NCSL-Democracy Fund Project
Elections 2020: Policy, Funding and the Future
Rhode Island

A team of Rhode Island legislators, legislative staff, the Secretary of State and other state and local election officials convened in Providence on Jan. 14, 2016 to discuss elections-related technology. Topics included online voter registration, e-poll books, student poll workers, testing equipment before an election and tabulating votes.

A Profile of Elections in Rhode Island

- Turnout: 58 percent in the November 2012 General Election, 35th in the nation[1]
- Registered voters: 752,338[2]
- Equipment: precinct-based optical scanners, and ballot marking devices for ADA compliance
- Overall rank on The Pew Charitable Trusts' 2012 Elections Performance Index: 34

The Morning: Presentation by City of Warwick Board of Canvassers

A presentation was given by election staff from the city of Warwick on the role of local election officials in the election process, including voter registration, maintenance of the voter list and selection of poll workers.

- Rhode Island has a statewide networked voter registration system. Each city or town in Rhode Island is responsible for registering its voters, and conducting the day to day maintenance of the list. However the Secretary of State's office maintains the central list and assists cities/towns with maintenance.
- The statewide voter registration system and the department of motor vehicle (DMV) database are closely linked. Each night, information regarding new voters and address changes is uploaded from the DMV to the statewide registration system. This information then goes down to the local jurisdictions so that they can update their records.
- While Rhode Island is not one of the 29 states that offers online voter registration, Rhode Islanders can update their own address through a DMV website, which updates it for voting as well. If a voter moves to a different address within the same city, the address will be automatically updated in the voter registration system. If the voter moves to a new city, he or she will be sent a new voter registration form so that the new city has the voter's signature on file.
- Warwick sends its elected officials, such as state legislators, lists of new voters so that they can conduct outreach.
- Warwick has a robust student poll worker program, something recommended by many elections experts. They also conduct presentations at high school assemblies on the importance of registration and voting.

The Morning Continued: Presentation by State Board of Elections

A presentation was given by staff from the State Board of Elections on the work that goes into testing and preparing voting machines to be distributed to polling places statewide, and the process for tabulating votes on election night.

- Rhode Island is one of a handful of states with both a Secretary of State with election administration responsibilities, and also a Board of Elections (BOE).

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[1] Percentage of voting eligible population, courtesy of The Pew Charitable Trusts' Elections Performance Index
[2] Total active, inactive and pending voters as of January 21, 2016.

- In addition to storing and maintaining voting machines and providing support for jurisdictions on Election Day, the board is responsible for campaign finance and election complaints.
- Rhode Island's precinct tabulators were purchased in 1997. These use technology developed in the 1960s and 1970s to read ballots and store data.
- According to a recent report from the Brennan Center for Justice the projected lifespan of voting systems is 10 to 15 years. Forty-three states will be using machines that are more than ten years old in the 2016 election, and Rhode Island is one of 14 states that bought their systems more than 15 years ago. Rhode Island purchased AutoMARK ballot marking devices to assist voters with disabilities more recently, in 2006.
- The voting machine vendor no longer provides replacement parts for these machines, but the BOE has sufficient spare machines they can use for parts to maintain their system.
- The BOE conducts pre-election testing for the precinct optical scanners and ballot marking devices that are used throughout the state.
- Many security measures help ensure the integrity of the machines. For example, seals are used as indicators that a machine has not been tampered with and, at the beginning of Election Day, four poll workers must sign the "zero tape" indicating that there were no votes on the machine when the polls opened for the day.
- There are safeguards against counterfeit ballots. Ballots are printed on stock that is not commonly available and special ink is used during printing. Special marks on the official ballot also prevent it from being read on a machine in a different precinct, and poll workers keep a detailed accounting log of all ballots, before and after they are voted.
- The BOE supported 38 elections in 2015, including town meetings, fire districts and the state retirement board.

The Afternoon: A Conversation on the Future of Rhode Island Elections

Participants identified and discussed key issues in election technology and administration that will be facing Rhode Island in the near future. The conversation, facilitated by Merle King from Kennesaw State University, centered primarily on the use of e-poll books in Rhode Island. Jurisdictions in at least 32 other states currently use e-poll books. Questions posed by Mr. King included:

What are some of the features of e-poll books that may be useful for Rhode Island?
- Providing detailed information on where and when voters are voting.
- With paper poll books, polling places are usually arranged to funnel voters with last names A-D into one line, E-J into another, etc. Since an e-poll book can look up all voters, one line is possible and there is no risk of voters waiting in the wrong line.
- The check-in process is faster. This is especially true if the e-poll books also have a signature pad that can swipe a driver's license and automatically bring up a voter's information.
- Faster reporting of who voted. Currently, every voter in Rhode Island fills out a ballot application containing a bar code on Election Day. After Election Day local officials scan each of these bar codes in order to note who voted, a process that can take days or even weeks. E-poll books could allow an immediate download of this information so that it can be made publically available to candidates and others much quicker.

What are some considerations for Rhode Island in implementing e-poll books?
- Compatibility: Will the software used for the e-poll books be compatible with other aspects of the election system? As election systems start to incorporate more and more technology there is a need for different systems to be able to "talk" to each other. For example, the software and data format used for the statewide voter registration system will need to be compatible with the corresponding systems in the e-poll book.
- Testing: How do you test all e-poll books to ensure that they are doing what you need them to do, and they are performing uniformly? What is the process for testing these systems, and who is responsible for testing? A pilot to ensure the e-poll books are working as they should is also helpful.
- Statutory requirements: It's important to ensure that statutes are updated as appropriate to allow the implementation of new technology.

Resources

- NCSL offers technical assistance, testimony and other in-person help as needed, and can provide research on any topics useful to Rhode Island policymakers
- NCSL's [Election Technology Overview](#) webpage
- NCSL's [Election Tech Funding News](#)
- NCSL's webpage on [Online Voter Registration](#) (additional backup material is also available)
- NCSL's webpage on [Electronic Poll Books](#) (additional backup material is also available)
- NCSL's Nov. 12, 2013 webinar [Online Voter Registration: The Bipartisan Trend in Elections](#)
- Articles from NCSL's election administration newsletter The Canvass:
  - [Election Funding for 2020 and Beyond](#)
  - [Elections Technology: Nine Things Legislators May Want to Know](#)
  - [Burning Questions at NCSL's Policy and Elections Technology Conference](#)
  - [Online Voter Registration Grows in 2014](#)
  - [All About E-Poll Books](#)
  - [Voting Technology: Current and Future Choices](#)
  - [Voting Technology Standards: What Legislators Need to Know](#)
- The Pew Charitable Trusts' report on [Online Voter Registration: Trends in Development and Implementation](#)
- The Pew Charitable Trusts' report on [Understanding Online Voter Registration](#)
- The U.S. Election Assistance Commission's (EAC) webpage on [Voting Technology Procurement](#)
- The EAC's webpage on state [Electronic Poll Book Requirements](#)
- EAC'S webpage containing [Voting System Reports](#)
- EAC report [Ten Things to Know About Selecting a Voting System](#)
- EAC report [Ten Things to Know about Managing Aging Voting Systems](#)
- EAC'S [Quick Start Management Guide on Technology in Elections](#)
- The Brennan Center's [America's Voting Machines at Risk](#)
- The Brennan Center's [Guidance for Election Officials with Aging Voting Equipment](#)

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