Online Voter Registration

Establish online voter registration in Massachusetts

David Goldberg '14
John Pizzi '13
Ricky Rosen '14

Low voter turnout has been an issue for decades nationwide. In Massachusetts, voter turnout in the 2012 Presidential and U.S. Senate Elections was 64.9%. The barriers to voter registration in the United States have been estimated to deter voters and decrease turnout by as much as 10 percent. Across the country, an estimated 3 million voters could not or did not vote because of registration problems. To combat this problem in Massachusetts, S.313: An Act establishing online voter registration, proposes the creation of an online voting system, which would allow citizens to complete an affidavit of registration online. The bill also involves the creation of an online look-up system, where voters can check to see if they are registered to vote in a district. To guard against voter fraud, citizens' signatures from the Department of Motor Vehicles would be used.

■ The Bill
S.313: An Act establishing online voter registration.

■ Excerpt from Storybook
Sara Brady, Policy Director of MassVOTE, is an outspoken advocate of electoral reform and supports the online voter registration bill as a means of driving young people to register to vote. Sara affirms that in the technology-centric world in which we live, we should be taking advantage of all resources with online voter registration. Sara says: “It’s about making it more accessible and more convenient for young people. If you’re able to pay your taxes online, go grocery shopping online and pay your credit card bill online, you should be able to register to vote online.”

“I went to my local town hall to register in person immediately after I turned 18. I was left confused by the process and it was unclear how I was supposed to register.” [Josh Kelly, registered Massachusetts voter]

Gabe Distler, a Brandeis student, is registered to vote in Massachusetts where he attends college, but is considering switching his registration to Florida, where he has a...
permanent residence. Gabe was interested in looking up his registration status online and seeing whether the information is accurate; however, since Massachusetts does not have an online lookup system, he was unable to do this. Gabe says: ‘If so many other states have online lookup systems, I see no reason why Massachusetts should not be taking advantage of the technology and doing the same.’

■ Elevator Speech

Hello, our names are Ricky Rosen, David Goldberg and John Pizzi, and we are members of a student body at Brandeis University that is dedicated to social justice and reform. We wanted to speak with you about civic engagement, the bedrock of our democracy, when civic engagement falters, we cease to be a democratic nation. Voter turnout in the United States averages 55 percent, but in 2012 alone, three million voters could not vote because of registration problems. To help citizens, 41 states have instituted online registration look-up databases, 15 states have implemented online registration systems and 9 states are in the process of doing so. Massachusetts is not yet one of these states.

Right now, Bill S.313, An Act establishing online voter registration, has been filed in the Senate, which would create an online database through which citizens in Massachusetts can register to vote. Online voter registration is a proven way to increase voter registration in states that have enacted it. In Oregon and South Carolina, 25,000 new voters registered online as soon as the system was launched. In addition, online voter registration would save money compared to traditional paper processes. In Washington and Delaware, online voter registration saved $125,000 and $200,000, respectively, in the first year that the system was enacted.

Massachusetts needs to join the other states that have adopted online registration means for its residents and for its democracy. We urge you to support a favorable committee vote on this bill.

■ Letter to the Legislator

Dear Representative Stanley,

As Brandeis students dedicated to social justice and reform, we are writing to ask you to support Bill S.313: An Act establishing online voter registration. This bill is currently in the Joint Committee on Election Laws, but originated as part of a larger election reform bill, SD.1562. Since this bill was unable to pass, it was divided into a multitude of smaller bills, among them is S.313: An Act establishing online voter registration.

Voter turnout is a critical component of civic engagement. In the United States, voter turnout in federal elections averages 55 percent. However, in the 2012 presidential election, three million voters could not vote because of registration issues. To help citizens, 41 states have instituted online registration look-up databases, 15 states have implemented online voter registration systems and 9 states are in the process of doing so. Massachusetts is not one of those states.

Bill S.313, An Act establishing online voter registration, sponsored by Senator Katherine Clark, proposes the creation of an online voter registration system. The bill also involves the creation of an online look-up system, where voters can check their registration status and registration location (state and district).

States that have enacted online voter registration systems are quickly proving that it is an effective method to increase voter registration, increase the accuracy of voting records, streamline the registration process for election officials, and save state dollars. In California, 600,000 new voters registered with the online voter registration system. In Oregon and South Carolina, 25,000 new voters registered online the day the system was launched. Online voter registration would also save money compared to paper processes. Right now, paper voter registration costs Massachusetts millions of dollars due to the costs of printing, staff, distribution, system management, and support. Online voter registration would eliminate most of these costs and save Massachusetts money in the long run. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, in Washington, the Secretary of State’s office saved over $125,000 in the first year, while Delaware saved $200,000 in the first year that online voter registration was enacted.

The major argument against this bill is that it would generate voter fraud. However, in order to guard against this, the bill stipulates that the information on the registration form would be cross-checked with the Massachusetts Department of Motor Vehicles, including the citizen’s signature.

Massachusetts needs to join the states that have adopted online voter registration for its residents and for its democracy. This is an important bill that will benefit the Commonwealth. Currently, you are petitioning another bill on election laws under H.644 with Representative John J. Lawn from the 10th District. We hope that your desire for progressive election reform will extend to Bill S.313: An Act establishing online voter registration. Thank you for your support.
Representative Dempsey, the barriers to voter registration serve as a major cause of low voter turnout in the United States. In order to address this challenge, 24 states have either implemented online voter registration systems or are currently introducing these bills this year. An Act establishing online voter registration (S.313) was filed this year in the Massachusetts Legislature by Senator Katherine Clark, with the support of dozens of Representatives, Senators and coalition organizations such as Common Cause Massachusetts and MassVOTE. The bill proposes the creation of an online voter registration system, which would allow citizens the opportunity to complete an affidavit of registration online. The bill also involves the creation of an online look-up system, where voters can find out if they are registered to vote in a given district.

The online voter registration bill would produce an enormous increase in voter registration in Massachusetts, as has been the case in states that have implemented similar online voter registration systems, including California, Oregon, and South Carolina. The bill would also increase the accuracy of voting records, and appeal to young people, a demographic that has historically low voter turnout.

This bill also addresses another major concern with the current voter registration process in Massachusetts: it is incredibly costly. According to the Director of the Elections Division of the Massachusetts Secretary of State’s Office, Michelle Tassinari, paper registration in Massachusetts costs the state millions of dollars each year in printing, distribution, and staff expenses alone. Massachusetts is not the only state that has costly paper voter registration processes. A study by the Pew Center found that paper voter registration in Oregon cost more than $9.7 million during the 2008 election, which is a cost of $4.51 per active registered voter.

The reason that paper voter registration is so expensive is because of how elaborate the process is. According to the Massachusetts Secretary of State’s Office, voter registration involves a wide range of costs in every step of the process. First, there are costs for printing and postage for state notices to registered voters, confirmation notices sent to newly registered voters and confirmation notices sent to voters who updated their registrations with address changes or other new information. There are also staff costs for each part-time and full-time clerk who works for the county on voter registration. In addition, there are facility and support costs, which include the cost of office space, information technology support, and telephones for staff members. Furthermore, there are the costs of receiving and distributing completed registration forms to counties, the costs of managing the system which provides each county with a list of registered voters, and the cost of providing a toll-free call service for citizens with election registration questions.

How much does online voter registration cost in comparison? First of all, the start-up costs for an online voter registration database are inexpensive. According to a report by the Brennan Center for Justice, it cost Arizona, Washington and Oregon $130,000, $279,000 and $200,000, respectively, to set up the database. This is essentially the same amount that would be spent in one election cycle to print paper voter registration forms; however, the cost of setting up the database would only need to be incurred once. These costs could be eliminated with moderate grants from the federal government.

Nevertheless, studies have shown that these start-up costs have been recovered within a few years, mainly as a result of the need for less staff. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, in Washington, the Secretary of State’s office saved over $125,000 in the first year. In addition, Maricopa County in Arizona (which has a population larger than that of 23 states) spends only 3 cents to process an electronic registration, compared with 83 cents for a paper form. The county estimates it saved more than $450,000 in registration costs in 2008 alone. Delaware also saved more than $200,000 in the first year that online voter registration was enacted.

Where are these savings coming from? Besides the start-up costs, online voter registration would not incur many of the costs associated with paper registration. Staff, printing and distribution costs would be all but eliminated. In addition, according to MassVOTE, processing online registration costs 95 percent less than entering handwritten forms.

That being said, opponents argue that the system would produce voter fraud. They insist that people could register under fake names or send it multiple registrations by gaining access to the database. However, in order to guard against this type of fraud, the bill stipulates that the information on the registration form would be cross-checked with the Massachusetts Department of Motor Vehicles, including the citizen’s signature. In addition to this, one of the few costs associated with the online voter registration database would be system maintenance and security to prevent voter fraud. Senator Katherine Clark, the bill’s official sponsor in the Senate, states this bill “is no more susceptible to voter fraud than paper voter registration; if anything, it’s safer.”

Opponents argue that the system would confuse people who are unfamiliar with this technology. However, the bill targets teenagers and young people already familiar with the internet. In addition, the bill could institute a toll-free hotline for citizens with questions, just as the Elections Division provides for paper voter registration methods.
We would like you to consider the benefits that this bill would have on voter registration and voter turnout. We also urge you to consider that in this age of financial uncertainty, this bill would save Massachusetts millions of dollars in the long run. We request that you support this bill in your meetings with the Ways and Means Committee. Thank you for your time.

Op-Ed

Modernizing Massachusetts: Bringing Voter Registration into the 21st Century

Purchase airplane tickets. Trade stocks and commodities. Hire a personal assistant. Order fast food. Take courses at MIT. Pay your credit card bill. In some states, you can even get married online. In the world we live in today, there is truly no limit to the pervasiveness of the Internet . . . except when it comes to voter registration.

In Massachusetts, just about the only thing that you cannot do online is register to exercise your Constitutional right to vote. With every other aspect of everyday life in Massachusetts moving into the 21st century, it is simply unacceptable that the state’s electoral system remains stagnant.

Right now, it is fairly painless to register to vote in Massachusetts – provided that you have a half hour, a working printer, an awful lot of patience and a strong desire to fulfill your civic duties. All that you need to do is visit the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ website and download the voter registration form [if you can find it amidst all of the clutter]. Once you wait approximately six minutes for the download to be completed, you must open the form, but as a .doc file, not a PDF since you need to edit it. After you fill it out, printing it should not take longer than a few minutes, depending on how much toner you have. Then, you need to find an envelope and stamp [unfortunately the state will not reimburse for this] and take a trip to the post office to mail it. Within about twenty minutes, your registration should be in the mail, and you should receive notice of the registration within a few weeks. That doesn’t sound very tedious, does it? It’s no wonder that teenagers juggling Advanced Placement classes, sports teams, play practice and social lives decide to just skip the process altogether.

What many other states have realized, though, is that you should not have to jump through hoops to register to vote. Voting is not a privilege – it is the right of every American citizen, and the state has the duty to make the process as convenient as possible. For this reason, 15 states have implemented online registration systems and 9 states are in the process of doing so – and these states have seen results. Online voter registration has led to an increase in voter registration and voter turnout in Oregon and South Carolina. Oregon and Delaware have also saved thousands of dollars by implementing an online voter registration database.

The age group that online registration would most affect is teenagers, the laziest demographic of them all. Fewer than half of the eligible 18 to 21 year old citizens are currently registered to vote in Massachusetts. But for a teenager who spends most of his or her waking life deciding whether to devote the next three minutes to an article on BuzzFeed or a video on YouTube, the ability to register to vote online sounds incredible.

To clarify, Bill # S.313, An Act establishing online voter registration, would not enable citizens to cast their vote in the Presidential election by liking a status on Facebook. It is simply offering Massachusetts residents the opportunity to register to vote online, a privilege which 24 other states have already granted their citizens. But there is no rush: it is much more important to be able to order Domino’s Pizza online than to register to vote.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Ricky

Along with my group members, David Goldberg and John Pizzi, I stopped by Senator Finegold’s office at the State House to speak with him about Bill S.313, an An Act establishing online voter registration. We sought out Senator Finegold, in particular, since he is the Chair of the Joint Committee on Election Laws, and he was the sponsor of the omnibus election bill. Senator Finegold’s bill contained many components of election reform, including early registration for teenagers, extended voting periods, and online voter registration, all of which were divided into separate bills. We decided to drop by the Senator’s office, because we had finished a meeting with Senator Katherine Clark, the sponsor of Bill S.313, and had some time to chat. We figured that Senator Finegold would be a tremendous source of guidance and could advise us on what the next step should be in the advocacy process for the bill. Unfortunately, the Senator’s secretary let us know that the Senator was not in, and so we spoke with his Legislative Director, Stephanie Viola, instead. Stephanie met with us in the conference room of the Senator’s office and asked us to fill her in on the progress we had made on advocating for the bill. We told her that we were working with Common Cause Massachusetts and MassVOTE on the bill, and that we had reached out to several legislators to garner support. We then asked her how we could help the Senator and other Representatives in favor of election reform.
legislation. Stephanie urged us to testify at the legislative hearing for the online voter registration bill and to keep in touch with her to provide her with updates. We exchanged our contact information, and after the meeting, Stephanie emailed us thanking us for the work that we were doing.

**John**

I chose to meet with Senator Finegold, because my bill was originally part of an omnibus bill in the last legislative session and dealt with extensive election reform. Since last session, my bill has been removed as a standalone bill to grant it a better chance of passing. Senator Finegold’s omnibus bill is included in this session but will be difficult to pass in its entirety based on what the Senator’s staff had to say. The staff said that there are many factors and the Senator is ambitious. The location of the meeting was the Senator’s office at the Massachusetts State House. Those present included the Senator’s staff, Ricky Rosen, David Goldberg, and myself.

Overall, the substance of the meeting was highly informative. We learned of the Senator’s serious intent to pass his omnibus this legislative session and the staff members indicated a clear vote of support for Bill S.313 by the Senator. [In other words, my advocacy efforts were unnecessary.] We discussed the significant pros to our bill as well as what the opposition to our bill has for main talking points. The most significant opposition point that we learned in this early stage was a concern for city clerk jobs. The Senator’s staff said that many citizens are concerned there will be a significant amount of clerk job loss if bill S.313 is passed. They expressed a counter-point that the bill does not call for the abolishment of clerk jobs as they will still be necessary to monitor voter records and accept any situations where paper registrations are completely necessary. Overall, I think that this meeting was one of the best all spring semester. It was clear, professional and informative. Meeting with the Senator himself would be the only thing that could have gone better.

**David**

The first meeting I attended was a meeting with Stephanie Viola, the Legislative Director for Senator Barry Finegold’s office. I did not meet with her individually, but our whole group met with her to discuss our bill about online voter registration. When we told her what our bill was about, she was already very familiar with it, as Senator Finegold had supported the omnibus bill during the last session. So in that sense, we had very little lobbying to do, as she was already an advocate for our proposal. The meeting lasted around 15 minutes and was very casual, and we felt good about how it went. At the time of our meeting, she was in the process of finalizing the dates of the hearings relevant to our bill, so she promised to email us later with those dates. …

The ‘Deis Dems and the Brandeis Libertarian-Conservative Union co-sponsored a coalition event with Common Cause and MASSvote at Brandeis on April 10th. The event lasted around an hour and was led by Tyler Creighton, Pam Wilmot, and Sara Brady. We had all already been in email contact with Tyler and Sara, so this was a good time to meet each other and put a face to the name. All of the speakers gave presentations about the specific parts of each aspect of the omnibus bill. During his presentation on the online registration aspect, Tyler mentioned how he had been in contact with us and how we had good information regarding the bill. There were around 15 other people not part of our class who attended this meeting as well.

- **Update**

As of May 21, 2013, S.313 was scheduled for a hearing by the Joint Committee on Election Laws.

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**For more information**

**MassVOTE**

http://www.massvote.org

**Common Cause Massachusetts**

http://www.commoncause.org/ma