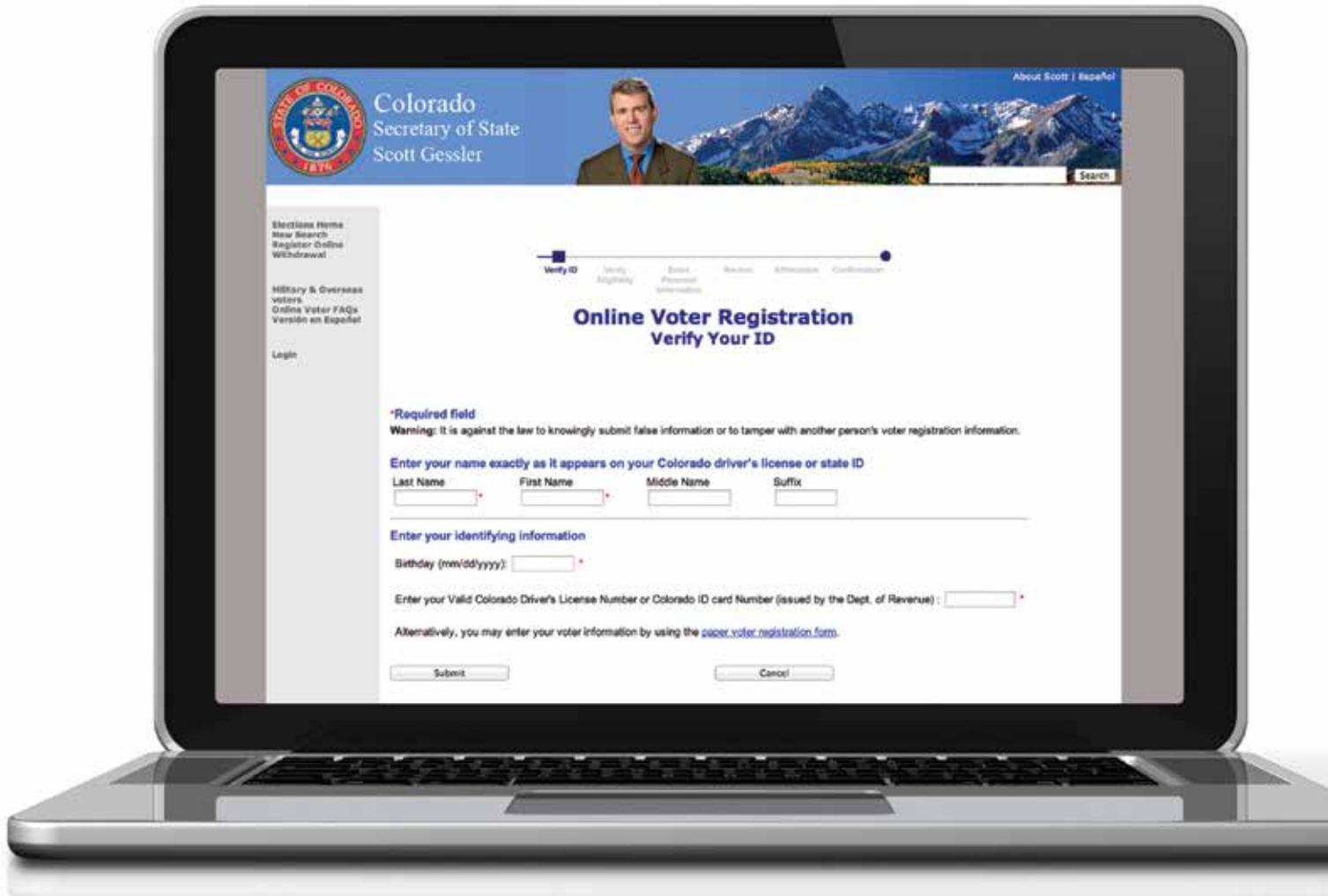


No Lines Online

More states are offering voters the convenience of registering online because it's cheap, easy and increasingly secure.



BY WENDY UNDERHILL

Online voter registration is a nonpartisan trend with a capital “T.”

We know it's a trend because of history: Arizona led the way in 2002, Washington was second in 2008, and today, 17 states offer, or will soon offer, online voter registration. And, legislatures in at least 12 states are considering it this year.

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We know it's nonpartisan because it appeals to efficiency-minded lawmakers from both sides of the aisle. Democratic states such as Maryland and Washington have it, and so do Republican states such as Arizona and South Carolina (where it passed unanimously in 2012).

But what exactly is it? What's called online registration or electronic registration is in fact just the opportunity for a citizen to complete an online *application* for voter registration. (Voters are still welcome to fill out a paper application if they prefer.) As with a paper-based registration, authorities check eligibility before the registration is completed and the voter's data are transferred into the statewide database.

Easy on Voters and a Cost Saver

“I’m a huge fan of online registration because it has made registration easy for our citizens,” says Scott Gessler, Colorado’s Republican secretary of state. In 2012, Colorado went a step beyond a computer-based online registration process and developed a web-optimized version that makes it possible to register from smartphones and tablets. Gessler also ran a \$1 million public education campaign in the summer and early fall—one of the reasons that registrations in the Centennial State jumped 13 percent compared to four years earlier.

“I look at it as a way to increase the franchise as much as possible, but also a way to increase security,” says Gessler. By giving people the opportunity to update their own registration record, the system also “cleans up our database at the same time—and we’re not doing it by spending a massive amount of state resources.”

By state resources, Gessler means money. Setting up online systems has been relatively inexpensive for states. On the low end, Utah spent \$37,000 on initial costs, and Oregon characterized its expenses as “minimal.” Colorado spent \$120,000, mostly for programming. And on the high end, Louisiana estimates it spent \$750,000 to \$1 million; its system includes a number of add-ons, such as the option to request an absentee ballot online. All states report that ongoing expenses are absorbed within existing departments.

The money question is really more about savings than costs. For example, in Arizona, a paper-based registration costs 83 cents to process, while an online registration comes in around 3 cents. From a national perspective, David Becker of the Pew Charitable Trusts says research indicates that “states that have implemented online registration have improved access to the rolls, greatly increased accuracy and experienced significant cost savings.”

Security Steps

Costs and convenience don’t seem to be a problem. What about security? How do we know if a person is really who he says he is? In Colorado, to use the online voter registration system, citizens must have a Colorado driver’s license or identity card, both of which required a visit at some point to a state department of motor vehicles office with appropriate identification in hand.

Other states use similar systems. That provides a degree of certainty that “a human being is behind every registration,” says Gessler.

There’s another level of security to consider: protection against hacking. In 2012, computer scientists, including the University of Michigan’s J. Alex Halderman, pointed out vulnerabilities in Maryland’s and Washington’s online voter registration

systems. “What legislators need to remember is that voter registration is an important part of the overall security of the election system,” Halderman says. “Security experts must be consulted during the design of the system, adequate security testing must be conducted before the system goes live, and ongoing monitoring and threat-detection efforts must be built in.”

And yet, he’s a fan: “It’s possible to do online voter registration securely. We just need to take the necessary precautions.”



SL ONLINE

To read a Q and A with computer expert J. Alex Halderman, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.