

Political Foes Team Up To Improve Voter Registration

by PAM FESSLER

November 3, 2009

text size **A A A**

In this lull between major elections, advisers from recent Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns have joined together to try to come up with a better way to register voters.

An estimated 2 million Americans were unable to vote in last year's elections because of problems with their registration. Others didn't even bother to register because it was too difficult.

"We have a voter registration system that doesn't really do what it ought to do," says Trevor Potter, former general counsel for Republican John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign.

Potter says many eligible voters don't end up on the rolls, often through no fault of their own. He — and a lot of other election experts — think that doesn't make sense. Why, he asks, is it the job of voters to get their names on the government's list?

So Potter has been meeting with Marc Elias, general counsel for Massachusetts Democrat Sen. John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign — and with a number of election officials, experts and interest groups — to see [if they can't come up](#) with a better system.

A New Way

In Delaware, a new system suggests one possible way forward. At the Delaware Department of Motor Vehicles, the system registers voters almost automatically when residents apply for new driver's licenses or update their old ones.

Elaine Manlove, Delaware's commissioner of elections, demonstrates the system. "It has my phone number, it has my date of birth, and my party change," she notes.

The system is very easy to use. Manlove signs her name on an electronic pad to affirm that the information is correct, using a stylus just like at the department store. A completed voter registration form appears on the screen. A DMV clerk hits "enter" to input the data. "And it's done — it's on its way to elections," Manlove says. "And then the elections office in Sussex is getting this as we speak, and they can process it."

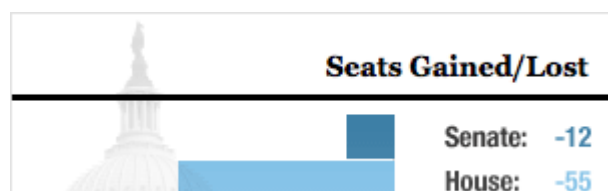
It's a far cry from before, when election officials sometimes waited days for piles of paper to arrive from the DMV and then entered the information into a computer — and that's if people even



Enlarge

Keith Srakocic/AP

Linda Graham helped register voters like Florence Dziarniski in 2008. Here, Dziarniski fills out a voter registration form outside a senior citizens home in Clairton, Pa.



bothered to fill out the forms in the first place. Now it's a quick click to either register or, if people prefer, decline to do so.

But Delaware's system is pretty much on the cutting edge. Many states still use older systems that rely more heavily on registration drives by outside groups, such as the community organizing group ACORN. These systems are more prone to error, duplication and even fraud.

"If we have a law that says you have to be registered in order to vote, then why wouldn't the government do something to put you on the list if you're entitled to be there, and to make sure the list is accurate?" Potter says.

He says the government already knows when someone turns 18 or becomes a naturalized citizen or moves and updates an address through the U.S. Postal Service.

Bipartisan Support

Doug Chapin with the Pew Center on the States says one idea for overhauling voter registrations is to have an individual's voter record be more portable and be automatically updated when he or she moves. Chapin says that could eliminate a lot of confusion at the polls.

"Election offices are swamped with thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of registration applications. And then they have a very small amount of time to turn those piles of paper into voter rolls, all the while checking eligibility, putting voters in the right precinct," Chapin says.

For now, there's a lot of bipartisan support to do something. Democrats think a more automatic system would make it easier to get people registered. And Republicans think it would reduce the potential for fraud.

Thad Hall, an election technology expert with the University of Utah, says that, as always, the devil is in the details.

"How do we make sure the system is secured and that people can feel confident that their information won't be in some way lost, stolen or otherwise used?" Hall says.

There are a lot of issues still to be worked out.

Hall and others think it could take years for something to happen, which is why they're glad people have begun talking about it now — away from the heat of the next big campaign.

comments

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Recent First 



david bockoven (davy_B) wrote:

Let me get this straight: A Republican thinks it would be beneficial to have Federal gov't agents track people down, record their exact whereabouts, keep track of their whereabouts, and do so in order to see to it that they get to vote? What hath God wrought?

What have I misunderstood? My mind keeps rejecting this input.

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 9:14:37 PM

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Mark Pachankis (KarlPopperFan) wrote:

geez, next thing you know the government will vote for us, so that way citizens can be totally passive

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 9:08:02 PM

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Elizabeth Tobias (GopherMPH) wrote:

Easy: Minnesota has same-day registration. Show up @ poll with either proof that you live at your address or someone to vouch that you do. Pow. Done. Of course, the next time you renew your driver's license, you can do it then too. That requires you to go in person anyway; might as well do it while you're there.

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 8:32:42 PM

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chuck vogt (breadline1) wrote:

just checkin da sit.

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 7:31:49 PM

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Zed Towers (ZedT) wrote:

You want to improve voter registration?? Here's how: STOP LETTING OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS GET BOUGHT-OUT BY SPECIAL INTERESTS. Maybe more of us would vote if we weren't ashamed of the criminals running for office.

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 6:43:48 PM

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Richard Cole (rlc) wrote:

I've always figured that if a person can't / won't take the time to find the township/village/city/county clerk and resister to vote they won't take the time to get informed before they vote. Yet the political types seem to act as though the quantity of voters is more important then the quality.

As for the SEIU, don't expect this administration to investigate them. Their boss, Andy Stein, seems to have easier access to the White House than Defense Secretary Gates or General McChrystal [IBD 11-03-09].

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 6:43:38 PM

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michael reed (hogman) wrote:

Love the photo! It says it all... An SEIU purple-shirt, tool and twin of ACORN. Yes, the same ACORN/SEIU already being investigated & prosecuted for voter fraud and voter intimidation in several states. Advisors assisting in registration of who - Mickey Mouse?

or some dead person? Yea, that's the picture we really should be seeing. Thanks NPR!

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 6:11:21 PM

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Mario Gonzalez (1radrev) wrote:

I'm surprised at Republican Trevor Potter's assigning responsibility for the registration of voters to the government. "Dictionary.com" says the etymology of the word "vote" is "vow", which I take to be a voluntary, intentional act. The right to vote is the right for citizens to take an intentional action to express their preference for one candidate over another. Part of that intentional action is registering themselves to vote. It's the individual voter's responsibility, not the government's. Should the process be streamlined and updated? No doubt. But registering is part of voting, just as obtaining a license is part of driving. I for one am grateful that there aren't groups going door-to-door helping folks fill out driver's license applications!

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 5:48:37 PM

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Your Government (DNCandRNC) wrote:

What I wish these two parties would do is focus on actually counting military absentee ballots. Time and time again these are not even counted.

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 3:56:19 PM

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Mark Pachankis (KarlPopperFan) wrote:

I wish NPR would have given examples of where it's "difficult" to register to vote. Most places require you AT MOST to go to your local courthouse, bring proof of residency, and fill out a form. How is that difficult for 99% of the population?

We should not automatically put people on the voter rolls. Can they opt out? Do they have to submit proof of residency?

Whatever happened to wanting to take part in the political system and doing what is required as a citizen. Are we so lazy that the state needs to register us to vote without us doing anything?

Tuesday, November 03, 2009 3:50:25 PM

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