California Secretary of State Debra Bowen

NASCIO 2013 State IT Recognition Award Nomination

Title: California Online Voter Registration (COVR)

Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration and Partnerships

Contact: Chris Maio
                    Information Technology Division
                    Secretary of State's Office
                    1500 11th Street, 4th Floor
                    Sacramento, CA 95814
                    Phone: (916) 653-7835
                    Chris.Maio@sos.ca.gov

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Completion:

Section 2: Executive Summary

Voting is a privilege, right, and duty of each citizen in a democratic system but millions of California residents fail to register to vote. There are various reasons why some don't participate in an election. The voter registration process was known to be cumbersome and time-consuming for the public. Registration required mailing voter registration cards which were only available at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), post offices, or through county registrars of voters. The Secretary of State (SOS) also made the card available online, but the public was still required to print, sign, and mail it to the registrar of voters to complete the process. This method was slow, not easily accessible to military or overseas citizens, and required significant and costly manual labor on the part of the counties to process. The SOS identified the need for online voter registration and launched the California Online Voter Registration (COVR) system to make voter registration easier, accessible to the mobile public, and streamline operations.

To make a project of this magnitude successful, the SOS partnered with the DMV and all 58 California county elections officials and their election management system (EMS) vendors. Together, COVR was collaboratively designed and developed by these entities to make registration available for the first time to California citizens from any location using a web application. The registration process allowed a web application to collect the voter registration information and utilized a web service that interfaced with the DMV to collect the signature image of the registrant to transmit the voter registration data and signature image to the correct county. With electronic signatures on file at the DMV for approximately 94% of California citizens, COVR was able to transfer those images to the SOS and eliminate the paper process to promote a quick and efficient registration process, resulting in greater voter turnout. Once the user enters key information, the application interactively communicates with the DMV to match records and provides an immediate notification to the user that their signature has been collected for voter registration purposes. The data is sent to one of the 58 counties, eliminating the need for staff to manually enter data into an EMS. A process that once took days is now accomplished in minutes. This design encourages voter participation by conveniently allowing any California citizen, on any mobile device, from anywhere in the world to register to vote.

The SOS launched COVR on September 19, 2012; four weeks before the voter registration deadline for the November 2012 Presidential General Election. This effort, coupled with communications, education and outreach partners involving other state agencies, California's three major public university systems, Federal Voter Assistance Program (FVAP), Rock the Vote, Common Cause, and Future of California Elections (FOCE) group, resulted in nearly 900,000 electronic voter registration applications in the 33 days preceding the voter registration deadline. After the system was implemented, over 50% of all new registrations processed were completed through COVR.

Section 3: Business Problem and Solution

Problem: Paper-Based Voter Registration is an Impediment to Democracy

To register to vote prior to January 1, 2012, California residents were required to physically sign a voter registration card and mail it to their county registrar of voters. Unfortunately, millions of California residents (approximately 25%) failed to register each year for various reasons. California's paper-based voter registration is not convenient, especially in today's fast-paced and mobile society and presents a barrier to voting. Residents are required to travel to the post office or government agency, or call the SOS or their registrar of voters to have a card mailed to them. Once the card has been completed and signed, it is mailed to their registrar of voters and a staff person enters the data into an EMS. The cards are not always complete or legible, which results in data entry errors and additional labor expenses for counties to clarify information and finalize the registration process. The cost of this process was not sustainable and did not factor in today's mobile environment or accommodate those who relocate within California.

One population of California residents significantly affected by this process was the Uniformed (Military) & Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters. Military registration process was challenging and time consuming for those deployed to foreign countries that had limited access to voter registration cards. UOCAVA voters, who were able to submit their voter registration cards, experienced a delay in delivery to the registrar of voters through the international postal service. Furthermore, UOCAVA voter mobility complicated matters further. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 15% of Californians move every year. This number does not reflect how often military personnel and their families relocate. Military officers move to new bases about every three years, and new military members can move more often, which translates into at least one third of the officer population relocating every year; some several times within the year. For any mobile population like UOCAVA, paper-based voter registration made it difficult to ensure ballots and voter information were sent to the correct address. While California has systems in place to transmit blank ballots and voting materials by email and fax, its paper-based registration system was riddled with various types of delays and issues that prohibited military and overseas citizens from registering timely.

Solution: California Online Voter Registration in 2012 - In 2011, the State Legislature passed Senate Bill 397 (SB 397), which authorized the SOS to offer online voter registration as early as 2012 and permitted the DMV to provide signature images to the SOS for voter registration purposes. While the California Legislature removed the legal barriers to online voter registration in 2011, California's state budget circumstances remained dire. The SOS made severe budget cuts – 25% agency-wide – since 2008. County governments in California had also experienced deep budget cuts during the Great Recession, making development and rollout of major new IT projects

extremely difficult. Seeing an opportunity for grant funding from the U.S. Department of Defense Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), the SOS approached the DMV and California's counties about collaborating on a project to build new IT connections between the SOS and the DMV, as well as the SOS and the 58 counties to make online voter registration possible for the first time in California and ultimately increase voter participation. The SOS worked with the DMV and counties to apply for one-time federal grant funding to collaboratively develop and implement online voter registration targeting UOCAVA voters for the 2012 General Election. In January 2012, the SOS received a $468,522 one-time grant from the FVAP to develop and implement COVR in 2012. One-time federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) grant funds were also made available to the SOS, $1.2 million of which was used to augment the project, allocating enough funding to develop COVR.

From January to September 2012, the SOS worked with the DMV and California's 58 county elections offices to design, build, test, and implement the COVR system statewide. COVR was released to UOCAVA voters and the general public on September 19, 2012, approximately four weeks before the voter registration deadline of October 22, 2012. During those 33 days, the SOS received nearly 900,000 new voter registration applications. In 2008, California had 102,983 UOCAVA voters. In the General Election on November 6, 2012, California had 112,355 UOCAVA voters. With the help of COVR, California boosted the number of registered UOCAVA voters by nearly 10%.

How Does COVR Remove Barriers to Voting? - The COVR Project allows California citizens, including UOCAVA voters, located anywhere in the world to complete their voter registration application online and receive instant signature confirmation of a DMV match. The SOS receives online voter registrations immediately and the 58 county elections officials in California receive the electronic applications the same day via automated web service retrieval. The COVR Project expedites voter registration and, for the hundreds of thousands of voters who register in the final weeks before Election Day, shortens the time between registering to vote and receiving elections materials and a vote-by-mail ballot by several days compared to registration by mail.

Project Management Approach - The overall project management was performed by an in-house team headed by a PMP certified project manager using Project Management Institute best practices and leveraging the California Project Management Methodology. Identifying personnel with the requisite skills and ability to develop and test the signature collection interface was critical for the success of this project. Without this interactive interface, the COVR project could not have been implemented prior to the November 6, 2012, General Election. The DMV also leveraged its existing DL/ID Card contract with L1 to serve images back to DMV's core COVR web service. Counties contracted with the three vendors, DIMS, DFM, and Votec, serving California county

elections offices to modify county EMSs to allow counties to securely retrieve, import, store, display and process electronic voter registration applications received via COVR. These vendors were also necessary for the project because the EMS modifications were required by law to be installed in all 58 counties before COVR could be released to the public. COVR has been successfully operating for over seven months, exceeded its objective to increase voter registration and has been recognized and lauded in the media.

Communications Plan - The SOS created a Communications Working Group comprised of other state entities, California's three major public university systems, FVAP, Rock the Vote, Common Cause, Future of California Elections (FOCE) group, and other nonprofit, nonpartisan voter outreach groups. The Communications Working Group requested organizations to place links to COVR on their home pages to increase awareness and educate the public via social media and traditional news media. This effort was also extended to outreach groups in college campuses and public meeting places to let others know about COVR and encourage people to register and vote. When COVR was released, the state Chief Information Officer also required all state agencies to add the "Register to Vote" online button to their homepages.

Solution Architecture - The basic architecture of COVR involves three main components including the DMV hosted web service that provides data matching and signature image retrieval services, the web application and database hosted by the SOS to capture and temporarily store voter registration data and signature images, and the modified election management systems that collect data from the SOS and present it to the county elections officials.

Accessibility and Information Security - COVR was developed with UOCAVA in mind; however this system allows any California citizen to register to vote online. COVR is available in English and Spanish, and the COVR website also contains fillable PDF voter registration forms in eight more languages to make voter registration accessible to non-English speaking Californians. COVR is accessible to people with disabilities, and the COVR landing page contains accessibility information and technical recommendations for people who use screen readers. COVR maintains its integrity through strict information security policies. Once a COVR record is received by the county elections officials through secure file transfer, it is handled in the same way as a paper registration. Each record must be checked against the statewide list to ensure the record is not a duplicate and that the registrant is not a felon or a deceased person.

Section 4: Significance
COVR Leads the Nation in Innovative Online Voter Registration Services - COVR is the national leader in online voter registration services providing access to every eligible voter. In other states, only those who have a state-issued drivers license or identification card (DL/ID) can use the online voter registration system. COVR is also

designed to serve UOCAVA voters, while other state online voter registration systems restrict access to UOCAVA voters. With COVR, the voter without DL/ID submits an electronic application and follows up by signing and mailing a pre-filled, pre-addressed form to the county elections office. The application is deemed timely as of the moment the person submits the registration online and the county still receives the application via the automated interface, eliminating the data entry labor and associated data entry errors. In the first four weeks of operation, COVR quickly became the dominant method for voter registration. According to a recent University of California, Davis study, more than half of all registrants chose to register via COVR (out of 1,597,253 total registrants, 815,066, or 51%, registered via COVR). Without COVR, barriers to voter registration would still exist.

COVR Aligns with State and National Strategic Priorities - The COVR project is a model of a solution driven service with an overwhelming business case where technology was used to achieve a positive outcome. The COVR system directly aligns with Governor Brown's priorities of improving state efficiency and improving service delivery to the Citizens of California. This project supports Objective 1.1 of California's IT Strategic Plan*, Increase online service and information offerings and make them more accessible through mobile devices*; and Objective 1.3, *Enhance transparency, accessibility and openness through online and mobile solutions to promote informed participation by the public*. COVR also supports the NASCIO's priorities of optimization and identifying and dealing with barriers by using cross-boundary collaboration through the partnerships with DMV and California counties to modernize services to California citizens.

Section 5: Benefits of COVR

COVR Removes Barriers to Voting for Military and Overseas Citizens - California has more than 100,000 military and civilian overseas voters. UOCAVA voters, particularly military personnel, live, work, and serve our country from locations all over the world, yet California's paper-based voter registration system makes it difficult for them to participate in our democracy. To better serve citizens who live and work abroad, California needed a remote and electronic voter registration system to break the dependencies of its current paper-based registration process. When COVR was launched in September 19, 2012 through the close of registration on October 22, 2012, the SOS received nearly 900,000 new voter registration applications. Of that number, over 12,000 came from military and overseas citizens. In the 2008 Presidential Election, California had 102,983 registered UOCAVA voters. For the November 2012 Presidential Election, California had registered 112,355 UOCAVA voters. COVR helped boost the number of registered UOCAVA voters by an astounding 10%.

COVR Helped Improve Registration and Turnout Among Young Adults - A March 2013 study by the Center for Regional Change at the University of California, Davis,

indicated 70% of 18-24 year-olds who registered to vote using COVR participated to vote in November 2012 – 25% higher than 18-24 year olds who registered using paper.

COVR as a Model for Other States - Representatives from Illinois, New Mexico, Texas, and Massachusetts have contacted the SOS to gather information about COVR to use the project as a model for legislation in their states. The SOS has also shared in-depth COVR project information and results with the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS). California became the first large state in the U.S. to successfully offer online voter registration for UOCAVA voters and the general electorate. COVR is a model for other large states considering moving toward online voter registration.

Return on Investment: COVR Generates Significant Ongoing Cost Savings - Before 2012, California counties spent an <u>average</u> of $2.44 to process each state voter registration card (VRC). In some counties, including Los Angeles ($4.79 per VRC), the cost of processing each VRC is very high, because election staff must manually enter voter information. In other counties, including Orange ($1.35 per VRC), the cost is lower because VRCs can be scanned and the data from digital images imported into the voter registration database. The average cost to process the National Mail Voter Registration Form and the FPCA is estimated to be much higher, because no California County has the ability to scan and import data from these forms. The SOS estimates a net savings of $2.34 <u>per online registration</u> over the paper-based voter registration system. This figure is based on the current average county cost of processing state VRCs, which is $2.44 per registration, minus the estimated cost of operating COVR, which is estimated to be less than 10 cents per registration.

Ongoing ROI Overall for California - A more accurate ROI can be calculated using the total number of online voter registrations expected in 2012 and beyond. During the 2008 Presidential Election, California counties processed at least 4 million VRCs. Conservatively, the SOS expects at least 1,000,000 people (25% of all people registering to vote) to use the COVR website in 2014 versus paper VRC. Therefore, COVR is estimated to save counties $2,340,000 in 2014 alone (1,000,000 registrations x $2.34 average cost of processing one paper application) with accumulating costs each year thereafter. During 2012, nearly 900,000 COVR applications were received. The cost savings estimate for 2012 based on the average net savings of $2.34 per application is about $2 million. In addition, COVR creates <u>additional</u> savings of $0.55 per online registration, because the SOS currently pays 55 cents in printing and postage per paper VRC. The SOS spends $.005 (1/2 cent) to print each VRC on special card stock and 54 cents each time a voter submits a VRC by mail, since each VRC contains a pre-paid first class postage stamp. For the 890,000 COVR applications in 2012, the printing and postage cost savings to the SOS was approximately $489,000. But the greatest benefit of the COVR is the additional votes received. Each vote is a voice for every citizen in a democracy who wants to invest in a better future.