

# Elections in the Digital World

From registering to vote to finding your polling place, digital solutions are coming online.

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BY WENDY UNDERHILL

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**E**verything from paying bills to buying movie tickets to applying for a job can be done digitally these days. But can elections go digital?

The answer is a qualified “yes.” Some states register voters online, distribute election information by email, and use computerized polling places. Beyond these core functions, elections digerati are designing easily navigable websites, and putting Facebook, Twitter, texting and mobile apps to work.

How and when states adopt new technologies vary, depending on their laws and their leaders. North Carolina is a particular hotbed for elections innovation, thanks in part to Marc Burris, chief information officer for the State Board of Elections. He’s even looking into experimenting with voter check-in kiosks in 2012. “It works for the airlines, doesn’t it?” says Burris.

Elections kiosks are only a concept at this point. There are, however, technologies that have been vetted in real-world applications in at least some states. Here are seven of them.

## 1. Online Voter Registration

Most folks register to vote at their motor vehicle bureaus when they get or renew their driver’s licenses. But some voters who haven’t taken advantage of this one-stop shopping site for government services still want to register.

For them, all states allow citizens to fill out a paper registration form and submit it to a local elections office. In Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington, voters are also permitted to register online.

Putting the words “online” and “voter” in the same phrase can raise concerns about security. In practice, though, online registration may be more secure than paper registrations because the data submitted are checked electronically against existing data, and third-party get-out-the-vote campaigners are not involved in the transaction. It also costs much less.

Maryland lawmakers passed a bill last year to permit online

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*Wendy Underhill tracks election issues for NCSL.*



voter registration. “I look at it as very nonpartisan,” says Delegate Jon Cardin, the bill’s sponsor. “Online voter registration is about making it more convenient.”



*Delegate  
Jon Cardin  
Maryland*

It makes registration much more cost-effective, too. Maricopa County, Ariz., saw the cost drop from 83 cents per paper-based registration to 3 cents for online registrations when the state began offering that option in 2004.

Are there downsides? An initial outlay is required. Washington, the second state to use online registration in 2008, spent \$278,000 in upfront costs. While more than 70 percent of Americans have access to the Internet, not everyone does, so states must be sensitive to that “digital divide” and continue to offer paper-based registration.

## 2. Paper or Online?

Many states, especially those with a strong citizen initiative process, specify in statute what information or educational materials must be provided to voters before each election. Since legal language often can be difficult to read and understand, providing plain language explanations is imperative. In some states, information about candidates, including candidate statements, also must be printed and mailed.



*“Online voter registration is about making it more convenient.”*

*—Maryland Delegate Jon Cardin*

That comes at a price. Printing the “blue book,” as the voter information booklet is called in Colorado, costs \$100,000 for 1.86 million copies. Mailing those out to every household in Colorado costs an additional \$310,000.

In California counties, between 11 percent and 46 percent of the total cost of elections in 2008 went to getting out voter information, according to the Pew Center on the States.

It’s no surprise, then, that states are exploring ways to skip the costs of printing and mailing by providing the required voter information electronically. Step one is to create an online document and a printer-friendly PDF document that citizens can access at the state’s election website.

To save money, though, these e-documents would need to replace mailed documents. Such a big change in tradition is sure to meet with resistance. One solution is to offer voters the choice to “opt out” of a mailed paper copy, and instead receive the document electronically. California authorized counties to provide that choice in January 2011, and many citizens immediately opted for the e-version.

“Our economy and common sense demand that we do more with less. This shift allows counties to save money and reduce waste. Each step in this direction is a victory for all of us,” says California Senator Kevin de León. “L.A. County alone anticipates savings of \$5 million to \$8 million per election cycle.”

### 3. Just Google It

When voters search “Virginia polling places” in Google, the first result is the Virginia State Board of Elections, which is exactly what they and the Virginia elections board want. But not all states are so successful at search-engine optimization—getting their websites to show up as the first in a results list.

The Pew Center on the States measured search engine optimization and many other elements of state elections websites for all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. Its report, “Being Online Is Still Not Enough: Reviews and Recommendations for State Election Websites 2010,” scored states on how well their websites performed from a voter’s perspective.

“Voters expect government services to keep pace” with the rest of the world, says Pew Senior Associate Matthew Morse. When people get their information online, it costs the state less than if they make a phone call for it. Good websites mean “states can both perform better and save money.”

The report identifies what features make a website go from “good” to “great.” These include writing in terms an eighth-grader can understand; logical and easily navigable menus; great look-up tools for address-specific information such as polling place locations; and specific sections for overseas and military voters.

On the up side, the study found the nation is doing better at addressing the needs of military and overseas voters. Out of 51 jurisdictions—the states plus the District of Columbia—50 have dedicated web sections for them.

Not so good is website navigability, where only nine of the 51 received full marks. Overall, though, “election websites are generally improving, and that’s good news,” says Morse.

### 4. Apps for Voting

Eligible voters need to know where to vote, when to vote and how to vote. Some states mail cards with that information, but errors sometimes occur, requiring mailing a corrected card, which can double the cost.

All this information is probably already online. But what about voters who are on the road? There’s an app for them. Through the Voting Information Project—a collaboration between the Pew Center on the States and Google—election officials, advocacy groups, candidates and others can adopt free tools to provide voters with accurate, personalized voting information, often on Election Day.

So far, 34 states are providing raw data to the voting project. The group creates a piece of computer code that programmers can incorporate in their apps. The more states that use it, the better. It means the same accurate voter information will be available in many locations.

“It was easy to implement and can be used on its own, or to complement existing applications,” says Linda McCulloch, Montana’s secretary of state, one of the early adopters.

For those who aren’t carrying smartphones, there’s still mobile help in some states. In North Carolina, an automated voter lookup function is just a text away. Voters simply text their name to the text address, and it replies with individualized voting



*Senator  
Kevin de León  
California*



information such as the polling place location. Both poll workers and voters have used this function.

### 5. Tweet This

“Today is Election Day. Be sure to vote!” Many tweets such as this have been sent by state election officials.

North Carolina’s Burris hopes to use Twitter to both receive and send information this year. On a trial basis, he plans to post quick response or QR codes, those black and white geometric icons that are showing up in newspapers, on billboards and on product packaging.

Voters with smartphones can take a picture of the icon, which the phone decodes and then connects the user to the state’s Twitter account. Once there, the voter can send a tweet reporting any problems, such as a polling place that isn’t open or that ballots have run out. It’s a short and sweet way to communicate—in two directions.

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—California Senator Kevin de León  
discussing electronic election documents

### 6. E-Books

Imagine this typical Election Day scenario: A voter shows up at a polling place and says, “I’m Ashley Smith, and I’m here to vote.” A poll worker searches through pages and pages of paper for Smith’s name on a list of the precinct’s registered voters and finds no entry, all while other voters wait in line. The poll worker may eventually

determine the correct polling place, but by then it may be too late for Smith to vote.

Now imagine Smith arriving at the wrong polling place, but this time it’s equipped with electronic poll books, probably a laptop linked to a registration database. The poll worker types in her name and address, and within minutes she is directed to the right polling place.

Similar technology works for banks, medical facilities, schools and most large institutions, so why not for elections? Electronic poll books can handle voter look-up, voter identification, polling place location and voting history, and can even make modifications to the voter’s record on the spot.

It’s no surprise, then, that e-poll books are spreading. At least 14 states permit their use: California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Washington.

Besides reducing waiting and hassles for voters, they also record in real time who has cast a vote, cutting down on the chance of fraud.

Switching to e-poll books has up-front costs. Adding two or three laptops at each

polling place has a significant initial price tag for local elections offices. Those initial costs, though, can lead to big savings. Wendy Noren, the county clerk in Boone County, Mo., expects to hire 25 percent fewer poll workers now that she's made the transition to e-poll books.

A cautionary note: Computers with inaccurate data are no better than paper lists with outdated information. Maintaining accurate e-poll books must be a high priority.

## 7. Internet Voting Pilots

Voting over the Internet is one digital idea that is not coming to a precinct near you anytime soon. For a host of security reasons, Internet voting is nobody's favored solution to running elections. It is, however, a potential solution for military and overseas voters.

Americans living abroad, including members of the military, can't always find a fax machine, printer or even a mailbox. For them, the only way to communicate may be over the Internet, and experiments in voting that way have begun. For instance, five West Virginia counties piloted Internet voting for overseas citizens in 2010. The pilot received good reviews from some, and cautions from others concerned with the potential for electronic vote stealing.

This year, Alabama Senator Gerald Dial sponsored successful legislation to create an Electronic Overseas Voting Advisory Committee, which will set up an Internet voting system on a trial basis. "We're a big military state, so we felt like we owed it to those people who are deployed all over the world" to reduce the hurdles they face in trying to vote. "They ought to be the first people to get in line and vote."



*Senator  
Gerald Dial  
Alabama*

Dial acknowledges "there's always apprehension about fraud and misuse," so Alabama will make security a priority for the new program. "Once we prove this works well for our military, we can expand it to other areas."

Earlier this year, the Department of Defense announced the availability of \$16.4 million to help develop electronic options for military and overseas citizens who vote absentee.

Bob Carey, director of the Federal Voting Assistance Program, says his group "continuously researches how to improve ballot transmission rates. One way ... is to research the technology used by the voters. This money gives states a chance to experiment with prod-

ucts and see what helps military and overseas voters most."

The rush to technological solutions is tempting, but North Carolina's Burris cautions legislators and administrators to be sensitive to those who are not as enthusiastic about the digital world.

"As new applications become available in the elections world, they are best introduced as

additions to, rather than substitutions for, the traditional ways of doing things." 

### SL ONLINE

Learn more about the role of digital solutions in elections and the report "Being Online Is Still Not Enough: Reviews and Recommendations for State Election Websites 2010" in an interview with Pew Senior Associate Matthew Morse at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).