

CONNECTED OVR

A SIMPLE, DURABLE APPROACH TO ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

Copyright 2013 Rock the Vote.

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

ABOUT ROCK THE VOTE

Rock the Vote is a national non-partisan organization dedicated to engaging young people in our country's democracy.

Founded more than twenty years ago at the intersection of popular culture and politics, Rock the Vote has registered nearly six million young people to vote and has become a trusted source of information for young people about registering to vote and casting a ballot. Rock the Vote uses music, popular culture, new technologies and grassroots organizing to motivate and mobilize young people in our country to participate in every election. Simultaneously, Rock the Vote works to upgrade the voter registration and elections system to meet the needs of today's young voters.

<http://www.rockthevote.com>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared and written by [Robinson + Yu](#) with support from the [Ford Foundation](#).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The Benefits of Online Voter Registration	1
2	The Connected OVR Approach	3
	States Should Provide An OVR Platform	3
	Platforms Define The Modern Internet	5
	Platforms Are Spreading In Government—From The White House To City Hall	6
	Community Outreach Can Bring Online Registration To New Voters	7
	Popular Online Sites, Like Google And Facebook, Can Promote Registration, Too	8
3	Legislative Framework for an OVR Platform	9
	Use Technologically Neutral Terms	9
	Provide Flexibility for Presentation and Design	10
	Allow for a Range of Methods to Verify Eligibility	10
4	Operational and Technical Framework for an OVR Platform	11
	Clear Rules of the Road	11
	Setting Terms for Designated Partners	11
	Providing Technical Documentation	12
	Software Functions of the OVR Platform	13
	Accepting a Completed Form	13
	Optional Functions	14
	Security and Control	15
5	Core Improvements for All OVR Systems	16
	Implement Real-Time Verification of Registrations	16
	Allow Users to Check the Status of their Registrations	16
	Provide Options for Users Who Lack State IDs	17
	Create Accessible and Responsive OVR Websites	17
6	Conclusion	19
A	Tech-Specific Excerpts from State OVR Statutes	20
B	Model OVR Legislation	22
C	Notes	23

INTRODUCTION: THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

In 2002, Arizona became the first state in the nation to provide an online tool that allows eligible residents to register to vote.¹ In the decade since, nearly twenty other states have chosen to launch online voter registration (OVR) systems.² The remaining states are likely to follow suit.³

OVR offers major advantages for state governments. Compared to paper-based registration, OVR can save states millions of taxpayer dollars each year in printing, distribution and processing costs.⁴ It eliminates errors introduced by manual transcription of paper forms. And if a state's verification systems allow, it can quickly detect and reject invalid or duplicative registration attempts.

Voters also benefit. OVR can provide all-hours registration from the convenience of an Internet-connected device. Online registration systems can also provide voters the opportunity to verify their registration status in real-time, which helps them detect and resolve registration issues ahead of an upcoming election. This, in turn, can simplify administration on election day and ease long lines at the polls. And compared to paper forms, OVR systems can provide better security for registrants' personal information.

Ten years after OVR began, a comprehensive review found that the results so far are "uniformly positive in a wide range of different states—large and small, red and blue—with different infrastructures."⁵

However, OVR's promise will only be realized to the extent that voters actually use the new online systems. For this reason, states must find ways to provide registrants with online experiences that are simple and intuitive. Voters should be able to register in online contexts that are comfortable and familiar to them.

Across many areas of government, public officials struggle to provide intuitive online experiences for their users, owing to a range of institutional and resource constraints. OVR is no exception: A patchwork of different technology investments and varying registration rules leaves no clear standard. States are duplicating efforts of other states and the private sector. Vendors aren't sure what to build, and a robust consensus solution has yet to emerge.

Technology changes much faster than policies governing elections ever could, or should. Most of today's OVR systems involve a single, isolated website run by the State Elections Director, which mimics a paper form and is designed to be used on a desktop computer. But a growing number of voters are leaving desktops behind, reaching the Internet almost exclusively through smartphones or tablets.⁶ Moreover, users are spending a growing amount of their time online interacting with services they already know and trust, such as Google, Facebook, and the apps on their mobile phones. A single OVR website, even if it does have a "mobile version," will struggle to serve people who rely on a growing variety of non-desktop devices.⁷ It may also struggle to earn their comfort and trust.

Technological change makes voters' desire to register "online" a swift-moving target. For example, Facebook now hosts 179 million U.S. accounts and is many peoples' primary online experience, making it a natural place today for a voter registration app—but Facebook did not even exist in 2002, when OVR systems were first launched.⁸

In this report, we argue for a simple and important shift in today's approach to OVR: States should adopt a **connected OVR approach**, building a **simple and durable platform** that focuses on the information registrants must provide, rather than just the interface or device they use to provide it.

By building a platform, rather than just an isolated website, states can future-proof their OVR systems. **Designated Partners** approved by the state, including major social media companies, nonpartisan voter registration organizations like Rock the Vote, government agencies, universities, and other groups, can use their expertise to design, maintain and promote effective registration interfaces that meet the state's requirements and deliver completed registration applications to its system.

This way, a state need not go at it alone. Instead, it can create a central online service for registering voters, while allowing its Designated Partners (operating within the state's requirements) to develop and continuously refine new sites, apps, and other tools that allow people to register.

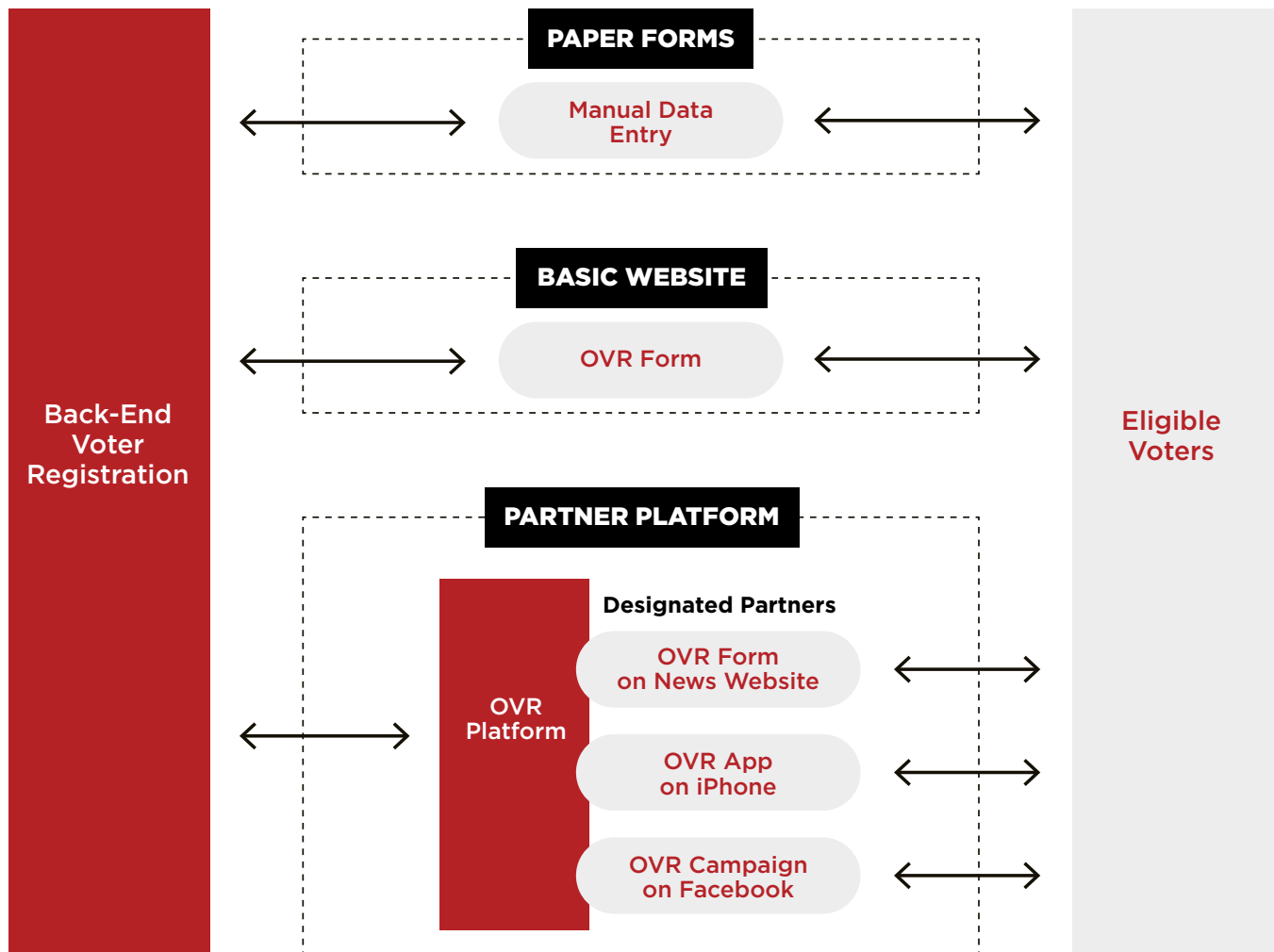
The objective of voter registration systems is to register as many eligible voters as possible, while preventing invalid registrations. States still have a long way to go: More than a quarter of eligible voters remained unregistered in the 2012 election.⁹

States Should Provide an OVR Platform

An OVR platform is a simple, durable online mechanism for the state to receive registration applications. It allows the state to designate partners, set policies, and benefit from the technical expertise of its partners, at little ongoing cost. Partners can provide user experiences that satisfy legal and policy requirements while keeping up with changing user expectations. These partners may include technology and telecom firms (building on the good corporate citizenship that many have already shown on this issue), as well as nonpartisan and tech-savvy voter registration organizations such as Rock the Vote. In each case, the state remains in control and ultimately processes all registration applications.

An OVR platform can dramatically increase a state's ability to reach eligible voters while maintaining current registration procedures and safeguards. For many states, an OVR platform would be a simple and incremental addition to the existing registration infrastructure, enabling new and complementary channels through which voters could submit registration applications. Incoming registrations would continue to be processed in the same way each time—using existing state procedures—regardless of which channel the registration took to reach the state.

An OVR platform can dramatically increase a state's ability to reach eligible voters while maintaining current registration procedures and safeguards.



The diagram above illustrates how an OVR platform fits alongside existing registration mechanisms. When an eligible voter submits a paper form, as shown at the top of the diagram, the information on the application must be entered into the state's system (often manually) after which various back-end procedures are run (for example, checks against DMV records, criminal databases, and the like). A form submitted through a basic state OVR website follows a similar route, except there is no need to manually transcribe the information—it is delivered directly into the state's back-end system. An OVR platform, pictured at bottom, allows Designated Partners—approved civic groups, local organizations,

social networks, government agencies or others—to deliver applications to the state in a secure and standardized way. The same state verification procedures remain in effect.

The OVR platform is a simple piece of software that sits between the two key endpoints of any registration mechanism—the interface a user sees, and the internal systems states use to process registration data.

On the front end, the platform communicates with the user interfaces created by Designated Partners, such as a mobile app. Building a friendly and intuitive user interface

is challenging, and an OVR platform allows states to share the task with appropriate Designated Partners, each of whom can build interfaces best suited to their individual communities or technological contexts.

On the back end, the platform securely transmits registration requests to the state's system.¹⁰ The state's internal process, which determines whether a submitted registration is valid, may be intricate, but it already exists and can function the same way for OVR platform registrations as it does for paper registration. In many cases, the back-end system will need to communicate with legacy systems, like a DMV or social security database, to match incoming registrations with known voter profiles. The system must also check for duplicate registrations, which typically requires coordination with numerous county-level systems and processes.

An OVR platform is like a virtual mail slot, through which Designated Partners can deliver the completed registration applications they have gathered from users in a standard, digital format that is easy for state officials to use.

An OVR platform is like a virtual mail slot, through which Designated Partners can deliver the completed registration applications they have gathered from users.

The platform remains consistent even when a Designated Partner creates a new or different app or website to gather the needed information. The state will automatically receive registration information from the partner's new app or site, without needing to change any of its own systems. At the same time, a state can separately manage or modify its proprietary and secure process for validating the data it receives.

The platform allows a state to mediate and control its partners' registration capabilities. For example, if a partner submits a registration request that is missing a piece of key information, the platform can reject it with an informative error message. (Of course, partners can also use their own processes to prompt the user for complete information before sending it to the state.)

PLATFORMS DEFINE THE MODERN INTERNET

The platform concept aligns with best practices in the technology field. Almost all major online services provide some kind of platform, and they come in all shapes and sizes. Companies like Google and Facebook depend on platforms to extend their online reach far beyond Silicon Valley. Google, for example, has built developer platforms for a wide range of its available services: this is how Google Maps directions can appear on a local restaurant's website, or a YouTube video can be embedded into a blog post. Facebook

also offers a platform for its services, which is how many sites are able to display “Like” buttons directly from their pages. There are thousands of public platforms (commonly called APIs) on the Web today that allow websites to seamlessly weave information from other sites into their own.¹¹

PLATFORMS ARE SPREADING IN GOVERNMENT—FROM THE WHITE HOUSE TO CITY HALL

A diverse set of government agencies have already adopted platforms for interacting with the public, even in situations where the transmitted information is particularly sensitive, as in tax filings. The information-gathering process for online voter registrations is relatively simple, and can easily be accommodated within a suitably secure and reliable platform. The benefits for civic participation could be substantial.

At the federal level, the White House Digital Government Strategy focuses on making “web APIs the new default.”¹² (API stands for Application Programming Interface, which is a common technical component of a platform.) The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) has also promoted the use of platforms across federal agencies, recommending that they should “[let] your audience get what they need from many places, not just your .gov website.”¹³ The GSA also recognizes that “APIs are not experimental. More than half of all the traffic for major companies like Twitter and eBay come through APIs.”¹⁴

One prominent example of successful platform use in government is the IRS e-file system, which “has safely and securely transmitted more than 1 billion tax returns since 1990.”¹⁵ The IRS platform authorizes and enables commercial tax software vendors—like Intuit and H&R Block—to submit prepared tax returns online on behalf of the taxpayers who use their tools. Each vendor applies to be an “Authorized IRS e-file Provider” and must meet certain eligibility criteria and follow the IRS’ e-file rules and requirements.¹⁶ Even in this highly sensitive realm, the IRS has used its online platform to expand the number of channels from which it can receive returns. The IRS platform has helped to make e-filing mainstream: in 2012, more than 80% of individual returns were filed electronically,¹⁷ which has substantially reduced the IRS’ costs associated with processing returns.

“Let your audience get what they need from many places, not just your .gov website.”

- GSA guidance to federal agencies

Another example, at the local level, is Chicago's Open311 system. Its online system tracks non-emergency issues with city services, such as potholes, abandoned vehicles and broken streetlights. Anyone in Chicago can report an issue by posting a new request, and the request is routed to the appropriate city agency. The city built a simple platform that allows other sites to query the status of any existing request, or to post a new request. The platform was the basis for a bevy of new, useful tools created by partners: a local software firm developed Chicago Works, which brings the Open311 system to iPhone and Android mobile devices; a separate site, Chicago Works For You, sorts requests by services and ward, and provides citizen feedback about current Open311 requests.

Community Outreach Can Bring Online Registration to New Voters

States and counties already rely heavily on community partners to reach a wide range of eligible voters. These partners—typically civic-minded volunteer groups and individuals—help to register voters in the context of community activities. They bring registration forms to “village fairs, picnics, religious events and block parties”¹⁸ and encourage residents to participate in the democratic process. They offer technical assistance to those who might have trouble completing the registration form on their own, because of a physical disability, a language barrier, or confusion about the registration process, and they are trusted by their constituents and members.

By adding context and convenience, community partners can significantly enhance registration efforts. Research has shown that community registration drives “increase voter turnout by as much as 30 percent.”¹⁹ In 2004, civic organizations helped to register “more than 20 percent of the total” number of new registrations nationwide.²⁰ These numbers indicate that simply making paper forms available at select government offices—like DMVs—should only be one part of the overall effort to register eligible voters. A full strategy includes community partners, who are in a unique position to reach eligible voters who would otherwise remain unregistered.

Community registration drives “increase voter turnout by as much as thirty percent.”¹⁹

Tapping into community efforts is equally important online. In many states that have implemented OVR, the registration form is only available in one place, like a Secretary of State's website. The site may be publicly accessible, but significant hurdles to registration persist. Many eligible voters may not know that online registration is possible in their

state. For instance, six years after Arizona implemented their EZ Voter system, roughly 30 percent of registered voters still did not know they could register online.²¹

Placing voter registration in voters' existing online contexts—rather than redirecting users midstream to an isolated state registration page—reduces the risk of user confusion. Community partners can help promote online voter registration opportunities, leveraging the trusted relationship they have with their members.

Community partners also have greater accountability when they work through a platform approach. The state can use the platform to monitor registration drives, and registrants can immediately confirm that their application was received. (See Section IV, below.) Because they collect information in real-time, OVR platforms avoid many of the traditional problems associated with paper drives, such as transcription errors and the risk of partisan discarding of completed registration forms.²² Many states already have established programs that allow trusted groups to bring paper registration forms into their communities; an OVR platform approach would extend these programs online. And these groups are already investing significant effort into online registration activities; this is an opportunity for states to streamline and regulate the process, while decreasing the burdens on election administrations.

Popular Online Sites, Like Google and Facebook, Can Promote Registration Too

If states build OVR platforms, there is strong evidence that technology firms will jump at the opportunity to advance registration efforts in innovative ways. Microsoft, Google and Facebook have made it a high priority to encourage civic participation,²³ even fielding dedicated internal teams to build tools that help people register and remember to vote. These positive investments would be far more impactful if these leading firms could contribute more directly to the registration process, rather than merely informing their users about the process. Other popular sites may also be willing to help. For example, the Voter Information Project partnered with AT&T and Politics360 to create the VoterHub Mobile App, to help voters find information about registration, polling places and sample ballots through their mobile phones.²⁴

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR AN OVR PLATFORM

Voter registration laws, including many of today’s OVR statutes, struggle to keep pace with changing technologies. Fortunately, legislation that enables a platform approach is simple and robust in the face of future technological change. This section describes the key components of future-proof OVR legislation.

State agencies must have proper legal authority to implement an OVR platform.²⁵ Many of today’s first-generation OVR websites were authorized by statute. These statutes vary significantly in their length and detail: some provide agencies with broad discretion, while others prescribe specific methodologies and designs. Unfortunately, many of these existing laws are poor companions to an OVR platform and some specifically preclude them. (Relevant excerpts of state OVR statutes—some flexible, some rigid—are included in Appendix A.)

In most states, an OVR platform will require fresh statutory authorization. We believe that legislators can and should require the adoption of OVR platforms in their states. They should use simple and clear legislative language that empowers state officials to control and safeguard the process, while still allowing room for technology to change in the future. (Appendix B provides model language.)

Overall, our experience points us to a few key principles that can help states succeed: use technologically neutral

terms, provide flexibility for presentation and design, and allow for a range of methods to verify eligibility.

Use Technologically Neutral Terms

Legislation should be future-proof. OVR platforms provide functionality beyond what many would consider standard for a “website.” Accordingly, a statute should refer to online voting technologies using technologically neutral terminology, for example, “digital voter registration system” or “online voter registration system.”

Unfortunately, many existing OVR statutes are restrictive. For example, Colorado’s OVR statute makes reference to completing forms “on the official web site of the Secretary of State.”²⁶ Indiana’s language is broader, making reference to a “secure Internet web site.”²⁷ Oregon’s language, by contrast, is among the most flexible, simply mandating creation of an “electronic voter registration system.”²⁸

Provide Flexibility for Presentation and Design

Statutes should avoid prescriptive design requirements, such as warnings and other presentation-related specifics. Design and wording requirements can and should reflect state officials' policies, but these can be more easily set, and more easily adjusted, in the Designated Partner Terms maintained by elections officials, rather than in a statute itself. Moreover, paper forms are poor models for effective user interfaces, especially on mobile devices.

Several of today's OVR statutes mandate presentation elements. For example, Virginia's OVR statute requires that "[e]ach transaction taking place under this section shall be accompanied by the following statement featured prominently in boldface capital letters"²⁹ Utah's OVR statute incorporates paper-form language as well.³⁰

Where necessary, OVR platforms can handle such mandated operational details through the Designated Partner Terms, but the mandated details still add complexity and may reduce flexibility.

Allow for a Range of Methods to Verify Eligibility

Eligibility verification strategies are independent of OVR platforms. An OVR platform can function alongside a wide array of verification mechanisms. There is no substantive reason for OVR platforms to require demonstrations of eligibility that exceed those of a state's paper registration process.

Unfortunately, most states' OVR websites currently have more stringent eligibility verification requirements than their paper registration processes do. In particular, as a precondition to using their OVR websites, most states require the registrant have a valid state driver's license or identification card, which some eligible voters do not possess. However, some states are more flexible, including Connecticut (which does not specify a state ID requirement in its OVR statute)³¹ and West Virginia (which allows registrants to submit the last four digits of their Social Security number if they lack state ID).³²

States can, and should, leverage their DMV database to verify eligibility in real-time. But states should not preclude those who lack such state-issued ID from using OVR. Other methods of eligibility verification are possible: Registrants could use the last four digits of their social security number, or provide evidence from other interactions with state government.³³ If state law requires that signatures be collected for all registered voters, and the registrant does not have a signature on file, states can collect a signature from the registrant at the polling place when she votes for the first time. (Optionally, the state could also capture such signatures electronically from a user's tablet device.)

OPERATIONAL AND TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AN OVR PLATFORM

A connected OVR system consists of both the OVR platform software and the key documents that govern its use. An OVR platform can be tailored—through software and policy—to meet a state’s needs. Accordingly, states must carefully consider the platform’s desired behavior. For example, states will decide who can interact with the platform and how the platform should be used. This section describes the components of any connected OVR system, how they function, and how they can be customized by states.

Clear Rules of the Road

Each state can set its own eligibility requirements for Designated Partners. For instance, states might require that Designated Partners be either U.S.-based organizations or U.S. citizens of voting age. More stringently, a state might specify that Designated Partners must complete certain OVR training activities. Whatever the criteria may be, they should be public, objective, and uniformly applied by the state.

Once an organization or individual is deemed eligible, the state should require the partner to expressly agree to its Designated Partner Terms.

SETTING TERMS FOR DESIGNATED PARTNERS

In order to become a Designated Partner, organizations, companies, or individuals will agree to the state’s Designated Partner Terms. These will be specified by an appropriate state elections official or office. They will incorporate whatever requirements the state may deem necessary. Designated Partners will agree to abide by these terms in their use

of the state's platform. This matches the common practice in both industry and government of having a public document that defines how an online platform may be used.³⁴ If necessary, some parts of the Designated Partner Terms may be spelled out in authorizing legislation, but most should be developed administratively by the responsible officials. These requirements could include:

- **Application procedures** for Designated Partners, such as demonstrating thorough knowledge of the platform's technical documentation;
- **Review and approval processes** that allow state officials to test, validate and monitor new registration sites and apps;
- **A list of specific form fields** that constitute the state's voter registration form, that partners are required to gather from registrants;
- **Rules governing the user experience** of registration via the state's platform, such as the interface being public, official notice that the app or site connects to state systems, or a requirement that the site or app be accessible for persons with disabilities;
- **Security and privacy obligations** for the Designated Partner's computer systems and practices, such as requiring the use of encryption, or specifying that the Designated Partner may retain names and addresses of registrants, but not their SSNs;
- **A requirement to comply with the Technical Documentation**, which may be modified from time to time by the state's technical staff; and
- **Standard contract terms** such as criteria for termination, limits on liability, jurisdiction, and the State's right to modify the terms at any time.

By specifying Designated Partner Terms, the state will maintain the legal right to control how partners interact with its OVR platform. If a partner violates the contract in any way, the state can selectively and safely revoke access to the platform.

If a partner violates the contract in any way, the state can selectively and safely revoke access to the platform.

PROVIDING TECHNICAL DOCUMENTATION

A second key document is the Technical Documentation, which will guide software developers as they build registration interfaces. The state should think of its technical document as a teaching tool: its purpose is to teach partner developers how the platform works, and how the partner's interface software needs to be programmed to interact with

the state's system. The best examples of technical platform documentation are highly readable, and they contain easy-to-follow examples to get developers up to speed on the ins-and-outs of various aspects of the platform's functionality.³⁵

The Technical Documentation should describe all of the requirements necessary to display a valid registration form. The documentation should include the name of each input field (e.g., "First name," "Last name," "Date of Birth," etc.), the input type of each field (e.g., characters, numbers, a choice of gender, etc.), any corresponding explanatory or disclaimer text, and so on. It should also describe the order in which the fields should appear, whether any fields are optional for the voter, and any other implementation logic or visual elements that the developer will need to know about.

The documentation should specify the format in which a partner interface will need to submit completed form data. The possible digital responses to a submission are also important for partners to know (for example, signals acknowledging receipt of an application, and possibly indicating success or failure of the registration attempt), so their interfaces can share this information with users.

Designated Partners will use this documentation to design usable voter registration forms, and incorporate those fillable forms directly into their own interfaces. Aside from any limitations set out in the Designated Partner Terms, which each partner will have agreed to, they will have the leeway to decide what technologies to use, and how best to design their interfaces.

Documentation of this kind is a long-established software best practice well understood by vendors, ensuring consistent and correct use of the platform.³⁶ The documentation for OVR platforms should also be relatively concise, since the functionality that it needs to provide is relatively stable and simple.

Software Functions of the OVR Platform

The OVR platform software need only perform one main task: it must accept completed registration applications from Designated Partner sites and apps, delivering them to the state's systems.

ACCEPTING A COMPLETED FORM

When a user submits a registration request through a partner interface, the platform first checks that the submission is complete—the Designated Partner must have gathered all

of the required fields, and the submitted information must conform to the requirements of the Technical Documentation (e.g., the birth date must be in the format MM/DD/YYYY). If there is a problem with the submission, the platform should return an error message that describes why the submission failed. (The Designated Partner interface should share this information with the user, and allow the user to correct his/her mistake and submit again.)

Once the platform receives a completed form, it should provide immediate feedback to the user through the partner interface. Some states will have the capability to process and verify registrations in real-time—when this is possible, the platform should convey this status information to the partner (rather than simply indicating that the form has been received). In states where the verification system takes hours or days to complete, the platform should provide users with a way to check their registration status later. One way would be to implement registration tracking numbers, which is discussed further in Section 5.

After the platform hands the form off to the state’s verification system and responds to the user, the platform’s job is done. The verification system can handle the platform submission in the same way it might handle a paper form or a submission through the state’s basic OVR site. Regardless of how the state receives registration data, the verification process can remain consistent.

OPTIONAL FUNCTIONS

At its simplest, a platform need only accept completed forms. However, states are encouraged to provide Designated Partners with additional platform functionality, such as the ability to:

- Offer registrants a “Check Your Registration Status” tool;
- Assist voters in submitting changes to their registration information, such as a new address;
- Request a machine-readable description of the voter registration form; or
- Request a list of the state’s voter registration deadlines for upcoming elections.

The more functionality and information an OVR platform provides, the easier it will be for partners to promote and coordinate their voter registration efforts.

SECURITY AND CONTROL

An OVR platform will have simple and powerful safeguards to ensure that the state remains in control of the technology and the voter registration process.

One essential feature is the use of API or platform keys to ensure that only Designated Partners have access to the platform. The state will control who can use its OVR platform by assigning a unique platform key to each of its Designated Partners. A platform key is similar to a password—it allows only the Designated Partner to use the platform. The key also allows the state to easily monitor the incoming registration patterns of each partner and audit each partner's use. If the partner violates the Designated Partner Terms, the state can revoke the partner's platform key at any time, shutting the partner out of the platform.

States should also log each request, in order to provide officials with an audit trail in case any problems are detected or reported. As an extra measure of caution, states could publish the directory of Designated Partners, as well as the expected locations and types of interfaces each partner provides. This would allow potential voters to check whether a registration interface is actually one that is built by a designated state partner.

In general, the state will decide who can use the OVR platform, and will set both the technological and contractual rules for how that use occurs. In all cases, state elections officials remain in full control of the registration process.

CORE IMPROVEMENTS FOR ALL OVR SYSTEMS

There are several important and feasible improvements that all states should make to their OVR systems, regardless of whether or not they have an OVR platform. The following recommendations are applicable to both OVR platforms and many of today's OVR websites. For states that cannot implement an OVR platform in the near term, these suggestions are positive, interim improvements.

Implement Real-Time Verification of Registrations

Wherever possible, a state's back-end system should check application information against records (e.g., DMV records and voter registration records) in real-time. In turn, an OVR system can provide an immediate response to the registrant as to the success or failure of an application. If these back-end verification mechanisms can be automated, OVR services will become more powerful and convenient.³⁷

Allow Users to Check the Status of Their Registrations

Regardless of whether real-time verification is feasible, states should provide registrants with the ability to check the status of their registration. Specifically, for those attempting to register for the first time, the state should provide a tracking number when the OVR application is submitted. This tracking number can be used by the registrant to easily check on the status of their registration, or by a Designated Partner to follow up with the registrant in case of registration problems. The user should also be offered the option to subscribe to updates by email or SMS. These notifications should be provided in tandem with any paper-based notifications that the state already sends out.

Provide Options for Users Who Lack State IDs

The convenience of OVR technologies should not be limited to those with a particular kind of credential. Unfortunately, most states today require voters to hold a state-issued identification card in order to use their OVR systems, but “as many as 11 percent of eligible voters do not have government-issued photo ID.”³⁸

A few states provide helpful options for these voters. In Minnesota, voters without state-issued identification can instead provide the last four digits of their social security number.³⁹ And California’s OVR statute provides that “[i]f an applicant cannot electronically submit the information required [. . .], he or she shall nevertheless be able to complete the affidavit of voter registration electronically on the Secretary of State’s Internet Web site”⁴⁰

OVR systems can use state ID numbers to fetch the voter’s electronic signature from the state’s motor vehicle database. But, for voters without state ID, the state could provide provisional registrations through the OVR system, subject to finalizing the registration with a signature on election day.⁴¹ At the very least, an OVR system should provide these users with a pre-filled document that they can easily print and mail to state offices.

Create Accessible and Responsive OVR Websites

With or without a platform, states should strive to provide OVR websites that are both accessible and responsive. States should ensure that their OVR websites are easily accessible to those with disabilities, such as blind and visually impaired voters using screen readers that dictate the content of websites. OVR forms should also be provided in a variety of languages, to lower registration barriers for minority language speakers.

A state OVR website should also be responsive, in both an everyday and a technical sense of that word. The online form should be “responsive” in the everyday sense that it should provide timely, informative messages that respond to the user. For example, if a user neglects to fill in a field, or enters an invalid character, the site should respond by telling the user exactly what went wrong. If a real-time verification process fails (e.g., a user’s state ID number could not be found), the user should be provided with a detailed error message and the opportunity to re-submit the registration.

The form should also be “responsive” in the technical sense familiar to people who create websites: it should smoothly adapt its format to match a wide range of end-user screen sizes and computing devices. Responsive websites automatically adjust to these differ-

ences, providing optimal interfaces to many users. (For example, the state’s online voter registration form might have two columns when displayed on a large monitor, but only one column when displayed on the smaller screen of a user’s smartphone.) OVR sites that are responsive will also be easier to embed as an “iframe” within other websites, which civic organizations like Rock the Vote are already doing.

A state could go even further by creating a simple programmatic way for civic organizations to pre-populate the official OVR form on the state’s own website. This would allow registrants to fill in most parts of the registration form using a partner’s interface, and have their information transposed automatically to the state’s interface. The registrant would then finish the registration on the official OVR site. This solution provides some of the benefits of a platform approach, but is a more limited, stopgap measure.

All states with OVR should make these core improvements, and voter engagement organizations stand ready to help states implement these changes to reach new eligible voters. For example, Rock the Vote offers an online registration tool—available for free to states and local jurisdictions—that election officials can incorporate as part of their official registration service. The tool’s interface is best in class in usability and design, is mobile friendly, and is available in 14 languages. Additionally, Rock the Vote and its technology partners are available to support elections administrators in developing an OVR platform and the related documentation. More information is available at www.rockthevote.com/ovr.

Voter engagement organizations stand ready to help states implement these changes to reach new eligible voters.

Voter registration is essential to the integrity of democracy. States should do everything in their power to provide accessible, user-friendly, and secure means of registration. OVR websites are a sensible start—they have increased registration rates, lowered costs, and improved accuracy. However, the relentless pace of technological change demands more. The rise of mobile devices, social networks, and other online contexts has already changed habits and expectations.

Fortunately, states can stay on top of these changes by adopting a connected approach, including a simple and durable registration platform. This approach allows states to leverage the expertise of diverse partner organizations to dramatically expand their reach and empower more eligible voters to participate in our democracy.

A. TECH-SPECIFIC EXCERPTS FROM STATE OVR STATUTES

California

[SB 397](#) (2011)

“Notwithstanding any other provision of law, a person who is qualified to register to vote and who has a valid California driver’s license or state identification card may submit an affidavit of voter registration electronically **on the Internet Web site of the Secretary of State.**”

Colorado

[HB 1160](#) (2009)

“An elector may register to vote, and a registered elector may change his or her residence on the registration record, change or withdraw his or her affiliation, apply for permanent mail-in ballot status, or amend his or her existing mail-in ballot status, by completing an electronic form **on the official web site of the Secretary of State. . .**”

Connecticut

[HB 5024](#) (2012)

“The Secretary of State shall establish and maintain **a system for online voter registration.**”

Georgia

[SB 92](#) (2012)

“A person who is qualified to register to vote in this state and who has a valid Georgia driver’s license or identification card may submit a voter registration application **on the Internet website of the Secretary of State.**”

Hawaii

[HB 1755](#) (2012)

“Notwithstanding any law to the contrary, the clerk of each county may permit a person who has a valid government-issued identification that is capable of electronic confirmation to submit **an application to register to vote electronically** in lieu of a traditional signed application by mail or in person.”

Illinois

[HB 2418](#) (2013)

“The State Board of Elections shall establish and maintain **a system for online voter registration** that permits a person to apply to register to vote or to update his or her existing voter registration.”

Indiana

[HB 1346](#) (2009)

“The secretary of state, with the consent of the co-directors of the election division, shall establish **a secure Internet web site** to permit individuals described in section 1 of this chapter to submit applications under this chapter.”

Louisiana[BN 520](#) (2009)

“[A]ny person who meets the qualifications for voter registration and desires to register as an elector shall apply to do so by making application . . . electronically **on the secretary of state’s website** if the person has a valid Louisiana driver’s license or Louisiana special identification card.”

Maryland[HB 740](#) (2011)

“The State Board may operate **an online voter registration system . . .**”

Oregon[HB 2386](#) (2009)

“The Secretary of state by rule shall adopt **an electronic voter registration system** to be used by qualified persons . . .”

South Carolina[HB 4945](#) (2012)

“A person who is qualified to register to vote and who has a valid South Carolina driver’s license or state identification card issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles may submit an application for voter registration electronically **on the Internet website of the State Election Commission.**”

Utah[SB 25](#) (2009)

“The lieutenant governor may create and maintain **an electronic system for voter registration that is publicly available on the Internet.**”

Virginia[HB 2341](#) (2013)

“Notwithstanding any other provision of law, a person who is qualified to register to vote **may apply to register to vote by electronic means as authorized by the State Board** by completing an electronic registration application.”

Washington[HB 1528](#) (2007)

“A person who has a valid Washington state driver’s license or state identification card may submit a voter registration application electronically **on the secretary of state’s web site.**”

West Virginia[SB 477](#) (2013)

“The Secretary of State is authorized to promulgate procedures to permit persons to register to vote through **a secure electronic voter registration system.**”

B. MODEL OVR LEGISLATION

FINDINGS

(1) [State] should make every effort to ensure that every eligible person has access to a convenient and secure means of registering to vote.

(2) Technological innovation is changing how people access information and interact with their government. Accordingly, [State] must provide a modern voter registration mechanism that will continue to serve our residents well, even as technologies continue to evolve.

(3) Online and electronic voter registration has already increased voter registration rates in states including Washington, Kansas, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Delaware, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Arizona. Moreover, in these states, online voter registration has increased the accuracy of voter registration processes while significantly decreasing processing times and costs.

PROVISIONS

The [agency/official] shall establish and maintain an online voter registration system.

This system shall allow persons to register to vote, and may further at the discretion of the [agency/official] allow a person to check his or her registration status, update his or her residence on the registration record, change or withdraw his or her affiliation, and any other functions the [agency/official] deems fit.

The [agency/official] shall promulgate policies governing the operation and use of the system, including policies that provide a programmatic interface for third parties designated by [agency/official] to submit completed registration applications to the system on behalf of persons who wish to register.

All persons qualified to register to vote under [currently-existing registration procedures] may submit an application to register to vote through the system. Upon the submission of an application through the system, the [agency/official] may at the discretion of [agency/official] employ software that provides immediate verification of all of the following: [specify information to be verified in real time, as appropriate]. If an application is rejected, the applicant shall be notified of such rejection within [appropriate time period] after the application is rejected, including information sufficient for the applicant to ascertain the reason for the rejection, and instructions for correcting the issue.

The [agency/official] shall employ security measures to ensure the accuracy and integrity of voter registration applications submitted through the system.

C. NOTES

- ^{1.} *Online Voter Registration*, National Conference of State Legislatures (Nov. 14, 2013), <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx>.
- ^{2.} *Voter Registration Modernization is Possible Now: State Experiences*, Brennan Center for Justice (Oct. 29, 2013), <http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/VRM%20State%20Brief%2010.29.13.pdf>.
- ^{3.} Lucy McCalmont, *Expanding high-tech voting for '14*, POLITICO (Dec. 2, 2013, 6:15 PM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/high-tech-voting-2014-midterm-elections-100519.html> (“Wendy Underhill, program manager for the National Conference of State Legislatures, said she expects that by 2020 all states will allow online voter registration.”).
- ^{4.} *Online Voter Registration (OLVR) Systems in Arizona and Washington: Evaluating Usage, Public Confidence and Implementation Processes*, A Joint Research Project of the Washington Institute of the Study of Ethnicity and Race (WISER) University of Washington, Seattle and the Election Administration Research Center (EARC) University of California, Berkeley, at 93 (Apr. 10, 2010), http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2010/online_voter_reg.pdf (In Maricopa County, Arizona, “[a] paper registration costs at least \$.83 of staff time to process; whereas an EZ Voter registration takes an average of \$.03 to process; therefore every registration that comes in online saves the county \$.80.”).
- ^{5.} *Voter Registration in a Digital Age*, Brennan Center for Justice, at 19 (2010), http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Paperless_Registration_FINAL.pdf.
- ^{6.} *Cell Internet Use 2013*, Pew Research Center (Sep. 16, 2013), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Cell-Internet.aspx> (“63% of adult cell owners now use their phones to go online, a figure that has doubled since we first started tracking internet usage on cell phones in 2009. In addition, 34% of these cell internet users say that they mostly go online using their cell phone. That means that 21% of all adult cell owners now do most of their online browsing using their mobile phone—and not some other device such as a desktop or laptop computer.”).
- ^{7.} Mobile devices are available in many different screen sizes, interfaces, and operating systems. The sheer variety of devices makes it complicated for software developers to build mobile interfaces that work smoothly on all of them.
- ^{8.} Josh Constine, *Facebook Reveals 78% of US Users are Mobile As It Starts Sharing User Counts By Country*, TechCrunch (Aug. 13, 2013), <http://techcrunch.com/2013/08/13/facebook-mobile-user-count>
- ^{9.} *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012 - Detailed Tables*, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.html> (the total in Table 1 shows that 29 percent of U.S. citizens of voting age are unregistered vote); see also Christopher Uggen et al., *State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States* (2010), http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/fd_State_Level_Estimates_of_Felon_Disen_2010.pdf (“Approximately 2.5 percent of the total U.S. voting age population -- 1 of every 40 adults -- is disenfranchised due to a current or previous felony conviction.”). Adding together the 71 percent of U.S. citizens who are registered to vote, plus the 2.5 percent of U.S. adults of voting age who are disenfranchised due their criminal records, leaves roughly 26.5% of eligible voters who remained unregistered in the 2012 election cycle.
- ^{10.} While it is impossible to guarantee absolute security on the Internet, OVR platforms should follow commercial best practices for digital security, including the use of secure web protocols. As with paper-based registration and existing OVR systems, elections officials should monitor incoming registrations to detect potential abuse.
- ^{11.} *API Directory*, ProgrammableWeb, <http://www.programmableweb.com/apis/directory> (last visited Dec. 13, 2013) (listing more than 10,000 public APIs in a wide range of topical categories).
- ^{12.} *Digital Government: Bringing a 21st Century Platform to Better Serve the American People*, The White House, at 10 (May 23, 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/egov/digital-government/digital-government-strategy.pdf>.
- ^{13.} *APIs in Government | HowTo.gov*, GSA’s Office of Citizen Services & Innovative Technologies (last visited Nov. 25, 2012), <http://www.howto.gov/mobile/apis-in-government>.
- ^{14.} *Id.*
- ^{15.} *Become an Authorized e-file Provider*, Internal Revenue Service (last updated Dec. 3, 2013), <http://www.irs.gov/Tax-Professionals/e-File-Providers-&Partners/Become-an-Authorized-e-file-Provider>.

16. *IRS e-file Application and Participation*, Internal Revenue Service, at 2 and 25 (May 2013), <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p3112.pdf>.
17. *Electronic Filing 2012 Annual Report to Congress*, IRS Oversight Board, at 5 (Dec. 2012), <http://www.treasury.gov/irsob/reports/2013/IRSOB~E-File%20Report%202012.pdf>.
18. *Deputy Registrar*, Cook County Clerk, <http://www.cook-countyclerk.com/elections/register tovot e/pages/deputy-registrar.aspx> (last visited November 2013).
19. Lisa Garcia Bedolla, *Declaration of Lisa Garcia Bedolla, in League of Women Voters v. Browning*, at 4 (Feb. 14, 2012), http://brennan.3cdn.net/336b484681def70b38_gqm6b44fw.pdf.
20. Diana Kasdan, *State Restrictions on Voter Registration Drives*, Brennan Center for Justice, at 2 (Nov. 30, 2012), <http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/state-restrictions-voter-registration-drives>.
21. See OLVR *supra* note 4, at 44.
22. Brennan Center for Justice, *Testimony of the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law Before the Presidential Commission on Election Administration*, at 2-3 (Sep. 4, 2013), http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/PCEA_Testimony_090413.pdf (“The paper-based voter registration system . . . creates needless barriers to voting, opportunities for fraud, and delay and confusion at polling places — which in turn leads to long lines on Election Day.”).
23. See, e.g., Donna Tam, *Facebook wants you -- to vote*, CNET News (Nov. 5, 2012), http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57544722-93/facebook-wants-you-to-vote.
24. *VoterHub Mobile App*, Voting Information Project (last visited Dec. 1, 2013), https://votinginfo project.org/projects/view/att_politics360_iphone_app.
25. Several Secretaries of State have introduced OVR websites without a specific statutory mandate. For example, Kansas IT staff introduced website registration in 2009 while implementing automated DMV registration. VRM in the States: Kansas, Brennan Center for Justice (Jun. 11, 2012), <http://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/vrm-states-kansas>. The relevant Kansas registration statute authorizes “delivery” on “a form approved by the secretary of state.” Kan. Stat. Ann. § 25-2309, available at http://www.ksrevisor.org/statutes/chapters/ch25/025_025_023_0009.html. Nevada’s Secretary of State implemented a website under a broad statutory reference to “registration by computer.” Nev. Rev. Stat. § 293.517, available at <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/NRS/NRS-293.html>. Similarly, Arizona’s voting statute contemplates the “electronic generation and transmittal of voter registrations.” Ariz. Rev. Stat. § 16-112, available at <http://www.azleg.gov/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/ars/16/00112.htm&Title=16&DocType=ARS>. Minnesota’s Secretary of State’s also launched an OVR website, which now faces a legal challenge. Conservative advocacy organizations and some Minnesota House Representatives argued that the website was not authorized because Minnesota’s voter registration statute was limited in its list of permitted delivery methods. See Memorandum from Jim Nobles, Legislative Auditor of the State of Minnesota, to a group of Minnesota Senators and Representatives, regarding Online Voter Registration (Oct. 10, 2013), available at <http://www.mnmajority.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Online-Registration-OLA.pdf>.
26. Colo. Rev. Stat. § 1-2-202.5, available at <https://law.resource.org/pub/us/code/co/colorado.xml.older/code11.html>.
27. Indiana Code § 3-7-26.7-5, available at <http://www.in.gov/legislative/bills/2013/HE/HE1391.1.html>.
28. Oregon Rev. Stat. § 247.019, available at http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/rules/oars_100/oar_165/165_005.html.
29. Virginia Code § 24.2-416.7, available at <http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?131+ful+HB2341ER>.
30. “A system created and maintained under this section shall provide the notices concerning a voter’s presentation of identification contained in Subsection 20A-2-104 (1).” Utah Code § 24.2-416.7, available at <http://le.utah.gov/~2009/bills/sbillenr/sb0025.htm>.
31. “The Secretary may cross reference the information input into the system by applicants with data or information contained in any state agency’s database or a database administered by the federal government, or any voter registration database of another state, in order to verify the information submitted by applicants.” Connecticut Gen. Stat. § 9-19k, available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2012/act/pa/2012PA-00056-R00HB-05024-PA.htm>.
32. West Virginia Code § 3-2-5, available at <http://www.legis.state.wv.us/WVCODE/ChapterEntire.cfm?chap=03&art=2§ion=5&year=2013&sessiontype=RS&btype=bill&input=477>.

33. David Orr, the clerk of Cook County, Illinois, suggests an “all in” approach to registration, which matches voters based on verifiable voter registration information from schools, tax agencies, Medicaid, and other public data sets. E-mail from David Orr, Cook County Clerk, to Heather Smith, Rock the Vote (Dec. 13, 2013, 12:06 PM) (on file with author). *See also* David Orr, *For Voters, a Registration Renaissance is Within Reach*, Chicago Tribune (Dec. 6, 2013), available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/site/ct-per-spec-voters-1206-20131206,0,190664.story>.
34. *See, e.g., Google APIs Terms of Service*, Google Developers, <https://developers.google.com/terms> (last modified Dec. 9, 2011); *Terms of Use*, The New York Times Developer Network, http://developer.nytimes.com/Api_terms_of_use (last visited Dec. 1, 2013); and *Open311 API Terms of Service*, City of Chicago, <http://dev.cityofchicago.org/docs/api/tos> (last visited Dec. 1, 2013).
35. *See, e.g., Tweet Button*, Twitter Developers, <https://dev.twitter.com/docs/tweet-button> (last updated Nov. 19, 2013).
36. *See*, Peter Gruenbaum, *A Coder’s Guide to Writing API Documentation* (Nov. 2010), <http://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/magazine/gg309172.aspx>.
37. We recognize that bureaucratic and technological hurdles stand in the way of making legacy systems compatible in real-time. For some states, this may be a long-term process.
38. *Voter ID*, Brennan Center for Justice (Oct. 15, 2012), <http://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/voter-id>.
39. *Voter Registration*, Minneapolis Elections & Voter Services, <http://vote.minneapolismn.gov/voters/register> (last visited Dec. 13, 2013).
40. Cal. Elec. Code § 2196(d), available at <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=elec&group=02001-03000&file=2196-2197>.
41. Nevada’s proposed SB 375 would “provide for the provisional registration of voters without a signature . . . their registration will not be perfected until they provide the signature, which they may do before or at the polls.” Lee Rowland, *Testimony of Lee Rowland from the Brennan Center for Justice in Support of Senate Bill 375 before the Senate Legislative Operations and Elections Committee*, at 3 (Apr. 2, 2013), http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/Nevada_SB375_Testimony_040213.pdf.