



Thousands of People Have Used Remote-Controlled Pens Over The Internet To Register To Vote

BY [SARAH LAI STIRLAND](#) | Friday, October 26 2012

While it's a drop in the bucket in numbers, this election cycle has seen one science-fiction like innovation in an area that might seem dry as dust, yet holds significance for the future of voter engagement: Voter registration. This year, more than 100,000 people have used remote-controlled pens over the Internet to sign and complete their voter-registration forms.

President Obama's re-election campaign and Rock the Vote have both used the new service from the five-person startup Allpoint Voter Services in Oakland, Calif. The Obama campaign made the service available through its [GottaRegister.com](#) Web site to voters in North Carolina, 10 other states and the District of Columbia.

Campaign finance records show that the campaign spent almost \$43,000 from August through last week to use the service. Allpoint provided the service to Rock the Vote for free so that they could prove that the model works and can scale, says company spokesman Jude Barry. He claims that the system could potentially process a million voter registration forms a month.

For now, the total number is a fraction of that, yet it's been used in all 50 states, he says. The system works by capturing the motion of an individual's signature on a filled-out voter registration form online through a tablet device. Allpoint's system transmits the captured data from the motion of the signature and sends that information over the internet to a pen, which then renders the individual's signature in ink on a paper voter registration form in Allpoint's offices in Oakland.

The staff then mail those forms off to the relevant local elections boards within 72 hours. Allpoint uses federal voter registration forms, which all states are bound by law to accept. Allpoint has received written opinions on the acceptability of the forms and their wet signatures from the

District of Columbia, Cook County, Ill., Minnesota, North Carolina, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Santa Clara County in California and Washington State. So far, no election authorities have challenged the validity of any of the submitted voter registration forms in any other jurisdiction, Barry says.

TechPresident [first reported on tests of this system](#) in February.

It's an interesting hack around the byzantine voter registration system in the United States that takes into consideration the needs and requirements of registrars and the existing legal system, but also tackles the problem from the end-user point of view of having to complete and send off paper forms.

The process of making voters fill out bits of paper and finding an envelope and stamp to send off their information has historically stymied voter registration levels. (Earlier this, year in fact, the Pew Center on the States [issued a report](#) that said that a quarter of people in the United States who are eligible to vote were not registered.) This hack is meant to remove that process and have the company do it for them, while retaining the paper and the wet signature that state laws require.

"If you're asking people these days, particularly people under 40, to mail a piece of paper, which involves finding an envelope and finding a stamp, you're not going to get good results," he says.

Barry points to [news articles](#) about voter registration form completion rates and notes that other programs that ask voters to mail in the forms also have historically low completion rates. He claims that Allpoint's online system has an almost 84 percent completion rate.

"If you start the process with us, whether it's someone walking up to you, or someone sending you an e-mail link, or someone sending you a link through Facebook, our completion rate -- meaning people who actually get registered -- is 83.5 percent," he says.

He also claims that this system is more reliable, less labor intensive and more efficient than a volunteer-driven effort to register voters with in-person physical voter registration forms, and cheaper than paid voter registration drives, which can cost between \$2 to \$10 apiece.

"We started with the premise that we could help voter registration if we could make it easier for the user by using the touchscreen device, and getting rid of paper, but keeping it simple for the registrar, who is accustomed to using paper, and must legally accept the national voter registration form if it has a wet signature," Barry says. "We have now established a national, mobile, online registration system."

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Quinn: Elections should ditch paper, embrace technology

By MICHELLE QUINN

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When it comes to the electoral process, technology is great for getting the word out.

But it's another thing altogether when it comes to using technology to put candidates and initiatives on the ballot. The potential benefits of making the system easier, faster and more convenient have to be balanced against real concerns about fraud, debates about whether voters would face a crush of new initiatives and crowds of candidates, and whether technology will make the process more susceptible to special interests.

But we are on the brink of change. This month, Facebook urged users to register to vote by providing a link from its platform to the secretary of state's website. More than 60 percent of the nearly 200,000 users who registered over two days were under 36, according to the secretary of state's office.

It's high time for California to start thinking about moving beyond a paper-based system and finding ways to adapt to the Internet era.

Change can be slow, as the case of Jonathan Padilla illustrates.

Padilla, 27, a legislative director for San Jose Councilman Manh Nguyen, submitted more than the required number of signatures to qualify as a candidate for the Democratic Party's County Central Committee.

When he delivered his papers to the Santa Clara County Registrar's office in March, he told Registrar Shannon Bushey that 19 of his signers used a pen. But the rest signed their names on a touch pad using technology from Allpoint Voter Services. Allpoint, co-founded by Democratic political strategist Jude Barry, transmits a person's touch-screen signature to a remote robotic pen, which writes that signature in ink on a paper version of the form.

Padilla's problem? There appears to be no precedent for using touch screens with candidate papers. (In 2010, another company tried unsuccessfully in San Mateo County to submit signatures acquired on touch screens.)

Bushey recalls someone in Padilla's group saying, "We are trying to make history." Her job is to verify signatures. She's not allowed to consider other factors, such as whether a technology is legit or not. She said it was impossible to tell which documents had been signed by touch screen and which by human hand. All had blue ink bleeding through the paper. She verified the signatures and put Padilla on the ballot.

That's when Secretary of State Alex Padilla (no relation to Jonathan) stepped in and went to court to remove the candidate from the ballot. The state argues that candidate Padilla violated the California Election Code, which says signatures should be "personally affixed" on nomination forms. The Allpoint signatures, the state argues, were not "personally affixed," a requirement that dates back to 1933.

Padilla came off the ballot. The secretary of state has sued the county and Padilla, seeking a judge's ruling that Allpoint technology violates the state election code and the state was correct in blocking Padilla. Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Beth McGowen is set to hear the case next month.

So you can sign a screen with your finger to pay for a cup of coffee or approve a loan document. And you can register to vote online (the state uses the information to take signatures from DMV records).

But when it comes to signing a form to support a candidate for the ballot, it has to be a person, not a machine, putting ink to paper, the state says.

The risks, according to the secretary of state, are real. Allpoint is a "novel, untested and unregulated digital technology" that raises concerns about "voter privacy, fraud prevention and integrity of the electoral process," the state's court papers say.

Barry sees it differently. "We believe that technology can make politics and government easier and better," he says. "The only thing holding back an engaged citizenry is government's slow adoption of technology and resistance to change."

Warren Slocum, former San Mateo County elections officer and now president of the board of supervisors, agrees. “The guy should be on the ballot,” he said. “The entire California election code is modeled from a bygone era.”

I don’t think it matters if the signatures were made by pen, finger or stylus, as long as they are legitimate and verified. The process allows local election officials to make the call about validity of signatures, which is precisely what Bushey did.

In fact, the Legislature needs to revive something killed 19 years ago by then-Gov. Pete Wilson: a task force to study the creation of a digital electoral system. Wilson vetoed a bill that would have created a task force to look at the issue, worried that such a system “would compromise voter confidentiality and generate significant opportunities for fraud.”

We need that task force now.

I’m not saying the Allpoint technology Padilla used is the answer.

But we live in a world where touch screens on phones and tablets are more prevalent than pen and paper. The rules about “personally affixing” a signature to a paper seem archaic. The world has accepted that the finger can be a pen when it comes to putting our John Hancock on screen versions of important documents such as contracts and bank loans, even if our digital signatures lose some of their flair.

If resisting technology is the government’s default position, people like Jonathan Padilla and Allpoint should keep pushing.

Election Milestones in California

1997

Then-Gov. Pete Wilson vetoes a bill that would have created a task force to study the creation of “a digital electoral system.”

2011

The First District Court of Appeal rules that signatures gathered for a ballot initiative on a touch screen and delivered on a thumb drive violated election voter signature laws.

2012

The state allows people to register to vote online.

Michelle Quinn is a former business columnist for the Bay Area News Group. Prior to that, she was the Silicon Valley correspondent at Politico covering tech policy and politics. She has also covered the tech industry at the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle. She was a blogger for the New York Times.