

VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: PENNSYLVANIA

BACKGROUND

In 1995 Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation (PennDOT) took the bold step of introducing a fully computerized system into its offices. Visitors may now use programs at self-service computer terminals to apply for a driver's license or I.D. card, change their address, and conduct other business. From the beginning these programs have also included question that allow users to indicate a desire to register to vote, or to update an existing registration.¹ Paper forms that include voter registration questions are also still available, but customers rarely use them.²

PennDOT typically printed registration requests and provided them to county election officials in hard copy until 2003, when a few county offices began accepting registration data through the new Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors (SURE).³ Other counties followed once this approach proved successful, and all had done so by the end of 2005.⁴

OUTCOMES

Voter Registration

Pennsylvania has been processing a very large number of motor vehicle registrations for many years. Between 2001 and 2008 the state received an average of over a million of these registrations annually, a total equivalent to over 10 percent of its voting-age citizen population.⁵ Full automation does not appear to have impacted these registration rates.

Efficiency

State election officials report that electronic applications from PennDOT are more accurate than paper, and quicker to process. They also note that the new system allows them to trace the history of any transaction from the time it is first submitted at a PennDOT office. On the debit side, they find that visitors who are not yet registered sometimes mistakenly submit address updates (rather than a new registration); county officials must then attempt to contact these people in order to obtain the full range of information they require to make a new registration.⁶

Track Record & Future Plans

Officials report no notable problems with the automated system. They are currently considering adopting online registration as well.⁷

HOW PAPERLESS REGISTRATION WORKS IN PENNSYLVANIA

1. For Visitors

When a person is doing business with PennDOT through a self-service computer terminal, the application program displays a question asking if she is registered to vote. It then asks whether she would like to register, if her answer was no; if it was yes, the program asks whether she would like to make changes to the address, telephone number, or party preference listed in her registration.⁸

If the visitor agrees to begin a registration transaction, the program asks whether she is an eligible U.S. citizen and Pennsylvania resident.⁹ It then poses a series of questions about her party preference and county of residence—and, if applicable, the name, address, and year of any previous registration.¹⁰ After she has answered these questions, the visitor reviews her responses, confirms that they are correct, and again affirms her eligibility to register.¹¹

If a registered voter is updating her address with PennDOT, the program specifically queries whether it should apply the update to her voter registration as well.¹² Individuals who use PennDOT's online change-of-address service may also update an existing voter registration.¹³ Finally, people can mail in paper application forms that include questions about voter registration. These paper forms are also available in PennDOT offices, as noted above, but people rarely prefer them to the computer terminals.¹⁴

2. For Motor Vehicle and Election Officials

Several times each week the PennDOT system batches all the applications it has received, along with their digitized signatures, and post them to an FTP site maintained by the SURE system. The system then sorts and directs applications to local election offices based on the county each user has entered. If no county is given, the SURE system will automatically assign one that corresponds to the applicant's zip code.¹⁵

County officials process applications from PennDOT in the same way they would any others, first running a duplicate check and assigning a precinct. The county system automatically attempts to verify each application against PennDOT records, and officials then decide whether to accept it. If they do, the statewide voter registration system automatically checks the application against a list of deceased residents.¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ Telephone Interview with Lindsey Hock, Voter Registr. Div. Chief, Pa. Dep't of State (Dec. 23, 2009); E-mail from Lindsey Hock (Jan. 5, 2010).

² E-mail from Lindsey Hock, Voter Registr. Div. Chief, Pa. Dep't of State (Apr. 7, 2010).

³ Telephone Interview with Lindsey Hock, Voter Registr. Div. Chief; Larry Boyle, Deputy Chief Counsel; David Burgess, Deputy Sec'y for Planning; & Jonathan Marks, Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors Div. Chief, Pa. Dep't of State, Jan. 28, 2010 [hereinafter Lindsey Hock et al.]. The legislature required in 2002 that PennDOT begin making electronic transfers once the statewide registration database was complete. See 2002 Pa. Legis. Serv. 3 (West), creating 25 PA. CONS. STAT. ANN. § 1323(c)(3.1).

⁴ Lindsey Hock et al., *supra* note 3.

⁵ The above totals are based on figures supplied by Pennsylvania officials. PA. DEP'T OF STATE, PENNDOT VOTER REGISTRATION STATISTICS (2010) (on file with the Brennan Center). The two-year NVRA Reports, however, report much lower motor voter figures until 2005-06, at which point they rise to match those cited here. The discrepancy may be due to a change in the way state officials report these numbers: they now use figures taken directly from the statewide system, rather than rely on county reports as in the past. Lindsey Hock et al., *supra* note 3. See the Federal Election Commission 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. For estimates of the voting-age citizen population, see the Census Bureau's detailed tables for voting and registration among the citizen voting-age population by state for federal election years, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20>.

⁶ Lindsey Hock et al., *supra* note 3.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Screenshots provided by the Pa. Dep't of State (Feb. 23, 2010) (on file with the Brennan Center).

⁹ The voter registration transaction will terminate if the visitor answers no to these questions. E-mail from Lindsey Hock, Voter Registr. Div. Chief, Pa. Dep't of State (Apr. 13, 2010).

¹⁰ *Id.* There are also optional questions about phone number and race or ethnicity.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Lindsey Hock et al., *supra* note 3.

¹³ E-mail from Lindsey Hock, Voter Registr. Div. Chief, Pa. Dep't of State (Mar. 15, 2010).

¹⁴ E-mail from Lindsey Hock, *supra* note 2.

¹⁵ Lindsey Hock et al., *supra* note 3. If officials do receive an application from someone who lives in another county, they can redirect it electronically to the appropriate office. But this does not often happen.

¹⁶ *Id.*