Issue Brief

THE PEW CENTER ON THE STATES

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Voting Information Project

Partnering with Election Officials to Inform American Voters

In 2008, approximately 120 million people went online in search of answers to their questions about the general election.[1] Despite the fact that four in five Americans have visited government Web sites to seek information or assistance,[2] no standardized, reliable source currently exists for voters to obtain basic Election Day essentials such as the location of their polling place, candidates and issues on the ballot, identification requirements and requests for or instructions about absentee ballots.

The Voting Information Project (VIP) enables election officials to provide their constituents with a cutting-edge suite of online tools that informs voters, enhances the voting process and brings official information to civic groups, news organizations, political campaigns and technology innovators around the country. In today's digital society, Americans are able to search for movie options, find theatre locations and buy their tickets—all online. Such ease and elegance should be extended to services provided by the government, including access to information such as where to vote and what issues and candidates are on the ballot.

"The voters of Montana were well served by the Voting Information Project. In this age of technology, it is a fast, convenient and accurate way for voters to check their polling place location, and it cuts down on county election administrator time answering these inquiries."

—Linda McCulloch, Montana Secretary of State

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To bridge the gap between the information voters need and what is currently available to them, the Pew Center on the States in partnership with Google, Inc. is offering technology solutions to state and local election offices that would

- help state election officials make voting information more accessible online to the public;
- decrease the amount of time and money election officials spend compiling and disseminating voting information;
- reduce the number of phone calls and visits to election administrators, which could result in significant cost savings;[3] and
- allow staff to focus more time on other important aspects of election administration.

Additionally, states would not incur any expenses aside from a minimal investment of time from existing staff to implement the new technology.

Improving Access to Reliable Voting Information

VIP gives election officials free tools that they can place directly on their Web sites to help voters find their polling places, determine what issues and candidates are on the ballot, locate links to state registration resources and much more. These Web instruments utilize official data that is controlled by the state board of elections or secretary of state's office, and they leverage powerful software tools such as Google Maps to offer on-demand access to accurate, customized voting information.

The key to VIP is an "open format" that allows for successful integration into other applications and Web site tools. In the 2008 election cycle, VIP data feeds were integrated with Google Maps to help voters find their polling places; approximately 10 percent of people who voted on Election Day used Google's VIP-powered tool to find their precincts.[4] VIP also allows for wide distribution of official voting information by state election offices.

For example, the Virginia State Board of Elections used a VIP-driven "gadget" on its homepage for the state's 2009 statewide election.[5] Candidates, newspapers and other groups then linked to the state's gadget on their own Web sites, resulting in the state's official information being displayed nearly three million times in the days leading up to Election Day.[6] Virginia is one of numerous states that already have operational VIP feeds serving millions of voters, and additional jurisdictions plan to use them for the 2010 election cycle.[7]

Providing Assistance for Highly Mobile Populations

Voters who have changed addresses tend to vote less often and encounter more problems with requirements and registration.[8] VIP is particularly beneficial for highly mobile populations, such as American service members and overseas civilians, because of their limited access to information from their local election offices. The Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot and similar options available in certain states offer an opportunity for military personnel and overseas citizens to vote when they fail to receive their official ballots. An effective solution must also provide information to them about what is on the ballot.

"North Carolina voters were the real winners in this partnership that provided access to voting information by utilizing a Web search tool familiar to most computer users."

—Marc Burris, Information Systems Director, North Carolina State Board of Elections

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"For Iowa's technology team, this was a very simple and straightforward project to accomplish with substantial payoff to Iowans."

—Klint Belz, Director of Voter Registration, Office of the Iowa Secretary of State

In addition to providing an efficient, electronic means for voters around the globe to learn what is on the ballot, Pew will offer states an online tool that allows them to access a self-populating printable one that can be returned by mail in time to be counted.

Creating Innovative Applications

The potential number of VIP tools and software applications are limited only by voters' needs and by developers' imaginations. In consolidating vast quantities of open format election information, VIP allows software developers to use publicly available data in new and innovative ways. VIP data will power development of robust applications that provide customized information for individual voters about polling place locations and hours, candidates and issues on the ballot, candidate statements and biographies, identification requirements and absentee ballot instructions.

Applied to mobile technology, for example, a personal digital assistant with a global positioning system could obtain a voter's precinct location and supply turn-by-turn directions. Visually impaired individuals could use a computer's text-to-speech capabilities to listen to candidate statements and biographies prior to leaving for the polling place.

Bringing 21st Century Technology to Elections

Coordinating with state and local officials to bring 21st-century technology to the election process and ensure that all eligible Americans have the opportunity to cast an informed vote, our team is working to achieve nationwide adoption of VIP by the 2012 presidential election.

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[1] Aaron Smith, "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008," Pew Internet & American Life Project, Pew Research Center (2009), http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/6--The-Internets-Role-in-Campaign-2008.aspx; U.S. Census Bureau, "Census Bureau Estimates Number of Adults, Older People and School-Age Children in States" (press release, March 10, 2004), http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/001703.html.

[2] Lee Rainie, Leigh Estabrook, and Evans Witt, "Information Searches That Solve Problems," Pew Internet & American Life Project, Pew Research Center (2007), http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Information-Searches-That-Solve-Problems.aspx.

[3] Pew Center on the States, "Being Online is Not Enough: State Elections Web Sites," The Pew Charitable Trusts (2008), http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/VIP_FINAL_101408_WEB.pdf.

[4] Matt Klainer, "Voting Information Search Volume" (presented at the Voting in America Conference, Washington, DC, December 8–10, 2008); Klainer is manager, new business development, at Google, Inc.

[5] For more information on the Virginia 2009 VIP gadget, please visit http://www.votinginfoproject.org/blog/index.cfm/2009/12/15/The-Wonder-That-Was-The-2009-VIP-Gadget.

[6] Total views based on views of embedded maplet (~277,000), Maps.Google.com/Vote tool (~251,000) and gadget placement campaign (~2,300,000).

[7] Existing VIP feeds: Iowa, Kansas, Los Angeles County, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio and Virginia.

[8] Stephen Ansolabehere, Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2008: Common Content (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Release 1, February 2, 2009).

Contact the VIP Team

We welcome the advice and participation of election officials, government technology specialists, software developers, nonprofit stakeholders and members of the voting public. For more information or to join us in helping to bring VIP tools to every state for all voters, please contact any member of the VIP team:

Anthea Watson
Anthea@votinginfoproject.org
617-216-4526

Ethan Roeder
Ethan@votinginfoproject.org
312-925-9469

Aaron Strauss
Aaron@votinginfoproject.org
202-207-0370

Matthew Morse
MMorse@pewtrusts.org
202-552-2229

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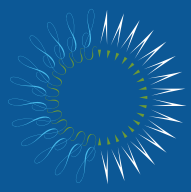

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