

Online Voter Registration Could Save Pennsylvania Up to \$1 Million in 2016

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The adoption of online voter registration (OVR) would put Pennsylvania a step closer to what election administration should look like in the 21st century. Many Pennsylvanians think OVR is already available.ⁱ It is not. As of August 2015, 22 states offer OVR and another 5 states plus Washington, DC are working toward implementation.ⁱⁱ They have found that this technology provides convenient access to registration for voters, improves the administration of elections, and saves state and county governments much-needed funds.

Election Administration Improvements

OVR improves the accuracy and integrity of voter registration lists, primarily because it eliminates the need for a county employee to decipher a voter's handwriting from a voter registration form and then enter that information into the state's computerized voter registration database. It also allows for this data to be instantaneously transferred to the state voter registration database, eliminating mail transit time and reducing application processing time. This would be particularly advantageous as Pennsylvania moves into a presidential election cycle during which there are large voter registration efforts and thousands of voter registration forms are often submitted to counties right before a voter registration deadline.

The influx of voter registration forms often costs counties significant overtime expenses and can exacerbate human errors, creating inaccuracies in voters' records—some of which may prevent people from voting or require that they cast a provisional ballot rather than a regular ballot. For example, during the 2012 Pennsylvania general election, a backlog caused sizable numbers of voters to be placed on separate, supplemental voter lists at their polling places rather than on the normal voter lists. Some judges of elections were unaware of these supplemental lists and did not have them on-site or did not search for voters' names in them. As a result, properly registered voters cast provisional paper ballots instead of voting on machines that record votes immediately. Some voters were turned away and not offered provisional ballots. After one such Philadelphia voter was turned away at the polling place, she requested that the poll workers check the supplemental list, but the polling place did not have one.^{vii} If Pennsylvania had OVR, it could significantly reduce the number of voters appearing on supplemental lists and experiencing these problems, as fewer applicants' data will need to be input right before Election Day.

Estimates Used

Cost savings per registration form completed online (median range)	\$0.80 - \$2.00 ⁱⁱⁱ
Expected no. registration applications submitted in Pennsylvania in the 2016 election cycle (Nov. 2014-Oct. 2016)	3,761,330 ^{iv}
Expected proportion of registration applications that will be submitted online in the 2016 election cycle	15.10% ^v
Reduced printing costs (statewide only, as state incurs costs)	\$10,000-\$25,000 ^{vi}

Cost Savings

Some of the cost savings generated from OVR are a result of the reduced need for temporary personnel to perform data entry right before an election. With this reduced burden, permanent elections office employees can focus on the *many* other tasks that must be completed ahead of an election and even avoid logging extensive overtime hours. In 2002, Arizona became the first state in the country to adopt OVR. Between 2008 and 2012, Maricopa County, AZ reported saving \$1.4 million as a result of implementing OVR. California deployed its system a little more than a month before the registration deadline for the 2012 election. In that short period, OVR saved the state approximately \$2.5 million, quickly paying for itself.^{viii} Counties in Washington State reported saving between \$0.50 and \$2.00 *per voter registration application* that was completed electronically in 2008.^{ix}

According to the Pew Center on the States, the average cost a state has incurred in building and deploying its OVR system is \$249,000.^x States recoup the comparatively modest costs of building and deploying OVR quickly, making OVR a solid investment even in times of lean budgets.

By moving to OVR, Pennsylvania could benefit from these trends. Based on the experiences of other states, **between the State and counties, Pennsylvania taxpayers can be expected to save over \$450,000—and possibly even over \$1 million—during the 2016 election cycle.** In Philadelphia alone, reduced processing expenses could save the city as much as \$190,000 during the 2016 election cycle. Even counties with smaller budgets could experience thousands of dollars in savings per election. The statewide estimate above includes county staff members' time as well as the costs associated with printing hundreds of thousands of voter registration forms. If the OVR system is offered in Spanish and is mobile-optimized, that will enhance the State's ability to reap these benefits by expanding the number of Pennsylvanians who are able to use the online system.

2016 Election Cycle Cost-Savings Estimates if OVR is Available

	Low-Range Estimate	High-Range Estimate
Statewide	\$464,478	\$1,161,196
Largest County: Philadelphia ^{xi}	\$75,934	\$189,834
Mid-Population County: Lehigh ^{xii}	\$13,556	\$33,889
Small County: Warren ^{xiii}	\$1,822	\$4,556

Supplemental Features Could Save Even More

Most states only offer OVR through official state websites and require citizens to have a signature on file, usually from their driver's license or state-issued identification. It would be advantageous to expand beyond this basic OVR system and include features that allow elderly citizens and others without PennDOT IDs to use OVR and create a platform that allows organizations that conduct voter registration drives to utilize the system. These features would encourage more voters to register to vote or change their information online instead of on paper.

Several other states, including neighboring Delaware, have created online systems that closely mirror the paper process by allowing their citizens to provide a new signature through the OVR

system, which is particularly helpful to military voters. This would provide the opportunity to register online (assuming that the proportion of registered voters without PennDOT IDs remains constant moving forward).^{xvi} The system could allow applicants to upload a photo of their signature or create a signature by signing a phone or tablet with their finger, similar to an electronic credit card transaction.

Savings Potentially Available with Supplemental OVR Features			
	Est'd. 2016 Applicants	Low-Range Estimate	High-Range Estimate
Without PennDOT IDs If the proportion of registered voters without PennDOT IDs remains constant	116,601 ^{xiv}	\$93,281	\$233,202
Registration Drives If all were submitted through the online platform	480,227 ^{xv}	\$384,182	\$960,454

As the bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration (PCEA) recommended, OVR should be implemented “in a way that allows secure and direct data entry by prospective voters through multiple web-based internet portals approved by the state.”^{xvii} Creating such a platform would allow community-based voter registration drives to take advantage of online registration in their efforts to register Pennsylvanians to vote. In the past two presidential election cycles, Pennsylvania reported receiving an average of over 480,000 registration applications through community-based voter registration drives. Philadelphia alone received over 330,000 during the 2008 election cycle.^{xviii} Philadelphia’s elections office could save as much as \$660,000 if registration groups carry out a similar scale of effort in Philadelphia in 2016 using an OVR platform because some of the tasks associated with processing paper forms would be automated. The State should create an OVR platform that enables civic engagement groups and other organizations to move those additional registrations from paper to the Internet in order to gain efficiency, accuracy and cost-savings.

Conclusion

Based on the experiences of other states, Pennsylvania could save between \$460,000 and \$1.1 million by implementing OVR in advance of the 2016 general election. In addition to the traditional OVR models, the State could save hundreds of thousands more dollars by adding more signature capture options and by creating a platform that enables voter registration drives to use the online system. Pennsylvania should implement OVR ahead of the 2016 elections in order to avail itself of significant cost savings and make the 2016 elections more convenient and accessible to voters.

ⁱ The Pew Charitable Trusts, 1 (Oct. 2014), [What Pennsylvanians Think About Voting](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2014/10/PA_Elections_Polling_v4.pdf).
http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2014/10/PA_Elections_Polling_v4.pdf

ⁱⁱ National Conference of State Legislatures (Aug. 6, 2015), [Online Voter Registration](http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx).
<http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ This range represents the middle range of cost-savings estimates reported by counties and states that have implemented OVR. Counties in Washington State reported saving between \$0.50 and \$2.00 per registration

application submitted online; Maricopa County, AZ reported savings of \$0.80 per application; and California reported saving \$2.34 per application. The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2 (Jan. 2014), [Understanding Online Voter Registration](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2014/01/28/Understanding_Online_Voter_Registration.pdf?la=e), http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2014/01/28/Understanding_Online_Voter_Registration.pdf?la=e. ; Christopher Ponoroff, Brennan Center for Justice, [Voter Registration in a Digital Age 12](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf) (2010), https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf.

^{iv} The mean of applications received in Pennsylvania in the 2008 (4,276,189) and 2012 (3,246,470) election cycles, per county reports to the Election Assistance Commission (EAC). Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>. Election Assistance Commission (June 30, 2009), [2007-2008 NVRA Report: Data Sets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>.

^v The mean of the proportions of registration applications that were submitted by individuals via the Internet in each of the 12 states offering OVR in the 2012 election cycle that reported these numbers to the EAC—regardless of implementation date (some sites were only live for days or five weeks prior to the 2012 general election registration deadline), promotion of the system and features of the system. Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> ; National Conference of State Legislatures (Aug. 6, 2015), [Online Voter Registration](http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx). <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx>

^{vi} Assesses savings of \$0.02 on the low end and \$0.05 on the higher end per application if the state prints approximately 500,000 fewer paper applications. This may be a conservative estimate, as Maricopa County, Az. alone reported saving \$60,000 in printing costs in 2008. Christopher Ponoroff, Brennan Center for Justice, [Voter Registration in a Digital Age 12](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf) (2010), https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf.

^{vii} Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 27 (2013), [The 2012 Election Protection Report: Our Broken Voting System and How to Fix It](http://www.866ourvote.org/newsroom/publications/document/EP-2012-Full-Report.pdf), <http://www.866ourvote.org/newsroom/publications/document/EP-2012-Full-Report.pdf> .

^{viii} The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2 (Jan. 2014), [Understanding Online Voter Registration](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2014/01/28/Understanding_Online_Voter_Registration.pdf?la=e), http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2014/01/28/Understanding_Online_Voter_Registration.pdf?la=e.

^{ix} Christopher Ponoroff, Brennan Center for Justice, [Voter Registration in a Digital Age 12](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf) (2010), https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf.

^x The Pew Charitable Trusts, 4 (May 2015), [Online Voter Registration: Trends in Development and Implementation](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2015/05/OVR_2015_brief.pdf), http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2015/05/OVR_2015_brief.pdf

^{xi} Calculating the number of registration applications expected in the 2016 cycle as the mean of 740,341 applications in 2008 and 516,575 applications in 2012. Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>. Election Assistance Commission (June 30, 2009), [2007-2008 NVRA Report: Data Sets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>.

^{xii} Calculating the number of registration applications expected in the 2016 cycle as the mean of 126,320 applications in 2008 and 98,058 applications in 2012. Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>. Election Assistance Commission (June 30, 2009), [2007-2008 NVRA Report: Data Sets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>.

^{xiii} Calculating the number of registration applications expected in the 2016 cycle as the mean of 28,487 applications in 2008 and 9,543 applications in 2012. Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>. Election Assistance Commission (June 30, 2009), [2007-2008 NVRA Report: Data Sets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>.

^{xiv} 3.1% of total expected applications in 2016. Bernard R. Siskin, 4 (July 2013), [Report in the Matter of Applewhite v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania](http://www.pilcop.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Applewhite-Expert-Reports-Notice-of-Filing-and-Exhibit-1.pdf), <http://www.pilcop.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Applewhite-Expert-Reports-Notice-of-Filing-and-Exhibit-1.pdf>

^{xv} Calculating the number of expected applications generated by registration drives as the mean of the 650,888 reported in 2008 and the 309,566 reported in 2012. Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>. Election Assistance Commission (June 30, 2009), [2007-2008 NVRA Report: Data Sets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>.

^{xvi} Bernard R. Siskin, 4 (July 2013), [Report in the Matter of Applewhite v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania](http://www.pilcop.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Applewhite-Expert-Reports-Notice-of-Filing-and-Exhibit-1.pdf), <http://www.pilcop.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Applewhite-Expert-Reports-Notice-of-Filing-and-Exhibit-1.pdf>.

^{xvii} Presidential Commission on Election Administration, 27 (Jan. 2014), [The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration](https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf), <https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2014/01/Amer-Voting-Exper-final-draft-01-09-14-508.pdf> .

^{xviii} Election Assistance Commission (June 24, 2013), [2012 NVRA Report Datasets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>. Election Assistance Commission (June 30, 2009), [2007-2008 NVRA Report: Data Sets](http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/), <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/>.