

Online Voter Registration APIs – The Next Step in Voter Registration Modernization

- Online Voter Registration (OVR) has made registration more secure, efficient, and cost-effective by removing labor-intensive and costly paper forms from the process.
- However, paper forms are still used extensively by third-party registration drives.
- In recent years, several states have extended their OVR systems to include an application programming interface (API), which allows trusted and verified third-party groups to submit registration forms electronically, eliminating additional paper registration forms.
- The net result is additional cost, efficiency, and security gains in the registration process.

In the past two decades, nearly all states have adopted online voter registration (OVR). OVR lets voters submit registration forms over the Internet instead of submitting paper forms in-person or through the mail. This shift to electronic forms makes registration more secure, efficient, and cost-effective. Processing paper forms is error-prone and expensive. Voters often have illegible handwriting or skip certain fields on paper forms, and election officials, working overtime in the run-up to election day, must decipher these forms or follow up with applicants on missing information. Election officials may also make errors when re-entering data into the registration database, creating inefficiencies and delays at the polls.

By making registration fully electronic, OVR saves election officials the time and expense of processing and re-entering information from individual paper forms. Research shows that the costs of paper registration application (and the corresponding savings from OVR) are high. In 2002, Arizona became the first state to implement OVR, resulting in significant savings from elimination of paper forms. According to one study, while Maricopa County, Arizona spent roughly 83 cents for each paper registration, it spent only 3 cents for each online registration.¹

Recognizing the cost and efficiency benefits of OVR, several states have taken the next step and added an application programming interface (API) to their OVR systems. Just as OVR replaces paper forms from individual voters, an API eliminates forms from third-party registration drives. Even in OVR states, registration drives conducted by field groups and campaigns still represent a significant and persistent source of paper application. In the 2018 election cycle alone, third-party groups submitted at least 2.2 million registration forms, placing a huge burden on election officials.

¹ See The Pew Center on the States, *The Real Cost of Voter Registration: An Oregon Case Study* (2010), https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2013/the-real-cost-of-voter-registration-pdf.pdf.

Unfortunately, these groups have little incentive to direct voters to the state's OVR system, as they cannot track the effectiveness of their registration drives when voters use the OVR website. The net result is a pile of unverified, potentially illegible paper forms arriving in the weeks before election day and adding to the already busy workload of election officials.

APIs solve this problem. An API is an electronic interface that lets trusted third-party groups collect voter registration information and then seamlessly and securely transmit this information to election officials for verification and processing. A field group must apply to work with the API system and then undergo testing and be verified as a secure and reliable actor. Once approved, a group can use the API to track its registration efforts, while electronic submissions save election officials the time, expense, and inefficiency of data entry and follow-up. Paper is removed from the process, creating a more secure and accurate system. Just as OVR modernizes registration for individual voters, APIs modernize the process for third-party registration drives.

APIs can also be used by other government agencies to integrate voter registration into agency transactions. In Pennsylvania, several state agencies including the Department of Human Services incorporate the API into their procedures. When agency customers engage in a transaction, the API offers them an integrated online voter registration opportunity, without the need to re-enter information or go to a separate website. APIs can thus improve registration rates at state agencies besides the DMV.

Recognizing these benefits, states like Virginia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Colorado have all adopted APIs or similar systems in the past several years. In many cases, APIs can be adopted administratively by Secretaries of State or other chief election officials. Secretaries just need to authorize the technical development of the API. By joining the growing trend of adopting APIs, states can reap the security, efficiency, and monetary benefits of eliminating hundreds of thousands of paper forms from the registration process while improving access to registration.