

### **III. Statewide Voter Registration Systems**

# Statewide Voter Registration Systems

Task Force on the Federal Election System  
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## *Summary of conclusions*

1. Twenty states currently have statewide voter registration systems in place in or process, and all but eleven states now have some form of periodic centralized statewide voter list.
2. Improved computing and data networking capabilities have made statewide registration systems possible, but the most important impetus to the adoption of statewide systems was the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). NVRA made voter registration available through driver's license bureaus and other government offices, and states have turned to centralized voter lists to achieve better coordination between local registrars and state and local governmental service agencies. NVRA also set stricter standards for voter list management, and states have found centralized registration lists to help in list maintenance, for instance, in identifying duplicate registrations and in facilitating re-registrations by people who have moved within state.
3. Statewide voter registration systems require standardization of data formats and computing platforms, which has been a challenge to achieve in large states and in states with radically decentralized voter registration responsibilities. Michigan is the largest and most complex state yet to implement a statewide voter registration system.

Historically, voter registration has been administered, except in Alaska and Oklahoma, almost exclusively on the local level, by city, town, and township registrars in much of New England and the Great Lakes and by county registrars almost everywhere else. Recently, as computerization has opened new possibilities and voter list management has become more difficult, states have begun to coordinate voter registration through centralized voter lists.

South Carolina was the first to create a computerized statewide registration list, a compilation of local registries, in 1968. Kentucky followed suit in 1973, consolidating local voter registration records in an active statewide database. Louisiana piloted a centralized list in 1983 and extended it statewide in 1987.

By now, eleven states and the District of Columbia have already implemented statewide registration systems that cover all their jurisdictions. Seven more states are midstream in implementation, and three more states are on the verge of adoption. The 20 states with full statewide systems in place or in process are able to give local election officials access to complete statewide registration lists, often but not always in real time. Altogether, these 20 states and the District account for 39.2 percent of the voting age citizen population of the United States.

Most of the rest of the states are moving toward better coordination of local voter registries. Fourteen states (with 17.8 percent of the voting age population) have or plan minimal systems to collect local voter lists and to check them for duplicate registrations. In between are eleven states that have coordinated systems with partial coverage of election jurisdictions. Altogether, 80.8 percent of the adult citizen population lives in one of the 39 states and the District with at least rudimentary statewide capacity for administration of voter registration.

Many factors have promoted the development of statewide voter registration systems. Computerization of records and faster communications technologies made effective statewide systems imaginable in the 1980s, and the pioneering systems in Kentucky and Louisiana worked on the model of one-way local access to mainframe databases. With innovations in networked computing and database management software, the mainframe systems were soon considered obsolete. Kentucky in fact overhauled its system in 1995, in response to the National Voter Registration Act. The new systems are superior in their capacity for interactivity. Michigan's Qualified Voter File (QVF), for instance, works on a model of two-way local access to centralized servers in Lansing via the Internet. New information is communicated from local QVF offices to Lansing and updated data are communicated back in less than an hour.

The passage of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) in 1993 provided a major impetus for the adoption of statewide registration systems.<sup>1</sup> First, NVRA required states to allow voter registration through driver's license bureaus and social service agencies. Statewide registration systems were an adaptation that made possible better coordination and data sharing between voter registration agencies and the other registration offices specified by NVRA. In the Michigan system, for example, voter registration records and motor vehicle records are fully integrated. Michigan turned the driver's license number into the registration ID number and changed its motor vehicle license code so that the voter registration address became the driver's license address. Changes to one record automatically cause changes to the other.

Second, NVRA set new and stricter standards for voter list maintenance. It allowed registrars to remove citizens from the rolls (subject to particular safeguards) only at their own request, because of criminal convictions, death, or mental incapacity, or because of a change of address. In the new management environment, statewide registration systems had attractive list maintenance capabilities. They slimmed voter registration rolls by allowing identification of existing duplicate registrations. They improved processing of in-state changes of address by pairing the incorporation of new voter registration records with deletion of the old records. If integrated successfully with motor vehicle registers, statewide systems also improved detection of changes of address to out of state, triggered by driver's license cancellations. With its new system, Michigan claims to have eliminated 600,000 duplicate and ineligible registrations. Integration with corrections records and vital records, which so far has proven difficult, may bring still greater efficiencies in list management.

An examination of the states that have yet to attempt statewide systems provides insight into the difficulties. Clearly, one challenge to the development of statewide registration is sheer size. To date, the largest state to implement a statewide system is Michigan, with about 6.8 million citizens of voting age, the nation's eighth largest electorate. If Florida goes forward with its plans, it will become the largest state to undertake the task, with an electorate of 9.8 million, the fourth largest. Prominent among the states that have not yet adopted even a partial system of statewide registration are New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and New Jersey, the third, fifth, sixth, and ninth most populous jurisdictions. In addition, the systems in California (largest) and Texas (second) are not very far advanced. Texas's system has only 109 of its 256 counties on line, and California's does not yet include Los Angeles County.

For the largest states, the challenge is just the absolute size of the task. For statewide systems to work, local records must be converted to common format and made to work on common platforms. The administrative obstacles of database conversion and system conversion are formidable. And, as Maryland has discovered, experienced vendors with turnkey systems in hand are in short supply.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, South Carolina's first-in-the-nation system was a response to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which put pressure on the state to insure uniform and scrupulous administration of voter registration.

A second obvious challenge to the implementation of statewide voter registration systems is the number and diversity of the local voter registration offices that must be coordinated. Also prominent among states that have not yet adopted even a partial statewide system are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Wisconsin, all states in which elections are administered by city, town, and township governments rather than county governments. Statewide systems in radically decentralized states require reconciliation of many, vastly different local voter registration practices.

In both respects, both in size and complexity, Michigan represents an attractive model. Michigan is a large state with a large city, Detroit. Michigan is also the state with the largest number of jurisdictions that manage federal elections, 273 city and 1242 township governments. The Michigan QVF was accomplished at a considerable expense (which was spread out, in part, over a much-needed overhaul of its motor vehicle system). The State provided both hardware and software, at State expense, to 83 county clerks and to 236 clerks of cities and townships over 5000 population. Ninety-four smaller jurisdictions opted to purchase the infrastructure at their own expense. As a result, 83 counties and 363 larger cities and townships, with about 80 percent of the Michigan electorate, have direct, real-time access to the Qualified Voter File. The remaining 1151 cities and townships share access through county QVF sites. Now that the start-up costs are paid, Michigan believes that local governments realize considerable cost savings in voter list management. The most recent FEC report on the implementation of NVRA finds that many other states have found their investments in statewide computerized voter registration lists worthwhile.

As technology develops, statewide registration systems hold even greater promise. First, statewide voter registration systems might facilitate statewide provisional balloting. After Election Day, election officials could quickly verify registration in other counties and accept votes cast for common offices. Second, statewide voter registration systems with real-time access on Election Day might make same-day registration possible even in states with histories of “early and often” voting. By entering Election Day registrations directly onto registration databases, election administrators could prevent the same person from voting at multiple sites.<sup>2</sup> Finally, statewide registration systems coupled with electronic voting systems might make it possible for voters to cast their ballots not only at their home precincts but at any precinct in the state. As of 1990, 17.7 percent of employed persons worked outside their county of residence, and 30.5 percent lived more than 30 minutes away from their workplace. The numbers of commuters and the distance of commutes continue to rise. If it were technologically possible to verify registration and call up the correct ballot anywhere in the state, citizens could vote near work, near school, or near errands and not only near home. Statewide registration systems, that is, might make it possible to make participation in elections more convenient for legitimate voters without adding to the risk of election fraud.

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia already treats the entire state as a single jurisdiction for registration purposes, so that in-state migrants need not re-register in order to vote.

*Selected references*

Election Data Services Inc. and AutoGenesis Systems Inc., “Developing a statewide voter registration database: Procedures, alternatives, and general models,” Office of Election Administration, Federal Election Commission, August 1997.

Federal Election Commission, Office of Election Administration, “The impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 on the administration of elections for federal office, 1999–2000,” final draft, June 2001.

InfoSentry Services Inc., “Needs and requirements for an Oregon Centralized Voter Registration System,” report prepared for the Secretary of State of Oregon, 18 March 1999.

Michigan Department of State, “Michigan’s Qualified Voter File system,” typescript, 5 June 2001.

Voter registration systems, by state

State	Local voter registration systems	State periodically collects local voter registries	State has some local registries on line	State has all local registries on line
Alabama			Yes	Implementing
Alaska				Yes
Arizona		Yes		
Arkansas				Yes
California		Yes	Implementing	
Colorado			Yes	Nearing passage
Connecticut				Implementing
Delaware				Yes
D.C.				Yes
Florida		Implementing		Nearing passage
Georgia				Implementing
Hawaii				Yes
Idaho	Yes			
Illinois		Yes		
Indiana		Yes		Nearing passage
Iowa			Yes	
Kansas		Yes		
Kentucky				Yes
Louisiana				Yes
Maine	Yes			
Maryland			Yes	Implementing
Massachusetts				Implementing
Michigan				Yes
Minnesota				Yes
Mississippi	Yes			
Missouri			Yes	
Montana		Yes		
Nebraska			Implementing	
Nevada	Yes			
New Hampshire	Yes			
New Jersey		Yes		
New Mexico		Yes		
New York	Yes			
North Carolina				Implementing
North Dakota	No voter registration			
Ohio		Yes		
Oklahoma				Yes
Oregon	Yes			
Pennsylvania	Yes			
Rhode Island		Yes		
South Carolina				Yes
South Dakota	Yes			
Tennessee		Implementing	Planned	
Texas			Yes	
Utah			Yes	

Vermont	Yes			
Virginia				Yes
Washington		Yes		
West Virginia		Implementing		
Wisconsin	Yes			
Wyoming			Implementing	
United States	11 current	11 current 3 implementing	7 current 3 implementing 1 planned	12 current 7 implementing 3 nearing passage

Source: "Statewide Voter Registration Systems," Election Data Services Inc., 31 May 1997, updated from Mary M. Janicki, "Statewide Voter Registration Systems," Connecticut Office of Legislative Research, 17 January 2001, Council of State Governments Elections Task Force, "Innovative Election Practices," 1999, and "2001 Legislative Scan on Election Reform," Center for Policy Alternatives, 9 May 2001.