Common Cause

The Administrative Advantage: Online Voter Registration

Online voter registration gives the advantage to county registrars in elections to keep up with record-breaking registration levels.
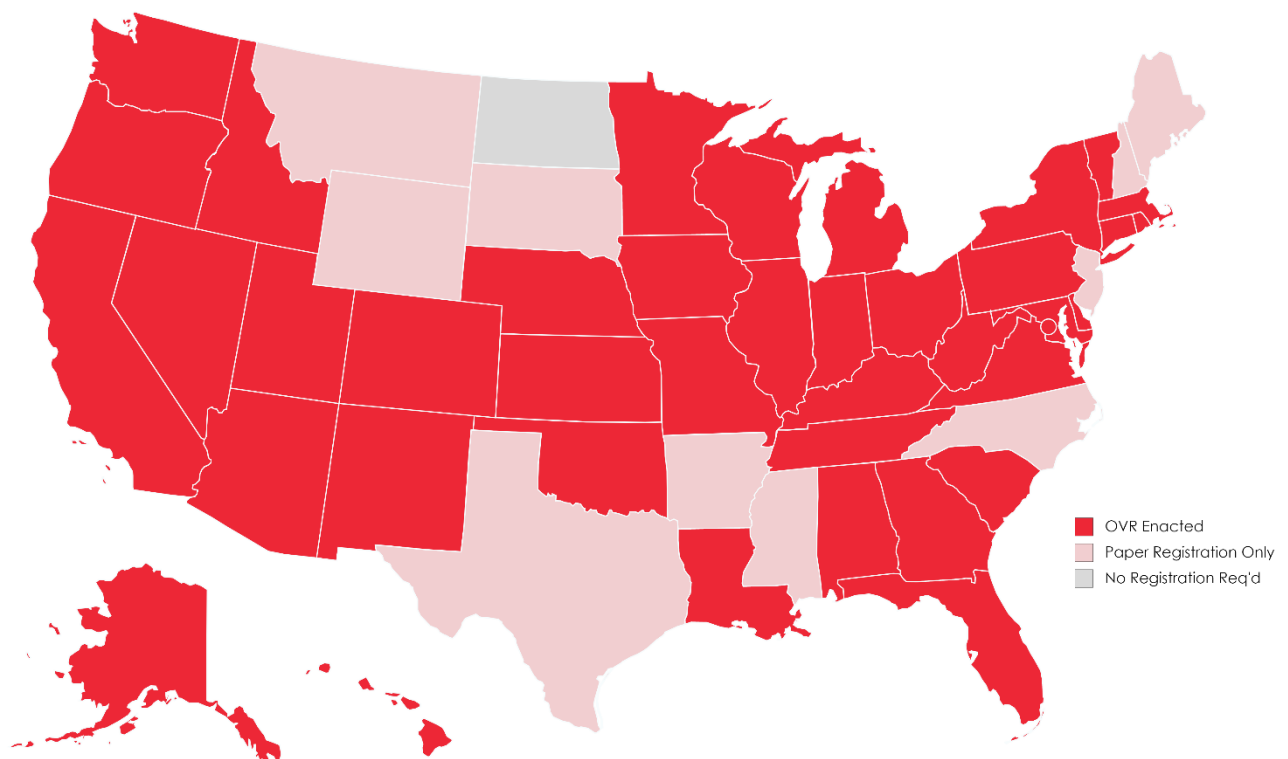
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Overview

Most states – 39, plus the District of Columbia – now offer citizens the opportunity to register to vote online. From the state's perspective, providing this opportunity makes good sense: it keeps voter rolls more accurate and up-to-date, it's cheaper than the outdated paper-based method, it's easier for elections officials to administer, and it can be done securely, thereby boosting confidence in our elections systems. There is widespread consensus that online voter registration (OVR) remains a nonpartisan reform without benefit to any single political party or shifts in election outcomes. An analysis of the election outcomes of states with OVR indicates that any apprehension of a state turning Democratic to Republican or vise-versa is ill-founded. In fact, the advantage is truly given to administrators of elections, eligible voters, and the state's budget. Overall, OVR eases administration of voter registration, substantially saves the state and the county money, and accurately and securely verifies voter eligibility.

Bipartisan Federal Findings on Online Voter Registration

What's more, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration, the 2014 bipartisan elections commission headed by both Mitt Romney's and then-President Obama's top lawyers, recommends the adoption of OVR. After reviewing a wide body of research, the Commission recommended that states adopt online voter registration as "an invaluable tool for managing the accuracy of voter rolls and reducing the costs of list maintenance."[1] When properly adopted, according to the Commission, OVR ensures that voter registration lists are more accurate, saves counties and states money, and improves the voting experience since voters can immediately verify that the information they transmit is accurately entered into databases.[2] Such verification, moreover, prevents potential back-and-forth between administrators and voters, given that the elections office won't then need to contact a voter to fix potential errors on a registration form.

COMMISSION FINDINGS ON ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION[3]

The Commission received consistently affirmative assessments of the benefits that online registration can provide to the overall objectives of election administration. An online voter registration system:

- Reduces the high potential for error that exists with traditional paper-based systems;
- Saves jurisdictions a significant amount of money;
- Increases the accuracy and currency of the voter rolls, thereby reducing delays and congestion at polling places; and
- Improves the voter experience because voters get immediate feedback when they are registered or when their information (e.g., address, party, etc.) has been updated.

Accurate

It's simple: the best way to maintain an accurate voter roll is to adopt online voter registration. In states with paper-only registration, 1 in 8 registrations are inaccurate and must be fixed before verifying eligibility to vote, resulting in more resources expended by the state to verify information.[4] A 2009 survey of incomplete and incorrect registrations in Maricopa County, Arizona found that **online voter registrations are as much as five times less error-prone than their paper-based counterparts**.[5] With online voter registration, information is instantaneously cross-checked between counties, and the voter gets expedited feedback on problems with their registration.

Election integrity requires accurate and up-to-date voter registration lists, to ensure that only eligible voters can vote. Due to outdated paper registration, the voter roll in states without OVR are full of inaccuracies and duplicate registrations. Online voter registration solves all these issues and keeps voter rolls clean of such oversights.

ONE IN EVERY EIGHT
PAPER REGISTRATIONS
IS INACCURATE

Cost-Effective

Surveys conducted by the PEW Charitable Trust show that, on average, each state spends roughly $250,000 for start-up costs to implement a system that facilitates OVR.[6] Once the system is in place, though, states start *saving* money: States with OVR spend a reported **$0.50 to $2.34 less per each registration transaction**.[7] The more citizens use OVR, the more the state saves. As such, the state and counties alike have a vested interest in doing some public campaigning to educate eligible would-be voters of the process.

THE **MORE** CITIZENS USE **OVR**,

THE **MORE** THE STATE **SAVES**

Arizona provides a prime example. As the first state to implement OVR in 2002, Arizona almost immediately saw cost savings. It spent no more than $100,000 in upfront costs, demonstrating that states can adopt OVR with minimal funds.[8] And thereafter it saw cost savings that continue to the present: whereas the state used to spend an average of $0.83 to process each paper voter registration form, since the implementation of OVR it has **reduced costs to $0.03 cents per online transaction**.[9]

Efficient

In addition to saving costs, elections clerks and administrators appreciate the administrative ease that OVR brings. In Texas, more than 70 percent of all new registrations are turned in to the county in the two months prior to the registration deadline, putting a strain on many County Elections Offices. Submission of paper voter registration forms requires clerks to transfer data from those forms to the county's computer system; this is a time-consuming and

oftentimes error-prone method of conducting elections business. When these offices don't have the resources to manually enter new and updated registrations into the online TEAM database to be sent to the Secretary of State before the start of early voting, people are turned away at the polls or told to vote with provisional ballots.

Paper registration relies on mail services to correctly handle sensitive information handwritten on a paper form. Mail service is inherently inefficient in an increasingly technological world: online registrations don't run the same risks of being lost, post-marked late, or physical tampering. **During the 2018 midterms in Dallas County, Texas, over 1,000 voters' ability to vote was jeopardized by inefficient and unreliable mail services**.[10] Implementation of OVR greatly reduces the paper-to-computer process, as more and more citizens begin submitting their information online. By getting rid of this outdated, process, voters can better ensure that their information is being captured accurately and timely, since they are plugging it in themselves. That additionally saves elections officials time, for they won't be required to try to track down as many voters down when the information doesn't add up.

Secure

Implementation of online voter registration can be done without any compromise to the system's security. Voters themselves are submitting their own information, and input either the last four digits of their Social Security number or their drivers' license numbers. This way, the voter is not **relying on strangers deputized as volunteer registrars to handle their sensitive personal information**. In addition, as with any registration form, individuals registering online must attest to their eligibility requirements, including citizenship and age requirements. Such attestations are required no matter how the individual registers to vote. When it comes to the security of the state's overall voter registration system, each state can take measures – like two-factor authentication, as used in Colorado – to ensure that their systems are as hack-proof as possible.

Nonpartisan

Online voter registration was first championed by conservative Republicans like Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, over 16 years ago. Since 2015 alone, **13 new Republican states have enacted or implemented online voter registration**: *Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Nebraska, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, West Virginia, Wisconsin*, and most recently *Oklahoma* and *Michigan*. Registration of voters is a nonpartisan issue. Data unequivocally shows that online voter registration does not alter the political balance of the registered population.

In southern states that have had at least two electoral cycles since the implementation of OVR, **partisan balances have remained nearly identical to pre-OVR races**. Margins of victory for many Republican candidates actually increased in many cases directly after the implementation of OVR. Competitive races are ones in which the margin of victory is less than five percentage points, whereas mildly competitive races lie in the five to ten percent range, and noncompetitive races see ten or more percentage points between the victor and his or her opponent.

Despite many races in the 2018 midterms pushing towards the competitive range of victory margins, OVR had at least one full electoral cycle before where margins remained unchanged. Therefore, other factors such as a candidate's likability, political climate, and public trust in the government make a much larger impact on election results than OVR ever could.

Georgia

In March 2014, Georgia launched an online voter registration system.[11] Between April 2014 and October 2016, more than 350,000 of registrations took place through the online system,[12] an estimated 25.5 percent of all registrations.[13] Over the next few years, the number of new Georgia voters registering online continued to increase compared to paper registrations.

71% OF **OVR** REGISTRANTS VOTED

50% OF **PAPER** REGISTRANTS VOTED

In the first year of OVR implementation, seventy-one percent of Georgia voters who registered online turned out to vote. Conversely, only 50 percent of voters registering by traditional methods, such as via mail or through state agencies, actually voted.[14] New registrants via OVR tended to be younger. Seventy percent of online voter registrants were between ages 18 and 34, and 42.4 percent of online voter registrants were registering to vote for the very first time.[15]

Despite a high percentage of online voter registrations, higher voter turnout of online registrants, and a demographic shift of the electorate, **partisan election outcomes have not changed in Georgia for the past decade.** Between 2010 and 2018, votes for each party have stayed relatively constant. Gubernatorial elections in 2010, 2014 and 2018 saw very little change in votes captured by the Republican candidate.

Georgia Gubernatorial Elections

	Republican	**Democrat**	**Third Party**	**Margin**
2010	Nathan Deal **53%**	Roy E. Barnes 43%	John H. Monds (LP) 4%	**+10%**
OVR Available March 2014				
2014	**Nathan Deal (I)** **52.8%**	Jason J. Carter 44.9%	Andrew Hunt (LP) 2.4%	**+7.9%**
2018	Brian Kemp **50.2%**	Stacey Abrams 48.8%	Ted Metz (LP) 0.95%	**+1.4%**

While the margin of victory for Governor Kemp against Stacey Abrams was slim in 2018, many other factors contributed to this decline in margins, including the race becoming highly politicized in the wake of the 2016 Presidential Election. While margins declined, the percentage of votes captured by the Republican candidate remained above 50 percent. More significantly, with the implementation of OVR in early 2014, the margin of victory remained statistically similar to its pre-OVR level. The availability of online voter registration in Georgia has not altered the state's continuous election of a Republican Governor.

Georgia Attorney General Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Third Party	Margin
2010	Sam Olens **52.9%**	Ken Hodges 43.6%	Don Smart (LP) 3.5%	**+9.3%**
OVR Available March 2014				
2014	**Sam Olens (I)** **56.9%**	Greg K. Hecht 43.1%	None	**+13.8%**
2018	Chris Carr **51.3%**	Charlie Bailey 48.7%	None	**+2.6%**

Georgia's Attorney General outcomes show a similar trend. In fact, the Republican candidate held a stronger margin of victory than did the victorious Republican Governor's race. Just as with the gubernatorial election, the Attorney General race consistently sees a victorious Republican candidate both before and after the implementation of OVR.

Alabama

Alabama experiences consistency in the partisanship of election outcomes after the implementation of OVR. A more recent adopter, Alabama began offering voters the option to register online in 2016.[16] With the availability of OVR, Alabama's republican governors continue to run in races considered highly uncompetitive based on each year's race respective margin of victory.

Alabama Gubernatorial Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Margin
2010	Robert J. Bentley **57.9%**	Ron Sparks 42.1%	**+15.8%**
2014	**Robert J. Bentley (I)** **63.6%**	Parker Griffith 36.2%	**+27.4%**
OVR Available February 2016			
2018	Kay Ivey **59.5%**	Walter Maddox 40.4%	**+10.1%**

The attorney general's race reflects the same uniformity after the adoption of OVR as the gubernatorial. The 2010 and 2018 races had near identical numbers, even with an increase in voter turnout. In both races for attorney general, the republican candidate handily won with a margin of 17.7 percent. Races such as this indicate OVR's negligible impact on electoral outcomes, even with a rate of higher participation by these online registrants.

Alabama Attorney General Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Margin
2010	Luther Strange Votes Cast: 865,203 **58.8%**	James Anderson 41.1%	**+17.7%**
2014	**Luther Strange (I)** Votes Cast: 681,973 **58.4%**	Joe Hubbard 41.4%	**+16%**
OVR Available February 2016			
2018	Steve Marshall Votes Cast: 1,004,438 **58.8%**	Joseph Siegelman 41.1%	**+17.7%**

In fact, each of the state's top leadership positions consistently hold a strong Republican victory margin: Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, and Lieutenant Governor's races all see a noncompetitive race with a margin of victory well over 10 percentage points (and most over 15 points) both before and after the implementation of OVR. Alabama has seen a steady and continuous Republican majority, and election outcomes have been entirely unaffected by the introduction of OVR in the state.

Alabama Secretary of State Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Margin
2010	**Beth Chapman (I)** **62%**	Scott Gilliland 38%	**+24%**
2014	John Merrill **64.3%**	Lula Albert-Kaigler 35.6%	**+28.7%**
OVR Available February 2016			
2018	**John Merrill (I)** **61.1%**	Heather Milam 38.9%	**+22.2%**

Alabama Lieutenant Governor Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Margin
2010	Kay Ivey **52%**	**Jim Folsom Jr. (I)** 48%	**+4%**
2014	**Kay Ivey (I)** **63.2%**	James C. Fields 36.7%	**+26.5%**
OVR Available February 2016			
2018	Will Ainsworth **61.3%**	Will Boyd 38.7%	**+22.6%**

South Carolina

South Carolina began using online voter registration earlier than both Alabama and Georgia, implementing the modern system in 2012,[17] and like these states, South Carolina experiences a consistent Republican majority in its elections both before and after 2012 as evidenced by its Governor and Secretary of State's races over the last ten years.

South Carolina Gubernatorial Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Third Party	Margin
2010	Nikki Haley **51.4%**	Vincent Sheheen 46.9%	Morgan Reeves (GR) 0.9%	**+4.5%**

OVR Available October 2012

	Republican	Democrat	Third Party	Margin
2014	**Nikki Haley (I)** **55.9%**	Vincent Sheheen 41.4%	Steve French (LP) 1.2%	**+14.5%**
2018	Henry McMaster **54%**	James Smith 45.9%	None	**+8.1%**

South Carolina Attorney General Elections

	Republican	Democrat	Margin
2010	**Mark Hammond (I)** [18] **60.9%**	Marjorie Johnson 39%	**+21.9%**

OVR Implemented October 2012

	Republican	Democrat	Margin
2014	**Mark Hammond (I)** **59.5%**	Ginny Deerin 40.4%	**+19.1%**
2018	**Mark Hammond (I)** **57.1%**	Melvin Whittenburg 42.8%	**+14.3%**

Conclusion

While slight shifts in the margins of victory exist, this is not the result of online voter registration. Many factors can be attributed to shifting partisan alignments of the voting population. It has been indicated that public policy perceptions, evaluations of government performance, and feelings about a candidate's characteristics play a more substantial role in voting behavior than does access to voter registration.[19] It is the parties and the candidates who are ultimately responsible for the ways in which new registrants vote. Online voter registration has not been proven to be an indicator of party alignments and is not responsible for any sort of shift in voting behavior.

The election results of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina all suggest that the implementation of online voter registration does not alter party outcomes in Southern Republican Strongholds. In each of the three states, the Republican candidates are victorious both before and after OVR was introduced. **Despite the success of online voter registration in these states, there has not been a shift in election outcomes.**

Endnotes

[1] Presidential Comm'n on Election Admin., The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration, at 23 (2014), available at https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf.

[2] Id. at 24

[3] Id.

[4] The PEW Center on the States, "Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient: Evidence That America's Voter Registration System Needs an Upgrade," Feb. 2012, p. 2, available at https://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2012/pew upgradingvoterregistrationpdf.pdf

[5] Brennan Center for Justice, Voter Registration in a Digital Age, 2010, p. 2, available at http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf

[6] PEW Charitable Trusts, "Online Voter Registration: Trends in Development and Implementation," May 2015, p. 4, available at https://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/assets/2015/05/ovr_2015_brief.pdf?la=en

[7] Id.

[8] Brennan Center for Justice, "VRM in the States: Arizona," April 6, 2018, available at https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/vrm-states-arizona

[9] PEW, supra. note 6

[10] Natalie Solis. (2018, October 24). *Dallas County says Post Office didn't deliver some voter registrations for midterm election in time.* Dallas, TX: Fox 4 News, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fINxsbenMqg.

[11] National Conference of State Legislatures Online Voter Registration Overview (2018), available at http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx

[12] Danielle Root and Liz Kennedy, Center for American Progress, "Increasing Voter Participation in America: Policies to Drive Participation and Make Voting More Convenient," 2018, available at https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2018/07/10161310/VoterTurnout-report-8.pdf

[13] Id.

[14] Id.

[15] Id.

[16] NCSL, supra. note 11.

[17] NCSL, supra. note 11.

[18] Attorney General Mark Hammond has been in office since 2003. While his victory margins have decreased over the last three midterms, overall, his margins remain uncompetitive. This is notable as his democratic opponents have been increasingly endorsed by conservative politicians over him.

[19] The University of Michigan Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research "Voting Behavior in the 2012 Election," available at https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/instructors/setups2012/voting.jsp