

HOW PHILLY WORKS

Coming Soon? Click Here to Register to Vote

You can pay taxes, buy clothes or find the love of your life online. You can even vote online...if you live in Estonia.

But, here in Pennsylvania, we can't even *register* to vote online – which is one reason why, two weeks before the November 2012 presidential election, the Philadelphia Board of Elections still had 28,000 unprocessed paper voter registration applications.

Change may be on the way. Today, the PA Senate's State Government Committee will vote on bi-partisan sponsored legislation to allow online voter registration. It won't be in place to register to vote (or make any changes in your current registration) for the May 21 primary election – that deadline is April 22 – but would make voting in future elections much easier.

This edition of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** examines the pros and cons of online voter registration and tells you how to let your state legislators know how you feel.

-- March 19, 2013

I'll tell you exactly how I feel: It's insane Pennsylvania doesn't have online voter registration.

Tell that to your elected representatives in Harrisburg. You can find their contact information [here](#).

I'll stop reading and do it right now.

Not so fast. Today's State Government Committee meeting is a voting-only session. But eventually the legislation would have to pass in both chambers of the General Assembly. Legislators do take the pulse of their constituents on proposed issues. It's definitely worth letting them know your opinion on Senate Bill 37, which you can read [here](#).

I don't want to get my hopes up. Wasn't this supposed to happen last year?

Good memory. Online voter registration was on track for the November 6, 2012 election. But the July 1 launch date came and went. According to the PA Department of State, which administers state elections, county officials told them they couldn't handle both online voter registration and the voter ID law. So the online voter registration plans were scrapped in August 2012.

But the voter ID law didn't end up happening on November 6.

No, it didn't. But the court ruling that blocked the voter ID law from going into effect for people voting at the polls didn't come down until October 2. And the voter registration deadline for the November election was October 9. It was too late to reverse the August decision.

Why can't the Department of State just start online voter registration right now?

That's a great question. PA Voice, a voting rights advocate, believes DOS can implement online voter registration without legislative action – and points out that no legislator questioned the authority of DOS to do this when online voter registration was planned for November 2012. But

passing legislation will make online voter registration a permanent part of the state Election Code, which means a new governor couldn't come into office and do away with it.

So the legislation being voted on today will get the ball rolling for this November?

It all depends when – and if – the full Senate votes on the bill, followed by the PA House and the Governor. (We hear Governor Corbett favors the idea though.) At least in Philly, a non-presidential and non-mayoral election year is a good time to start. As of today, the city's Board of Election's reports receiving only 46,200 voter registration applications so far for the May 21 primary election.

Would online voter registration increase the number of voters who register?

According to a California election data firm, Political Data, Inc., the availability of online voter registration for the 2012 presidential election resulted in slightly fewer new registrants than in President Obama's first election in 2008, when online registration didn't exist yet. Not surprisingly, 61.5% of California voters who registered online in 2012 were between ages 18-35.

Was there any impact on voter turnout?

Apparently "yes." An *LA Times* story on Political Data, Inc.'s numbers reported that turnout for online registrants in Sacramento County was 84.7%, 10 points higher than the county average.

Young voters. Bigger turnout. Isn't that just what some say PA Republicans were hoping to avoid with the voter ID law last year?

We're non-partisan so we're not going down the partisan politics route. Online voter registration bills have never advanced in the PA General Assembly in the past. However, the issue isn't as controversial as voter ID. And the labor-intensive process of manually entering data from paper voter registration forms is eating up county resources that could be spent elsewhere. (We're still waiting to hear the overtime costs of clearing Philadelphia's voter registration backlog last year.)

Mistakes can happen with computers too.

Mistakes can and do happen on the data entry end. Voters also make errors when writing down their information on paper registration forms. On balance, fewer mistakes will be made with online voter registration since voters will be asked to verify their information before submitting the form.

Sounds like a no-brainer. What are the arguments against online voter registration?

The strongest argument has to do with online security. It's not a trivial concern since voters must have confidence in the integrity of their voting systems. Just this week, NBC News reported the first confirmed case of cyberattack in a U.S. election. Over a two and a half week period last July, more than 2,500 online "phantom requests" for absentee ballots were made in Florida's Miami-Dade County. The election wasn't compromised but experts say the attempt signaled that more sophisticated computer hacking in elections could happen.

By the way, if Senate Bill 37 passes, can voters change their registrations online too?

Yes, voters who want to change their address, name or party affiliation would be able to do this online.

Will people who don't have a computer be out of luck?

Online voter registration would be available but not *required*. Pennsylvania voters could still use paper registration forms. If you still need one for May 21, you can download the form [here](#) or pick one up at any number of places (click [here](#) for a list of locations). All forms should be turned into the voter's County Board of Elections in person or by mail. Voters can also register to vote or update their registration at PA Department of Transportation Driver's License Centers. *Remember that the deadline to register to vote in the May 21 primary election is April 22.*

I heard some states let voters register on the day of the election.

A number of states do have same-day registration. Senate Bill 37 would keep Pennsylvania's 30-days before the election voter registration deadline. And, as far as we know, there is no serious discussion happening to change this.

Do other states besides California have online voter registration?

A survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures shows that, as of March 2013, twelve states offer online voter registration. Three states have passed legislation to put it in place, but haven't started registering voters yet. Online voter registration bills are pending in 13 other states, in addition to Pennsylvania.

Voters move. Wouldn't it be easier for one voter registration system for the entire country?

A February 2012 report by The Pew Charitable Trusts' Center on the States cited voters moving from place to place as a key reason for glaring deficiencies in voter registration lists all across the country. Around 24 million registrations (one in eight), Pew reports, are no longer valid or are significantly inaccurate; some 2.75 million people are registered to vote in more than one state. The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU's Law School urges the U.S. Congress to enact basic and modernized national standards to guide states' voter registration systems. Read the [Pew](#) and [Brennan Center](#) reports.

We'll let you know the status of Senate Bill 37, and any other bills moving forward in the state legislature to make it easier for Pennsylvanians to vote. You are welcome to e-mail us at futureofthecity@seventy.org with comments or questions.