The 21st Century Election:

Illinois county clerks share their perspective on AVR

May 2016

Illinois PIRG Education Fund

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Dear Reader,

In December 2013, I published a commentary piece for the Chicago Tribune calling for a "voter registration renaissance." [1] I wrote about the potential for a technology-driven system that would automatically register eligible citizens to vote, combined with Election Day Registration so that people not already on the rolls, or who had a problem with their registration, could still participate in the most basic act of democracy. I called the approach "all in."

In the two and half years since, I am pleased we have made great strides towards a modern voter registration and elections system in Illinois: implementing online voter registration, Election Day Registration, and joining ERIC, the Electronic Registration Information Center Project, a multi-state data sharing project aimed at cleaning up our voter lists, among other reforms.

Now that the Illinois General Assembly is considering the next key element of an "all in" voter registration system, automatic voter registration, it is important to listen to a diverse collection of stakeholders for ideas on how to make the system work best. As elections practitioners, County Clerks and Recorders such as myself deal with the practical implications of public policy changes every day.

I hope this report sharing the perspectives of four different election officials, from different parties and counties representing the diversity of Illinois, brings useful insight to the consideration of automatic registration in Illinois.

Sincerely,

David Orr

David Orr
Cook County Clerk

Introduction: Automatic Voter Registration

Automatic voter registration is this year's hot trend in registration and administration reform. Versions of the system have passed in Oregon, California, Vermont and West Virginia, and 26 more states plus the District of Columbia are considering bills this year to implement an automatic voter registration system.

It's a simple idea – Use data already collected at government agencies to automatically update voter registration files or add new eligible voters to the rolls. Voters who do not want to be added to the rolls can opt out.

Every eligible citizen – Democrat, Republican, or Independent – has the fundamental right to have his or her vote counted. Automatic voter registration (or AVR) helps protect that right by making registration more modern, accurate, and secure.

Recent Changes in Illinois Election Law

Illinois has made significant changes to voter registration and election administration in recent years. Cumulatively, the changes prepare Illinois to join other states in the transition to universal registration. This means all eligible citizens are registered to vote unless they affirmatively opt out, the state takes responsibility for adding eligible voters to the list and updating the list when voters move, voters have the opportunity to register or change their registration online, and, as a fail-safe, voters can register to vote on Election Day.

Recent updates to voter registration in Illinois started with Public Act 98-115, an online voter registration bill which passed in 2013. In 2015, Illinois lawmakers passed Public Act 98-1171, which enacted a number of reforms, most notably Election Day registration. Public Act 98-1171 also made other important changes, including electronic registration at state agencies, a regular cross-reference of the National Change of Address database with the statewide voter registration database, and participation in the interstate data sharing project ERIC.

These updates set the stage for Illinois to continue down the path of voter registration modernization, and the Illinois General Assembly is currently considering automatic voter registration legislation. Because voter registration and election administration is structured in a different manner in Illinois than other states that have passed automatic voter registration, there are new policy considerations for Illinois policymakers to consider. First, unlike Oregon and California, the Illinois Secretary of State does not house the statewide election authority. The Illinois State Board of Elections is a separate and distinct entity.

Second, when Illinois residents interact with Drivers Services, there is no requirement that they docu-

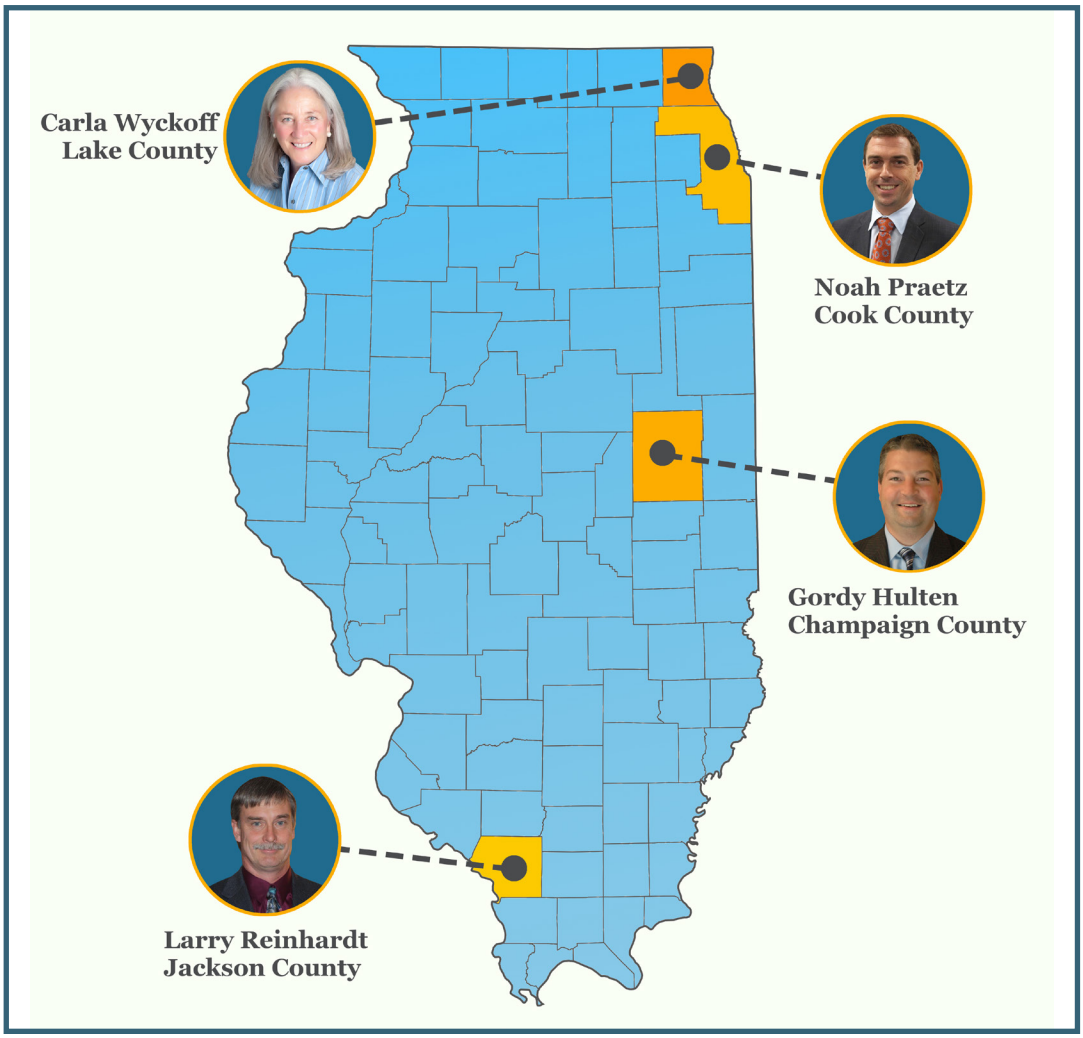
ment their citizenship status. Automatic voter registration in Illinois must therefore include a filtering mechanism to ensure that it only registers eligible voters. Finally, unlike many states, Illinois is a "bottom up" rather than "top down" state, wherein the 109 local elections officials maintain the exclusive authority to register voters and manage the voter file for their jurisdiction. This report does not cover how these policy considerations should be addressed, though they have been included in crafting automatic voter registration legislation currently moving through the legislative process.

Because of these considerations and more, it is critical that policymakers and advocates engage elections officials to gain their perspectives on how policy changes would affect them, and how to design policy changes that work well for all stakeholders.

Overview of Report

In this report, Illinois PIRG Education Fund gathers input from election officials across the state, who would have a role in implementing AVR, to document their perspective on the proposed reforms.

The following are excerpts from interviews with Illinois elections officials about the potential impacts of automatic voter registration in their counties. The four clerks highlighted represent a diverse set of geographic regions in the state and both political parties. Their support for the system ranges from enthusiastic to cautious, but all are open to the idea if implemented correctly.



Gordy Hulten is the Champaign County Clerk serving since 2011. He is a Republican representing a downstate county with a large college population from the University of Illinois. He is also the current President of the Illinois Association of County Clerks and Recorders. Hulten has been committed to digitizing and modernizing his office operations and in doing so has saved Champaign County taxpayers thousands of dollars.

Noah Praetz is the Director of Elections for Suburban Cook County and has been with the County Clerk's office since 2000. Cook County is the largest county in Illinois and the second largest in the country. Praetz, a Democrat, has been a leader in the County's efforts to modernize their election systems and his work has put him on the map as a national leader in election security and technology.

Carla Wyckoff is the County Clerk for Lake County, which borders Cook County to the North. Wyckoff is a Republican and has served since 2014. Prior to being elected County Clerk, she worked with the Lake County State's Attorney's Office for 20 years. Since being in office, Wyckoff has worked to meet significant new statutory mandates and maintain accurate Lake County voter registration rolls.

Larry Reinhardt is the County Clerk and recorder for Jackson County, first elected in 1998. Jackson County borders of Missouri, southeast of St. Louis, and includes a diverse population from Southern Illinois University - Carbondale to small farming communities. Reinhardt runs his office on the promise of providing effective, efficient public service to the residents of Jackson County. He is also a former president of the Illinois Association of County Clerks and Recorders.

Key Insights

The following are the two key insights repeated most often in interviews for this report:

1. **Automatic voter registration is key to running an efficient Election Day operation**

   The county clerks we spoke to had just managed the first Election Day in Illinois with Election Day registration. They saw first-hand that a significant portion of voters could have been registered before Election Day with an AVR system. Having automatic voter registration to compliment Election Day registration would mean a more efficient operation, saving taxpayers' money while continuing to ensure access.

   Cook County had the resources to collect specific numbers and found that 75% of Election Day registrants used a state ID with the same address as their registration address. This means 75% of voters who registered on Election Day could have been processed already through an AVR system.

2. **The overall impact on county budgets will most likely be neutral, with the biggest savings coming from digitizing registration and making rolls more accurate for Election Day**

   While election officials were hesitant to make specific proclamations without numbers in front of them, they don't predict any dramatic increase or decrease in their bottom line from this reform.

The biggest cost saver will come from electronic registration and reducing paper processing, which is already happening at many state agencies in Illinois. Automatic electronic updates would mean more accurate rolls, which can help with planning and cut costs on Election Day. Automatic registration would also spread out the influx of registrations, meaning clerks would not have to hire temporary staff or pay overtime to process a huge influx around the deadline.

The expense will be adding more registrations and contacting more voters via mail but most noted these would be negligible cost differences.

Gordy Hulten - Champaign County

Gordy Hulten (R)
Champaign County Clerk

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY
Population: 208,861
Demographics: 73.4% White, 12.4% African American, 9% AAPI, 5.3% Latino
Median Household Income: $45,262
Median Age: 28.9

Registered Voters: 124,832
Votes Cast 2016 Primary: 59,003
Votes Cast on Election Day: 47,889
Election Day Registrations: 5,478
Early Voting Registrations: 1,518

Automatic voter registration means a more efficient Election Day

"The concept of AVR is something that I've supported, something that I still support, and I think our experience at the most recent primary election within precinct election day registration at every polling place in Champaign County reinforces the need for an automatic voter registration procedure in Illinois.

Election Day registrations are a welcome change to Illinois law in the access they provide but they are a horribly inefficient way for us to service voters and for voters to take advan-

tage of their rights. AVR would have an enormous positive impact on our Election Day registration experience.

Every automatic voter registration that we process prior to Election Day is one fewer voter who has to go through that process on Election Day. So, it speeds it up for the voter themselves because their record is correct and it also speeds it up for every other voter who shows up to that polling place because they don't have to wait behind somebody doing Election Day registration."

A more engaged electorate

"I think if our fundamental position is that if you are eligible to vote, you have the right to show up on Election Day, regardless of what your status is, register and vote, then we need to get as many of those people on the rolls prior to Election Day as we can. In terms of efficiency in operation on Election Day, it means people don't have to stand in lines, which means their voting experience is more pleasant, which means we encourage them to vote.

Automatic voter registration will improve our ability to communicate with these voters prior to Election Day to tell them what the voting process looks like, where they need to go vote, here's your sample ballot. If someone is showing up on Election Day and registering to vote for the first time they've had no communication from an election authority prior to the election about any of that information and they're going in blind. If there's an automatic voter registration bill, we have them on the rolls, we can mail them, we might even be able to email them, all of that information to make their voting experience more pleasant and make it more efficient for everybody."

A cheaper Election Day

"I think we'll find cost savings in being able to operate on Election Day more efficiently – fewer forms on Election Day, potentially less judges on Election Day, fewer laptops, that sort of stuff. Where it will increase our costs is the amount of processing we have to do prior to Election Day but there are a number of procedural suggestions being made for the AVR bill in Illinois so that automatic voter registration in Illinois would mirror our paperless online voter registration process and if we can do AVR in a way that's paperless and electronic the way we do with online registration then the net expense for us will be pretty negligible."

Noah Praetz - Cook County

Noah Praetz (D)
Director of Elections, Suburban Cook County

COOK COUNTY
Population: 5,246,456
Suburban Population: 2,515, 825
Demographics: 43.9% White, 24.8% African American, 24% Latino, 6.2% AAPI
Median Household Income: $45,922
Median Age: 34

SUBURBAN REGISTRATION
Registered Voters: 1,443,261
Votes Cast 2016 Primary: 701,525
Votes Cast on Election Day: 549,455
Election Day Registrations: 23,123
Early Voting Registrations: 7,020

A better way of doing business

"I love the idea of automatic voter registration. Registration is the single biggest challenge for operating fair elections. It's an administrative artifice. It doesn't serve the voters in any particular way. It sort of serves candidates. But, it's built around government ease. It was the way we knew how many ballots to print for a particular area, where to mail materials from or to. It's built for government and if there is an easier way for government to build such a list without relying on people to tell us every time they move, then it's an easier way of doing business.

In states like Illinois the question of access is settled by and large because people can walk in on Election Day and vote so automatic registration in Illinois is almost entirely a question of accuracy, government efficiency, doing business smartly, and that is non-political. This doesn't effect the voter rolls or who's going to have the opportunity to vote on Election Day, all it effects is how well and how cheaply we can do our job and how well we can prevent untoward behavior.

We just came out of an election where there was Election Day registration for the first time. We had over 23,000 Election Day registrants in suburban Cook County. We did an analysis shortly after the election that showed 75% of those registered with their driver's license or state ID from the address on their ID, meaning it was a missed opportunity. They could have registered under the NVRA, but it's just not working as it's supposed to.

23,000 people registered on Election Day, those registrations take longer, they're inherently

susceptible to error on the part of Election judges, and if there were automatic voter registration, that 75% would for sure be registered already at their address. On top of that another 17%, so taking us up to 92%, used a drivers license or state ID from Illinois, from an older address, so they would have been on the list as well somewhere in the state. So using other data matching tools such as the National Change of Address Database, there is a high likelihood we would have moved those voters from the address they had on file to their current address. So we're up to 90% that would have been already taken care of if we had a good automatic voter registration system here in Illinois. You can imagine the decrease in burden that puts on the polling places."

Could keep costs flat

"The bottom line probably doesn't shift a whole lot, but instead of going up the budget can likely remain flat as we're able to move costs from voter registration over to other growth areas.

If we're just talking in a voter registration silo, instead of registering people who update before elections on paper, either using the deputy registrar form or a mail-in form or in a flurry updating them as they go online in the days before an election, automatic registration levels the curve, which means you're not hiring at the last minute to process it, and all that data is coming digitally which is certainly more accurate and has a lower chance of error, so in the voter registration silo, costs go down.

I don't [anticipate new costs]. A full automatic registration system will pull in some voters that aren't currently in the system so bottom line numbers in the short run – number of people you're mailing to – may go up and there are costs associated with that. But, there are also countervailing pressures of voters that we carry right now that do not live here any longer but remain on our rolls because they haven't updated elsewhere. So you've got two forces one up and one down with automatic voter registration and my sense is they level out and we're in about the same place, so costs remain fixed."

Carla Wyckoff - Lake County

Carla Wyckoff (R)
Lake County Clerk

LAKE COUNTY
Population: 703,462
Demographics: 75% White, 20% Latino, 7% Black, 6% AAPI
Median Household Income: $78,948
Median Age: 36.7

Registered Voters: 418,000
Votes Cast 2016 Primary: 182,851
Votes Cast on Election Day: 145,316
Election Day Registrations: 4,418
Early Voting Registrations: 1,200

Details of implementation are key

"My immediate reaction is one of caution. It's hopeful, obviously, that AVR might increase the number of people who are already registered prior to Election Day. That would help some of the burden on Election Day. I say caution, however, because it really depends on exactly how it is implemented and who ultimately remains the authority on registration. It also depends on the thoroughness of the training for the individuals and the entities that are tasked with performing the registration procedures.

The more accurate you can be the better it is, because not only does it save money but it improves relations with voters and the candidates. The campaigns like to be able to rely on our information. Voters are more pleased if our information is accurate so it is good all around if it would actually result in making our records more accurate."

A neutral impact on the budget

"[In Lake County] we already get the majority of our registrations in through the online voter registration system and second after that through the DMV. It might take a little more staff time because we'd be processing more, but again a lot of it depends on exactly how it will be implemented…I don't think there would be any significant cost increase or cost savings."

Bottom line: The whole system should be simpler

"I wish we could simplify everything in Illinois. It just seems that some of it is more complicated than it needs to be and I think voters get confused. For example right now online registration ends 27 days before the election but then 15 days before the election you can do grace registration at the early voting sites. Voters just get very confused about when the cut off is. I think we serve the voters better by having things as simple and clear as possible."

Larry Reinhardt - Jackson County

Larry Reinhardt (D)
Jackson County Clerk

JACKSON COUNTY
Population: 59,677
Demographics: 77.8% White, 14.3% African American, 4% Latino, 3.3% AAPI
Median Household Income: $32,244
Median Age: 29.1

Registered Voters: 39,167
Votes Cast 2016 Primary: 13,587
Votes Cast on Election Day: 11,274
Election Day Registrations: 374
Early Voting Registrations: 243

If implemented well, streamlines process for voters and election officials

"In general I do believe automatic voter registration is a good idea. I believe it will make the process easier for voters, especially those who are somewhat confused by voter registration laws as they move from state to state. We see a lot of transferees here in Jackson County because we're a college county so we have individuals who come here not from Illinois but from surrounding states and even across the country. For the most part they come in used to their own state's voter registration guidelines, if at all familiar with voter registration, so I think the automatic process may take care of some of those questions and some of those problems. From a county clerk standpoint, how the program is administered I believe will determine whether it's a good or bad program for Illinois as a whole.

If it's a fluid transfer and [all necessary information] is available, it will certainly be a benefit to our offices and thus to the voter as their registrations are complete, organized and timely. If there are issues with transferring the information or a lack of availability of some of the information, it could cause extra costs for our office as we try to obtain that information through mailings or contact to voters…All of these are different issues that have risen from the motor voter registrations and the processing of registrations from current state agencies so hopefully…if they are all done on the state's current online voter registration system, that would be the most organized and the most uniform way to process registrations…There are a lot of little details that have to be worked out as things move forward."

More electronic registrations mean smaller work load

"It might reduce the paper load, the number of registrations we receive hard copy only, and thus have to be manually entered through data entry, so if more are done electronically… that would of course reduce the workload. Serving in a jurisdiction where as much as 20% of the population is made up of college students, keeping voter rolls up to date takes a tremendous amount of time with limited resources for a smaller county. Any program that digitally and automatically adds and updates voters' information will assist in this process.

I'm not going to say we would get enough electronic registrations here to reduce our workforce or anything like that -- which would save money for the budget -- but it would of course reduce our workload."