

Online and Ready to Vote

Online voter registration. Although the phrase doesn't have much pizzazz, the concept undeniably does. And it's storming the states like no other elections-related trend in recent memory.

In 2008, only two states allowed eligible citizens to complete a voter registration application online by using personal data stored at the motor vehicle agency. Now, 26 states do—and at least three more are lined up to join the crowd soon.

As the online voter registration trend has developed, legislators have found solutions to several big concerns along the way.

In 2008, when only Arizona and Washington had online voter registration, the concern was over people who didn't have access to

computers. What would they do? The answer: Make online registrations a supplement to, not a replacement of, registrations by mail or at the motor vehicle bureau (the most common way people register).

By 2010, when Colorado, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Oregon and Utah introduced online registration, the questions had turned to costs. Would going online save taxpayer money or end up costing more? The answer: Setup cost for a mid-size state is roughly \$250,000. After that, states save money on every registration transaction because they don't have to pay to re-key information. (A Pew study found that in Arizona, for example, registrations on paper cost 83 cents to process, while an online transaction cost 3 cents.)

In 2012, when California, Maryland, Nevada, New York and South Carolina had joined the group, the question turned political. Which party benefits? The answer: Neither. Online registrations are in proportion to the number of Democrats and Republicans in the state, and are not skewed either way.

In 2014, when Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota and Missouri came aboard, security was the concern. Although it's hard to say anything is absolutely secure, states have built in many security measures.

This year, when Hawaii, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Vermont and West Virginia turned on their systems, the question officials asked most often was technical. Do we need legislation, or can we just do it? The answer: Lawmakers are working it out in their own ways.

Pennsylvania's secretary of state started using a system this year without legislation, Iowa expects to do the same by Dec. 31 and others may be taking that approach in the future. Indeed, six of the earlier adopters did it without legislation, although at least one legislature—Minnesota's—followed up with authorizing legislation that defined the parameters for the online registration system.

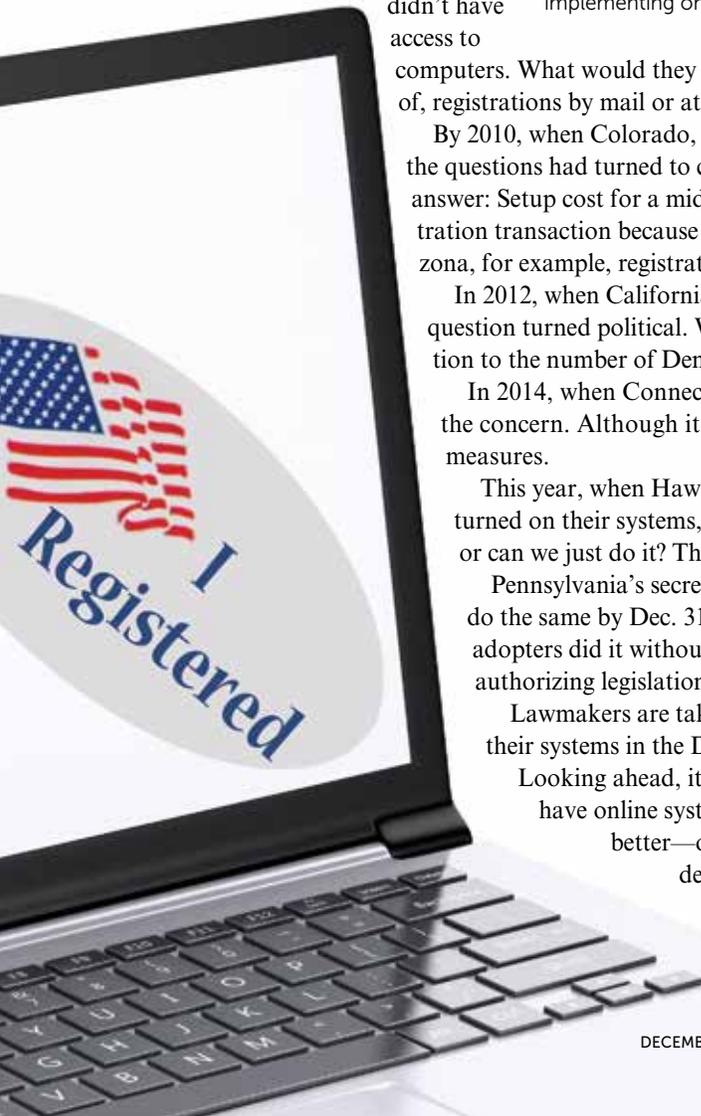
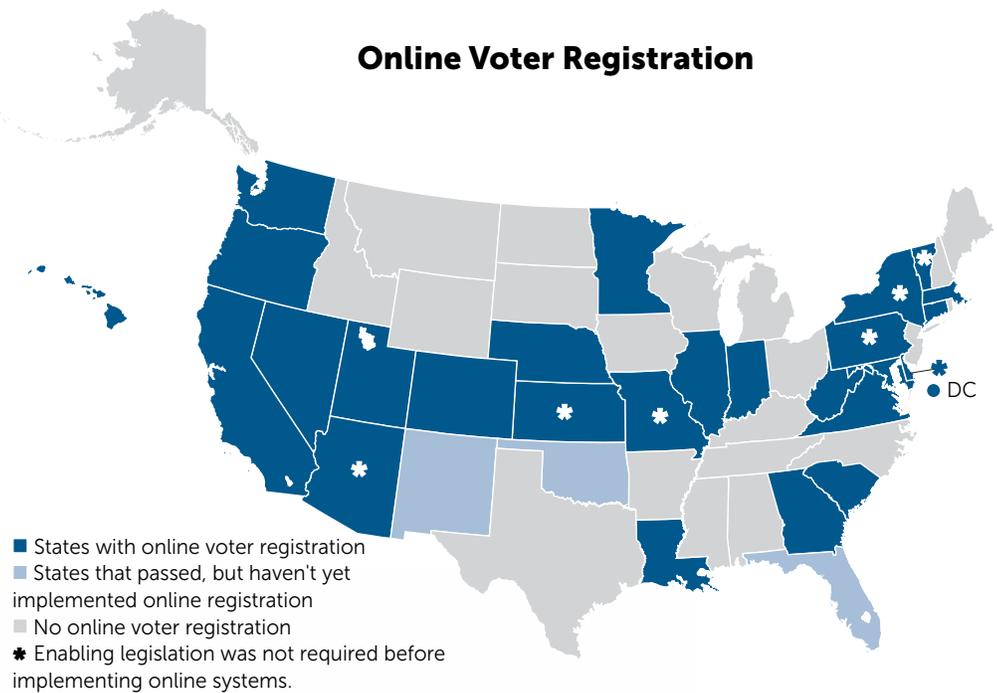
Lawmakers are taking the more standard approach—legislative authorization—in developing their systems in the District of Columbia, Florida, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Looking ahead, it's likely more states will offer online registration. And in the states that already have online systems, lawmakers will tweak them in the never-ending quest to make them better—offering forms translated into more languages, adapting systems for mobile devices, enhancing security features and permitting citizens who don't have driver's licenses to register online.

For more information, go to ncsl.org/magazine.

—Wendy Underhill

Online Voter Registration



Handwriting on Wall for Cursive

When the Common Core education standards were issued in 2010 and made no mention of handwriting, cursive or manuscript printing, advocates of longhand took notice. Currently, 43 states and the District of Columbia are members of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The Common Core is a set of guidelines for what every student, from kindergarten through 12th grade, should know and be able to do in math and English language arts. The goal of the standards is to ensure that students graduate from high school with the fundamental skills needed to succeed in college or the workforce.

Why isn't handwriting in the standards? "The Common Core Initiative admits that the [standards] 'do not describe all that can or should be taught,'" as Ohio's fact sheet on the guidelines states. "Handwriting is one of these skills that 'can or should be taught.'" The fact that cursive instruction isn't listed doesn't prevent teachers, schools or districts from requiring it. That decision is made at the state and local levels.

Advocates of cursive instruction make a cultural and cognitive argument. "You definitely need to teach typing and keyboarding and all of that, but kids do need to be able to sign their names, they do need to be able to read the Founding Fathers' documents," New Hampshire Senator Nancy Stiles (R) told the Boston Globe. Stiles sponsored a bill that passed after the wording was amended from "requiring" to "encouraging" cursive instruction.

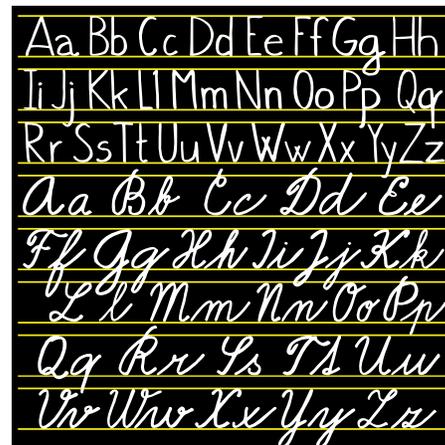
Supporters say handwriting instruction can improve overall literacy success, critical thinking, memory, reading, writing and spelling. When kids learn cursive, they are "creating new circuitry to evaluate what is seen, the speed of what is seen, the movements required and the speed and timing of movements," writes William Klemm, a professor of neuroscience at Texas A&M University. "This circuitry becomes a lasting part of the brain [and] can be recruited for use in other hand-eye-coordination tasks."

Not everyone is jumping onto the restore-cursive bandwagon, however. New

Hampshire Senator Molly Kelly (D), who spoke against Stiles' bill, said she opposed it because nothing in state law prevents schools from teaching the skill. "I think that sometimes we go too far in what we legislate," she told The Associated Press. "I think this is one of those bills that is not necessary."

This year, lawmakers nationwide introduced at least 16 bills addressing cursive instruction. Along with New Hampshire, Alabama and Arkansas also passed laws, and measures are pending in New York, North Carolina and Ohio.

—Dan Thatcher and Zita Toth



Religious Beliefs and Autopsies

Religious customs and intrusive postmortem procedures collided in the separate deaths of two American Indians in northeastern Minnesota car crashes in February. Their families are members of Ojibwe and Chippewa bands that perform ceremonies soon after death and forbid the desecration of a body.

The St. Louis County Medical Examiner ordered autopsies in both cases, based on the office's established practice of doing the procedure in all homicides, fatal car accidents, workplace accidents and most child deaths. The families got court orders in both cases to release the bodies without autopsies on religious grounds. The coroner complied, but the families argued they were denied their right to mourn in traditional ways. (The coroner, whose contract talks broke down after his handling of the cases came under fire, no longer works for the county.)

In response, Minnesota Senator Tony Lourey (D) introduced a bill to allow families to object to autopsies on religious grounds, but let judges order them to be performed in a minimally intrusive manner when there was "compelling state interest."

"There really was a disconnect between our statute and a constitutional right,"

Lourey says. "It's a very emotional conversation." When Lourey's bill went into effect July 1, the state joined several others—California, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Rhode Island—with similar religious protections.

American Indian beliefs are not the only ones that might conflict with state laws, says Brian Rusche, of the Minnesota Joint Religious Legislative Council. Amish, Hmong, Muslims and some Orthodox Jews also object to invasive autopsies.

The details and politics of the matter remain tricky. Deaths that must be reported to and investigated by the medical examiner vary by state. Generally, when an autopsy is required, a medical examiner does not need consent from the decedent's next of kin before doing the procedure. Religious freedom legislation can raise the ire of church-state-separation watchdogs and LGBT advocates who fear legal protections offer a license to discriminate. And even supporters of autopsy exemptions acknowledge a need for limits, particularly in cases of suspicious death. But disputes, they say, can be circumvented when concerns are addressed through open dialogue between officials and families.

—Zita Toth