating data entry, and with it the potential for keying errors. She states that it has proven far more reliable than the old paper-based system, so that problems with lost application claims on Election Day are largely a thing of the past.⁵

Track Record and Future Plans

According to Ms. Ruggiero, officials continue to receive a great deal of positive feedback from the public about the automated process, and it is popular with DMV and local election officials as well. There have been no technical problems with the new system.⁶

HOW PAPERLESS REGISTRATION WORKS IN RHODE ISLAND

1. For Visitors

People who visit the DMV to apply for or renew a driver's license or identification card go through an interview with DMV employees. At the end of the interview an employee asks each customer if she would like to register to vote, at which time she can also update an existing registration. If the

customer would like to make either a new registration or an update, the employee will inquire whether she has been previously registered and request a statement of party preference.⁷

Customers then move down the counter to an electronic pad that they use to make payments, answer further questions for the DMV, and provide a digitized signature.⁸ If a customer has initiated a registration transaction, the pad also presents her a set of questions about her age and eligibility to register.⁹

After a visitor signs her name at the pad and has her picture taken for the DMV, she receives a printed receipt which notes whether she made a voter registration transaction and, if so, what information she provided. Prior to 2005 employees printed pre-populated voter registration forms for interested customers.¹⁰

2. For Motor Vehicle and Election Officials

The DMV requires customers to submit their full Social Security number, which its computers check against the Social Security Administration's records in real time during interviews. If no match is found, the interview will not proceed, and the customer will not be given the chance to submit a registration.¹¹

At the end of an interview, DMV employees are prompted by their computer programs to ask customers whether they would like to submit or update a voter registration, and must indicate whether the customer answered yes or no. If a customer chooses to initiate a registration transaction, the interviewer's only additional task is to ask about previous registrations and party preference, and to copy the customer's responses into his computer.¹²

Registration data and accompanying digitized signatures are posted to a secure FTP site each night. A private vendor retrieves the applications, sorts them by town or city, and then enters them into the statewide voter registration system to be provided to local election officials. The state system uses a statewide street index to attempt to verify the address included in each application before it reaches local officials. Local election officials then resolve any duplicates, assign precincts, and accept applications.¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ Telephone Interview with Janet Ruggiero, Dir. of Elections, R.I. Sec’y of State (Feb. 23, 2010) [hereinafter Janet Ruggiero Feb. 23].

² *Id.*

³ Telephone Interview with Janet Ruggiero, Dir. of Elections, R.I. Sec’y of State (Mar. 9, 2010) [hereinafter Janet Ruggiero Mar. 9].

⁴ These figures, taken directly from the statewide registration database, were supplied by state officials. R.I. SEC’Y OF STATE, VOTER REGISTRATION STATISTICS 2005-2009 (on file with the Brennan Center); Telephone Interview with Janet Ruggiero, Dir. Of Elections, R.I. Sec’y of State (Mar. 24, 2010). More accurate reporting may play a role in the increase; previously the statewide system relied on local officials to designate DMV as the source of a registration when they performed data entry, whereas now it tallies electronic applications from DMV automatically. Note that the NVRA Reports for these years list significantly lower totals, reported by the State Board of Elections. Ms. Ruggiero was not able to account for this discrepancy. *Id.*; Janet Ruggiero Mar. 9, *supra* note 3. 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; 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> (showing a yearly average of only about 11,400 DMV transactions for this period).

⁵ Janet Ruggiero Feb. 23, *supra* note 1.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ The DMV is currently upgrading its system, and soon electronic pads will be available for these purposes at the desks where customers are interviewed. *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* Questions are specifically posed regarding Rhode Island residence and U.S. citizenship. Note that, unlike in Delaware, customers provide a single digitized signature regardless of whether they are completing a voter registration.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Janet Ruggiero Mar. 9, *supra* note 3.

¹³ Janet Ruggiero Feb. 23, *supra* note 1.