

# Breaking voting barriers

*States are considering making it easier for people to vote by using the Internet and the mails.*

BY TIM ANDERSON

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**W**hen residents of Iowa counties Woodbury and Johnson went to the polls in November, they weren't only deciding who would win their local municipal races.

The voters also were helping determine if and how the Internet will be used in future state elections. In a pilot program conducted by the Iowa secretary of state's office, an Internet voting booth was set up next to traditional voting booths.

The nonbinding online vote was "designed to test the viability of the system and the willingness of voters to participate through the Internet," Secretary of State Chet Culver says.

The Iowa project is one of several alternative voting methods being studied or implemented by states across the country. In Oregon, for example, voters no longer head to the polls on Election Day. They cast their ballots at home and send them in through the mail.

Ohio may soon be taking the first step to an all-mail system with a no-fault absentee-ballot initiative that has been introduced by Republican Sen. Eugene Watts and Democratic Rep. Vernon Sykes.

The states' methods are different, but the goals of the various plans are the same: Make voting more convenient for residents and improve what many consider alarmingly low voter-turnout numbers across the country.

## Results in Iowa

Iowa's pilot program worked with a pool of 3,256 registered voters who

went to the polls during last November's elections. Of those voters in the two counties' eight precincts, 39 percent of them agreed to participate in the Internet vote.

Bob Galbraith, who analyzed results of the Iowa project, says his findings are encouraging, with 83 percent of the study participants saying they would be willing to vote by Internet in future elections either at home or the office.

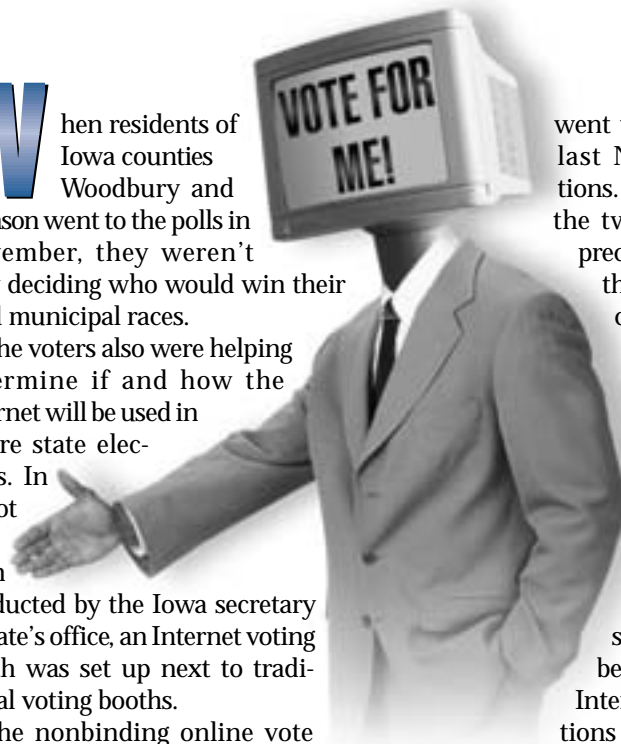
"If people were going to do the test, you would think a fairly high percentage would say, 'Yes, I will do this for real,'" says Galbraith, deputy secretary of state for elections and voter registration. "But I didn't expect it to be 80 or 90 percent, particularly in the rural precinct I was in with so many elderly people.

"A number of folks who probably never had touched a mouse before were willing to sit down and try it. Of those folks who tried it, most of them thought it was a neat idea."

But while pleasantly surprised by the reaction of the state's older residents, the secretary of state's office says Internet voting is geared more to improving turnout among Iowa's youngest voters.

Only 15 percent of the people between the ages of 18 and 24 vote, and Galbraith says part of the reason may be the unfamiliarity and the unease of going to a voting booth for the first time.

"I think it is a little more intimidating to them than it would be to walk



over to a computer where they spend a lot of time and have a higher comfort level," Galbraith says.

The secretary of state's office will continue to examine the results before deciding the feasibility of online voting in Iowa. When it comes to implementing Internet voting "for real," Galbraith says, he expects a Western state to take the lead, much like Oregon has done with voting by mail.

"I think the populous out there may be more willing to test the technology sooner than the Iowa population, but the secretary of state is convinced there will be real Internet voting in the states within the next 10 years," Galbraith says.

### No reasons required

No-fault absentee voting — which means any registered voter can request to vote by mail without a reason — is already in place in four Midwestern states: Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota and Kansas.



Ohio Rep. Vernon Sykes

Pending legislation in Ohio would add a fifth state to that list. Watts, who is proposing in the Senate the no-fault absentee ballots bill along with Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell,

says the initiative would make voting more accessible and easier.

"For many Ohioans who are dealing with the day-to-day chores of home, children and work, getting to the ballot box can be quite difficult," says the Republican from Dublin, Ohio. "I am confident that by opening this process, more Ohioans will participate in our electoral process."

Is this the first step to elections in Ohio that are done exclusively by mail, like they are done now in Oregon?

Sykes, who is carrying the legislation in the Ohio House, says it is far too early to tell.

"I'm not trying to do anything drastic," the Akron Democrat says. "We're going to hopefully start by expanding a system that we're already using, and that is absentee balloting.

"My purpose is to provide another method of accessing the ballot box. In today's climate of advancements in technology, we can bank 24-7 with ATM machines, we've got phones in our pockets. I just figure it's time for us to do something a little innovative when it comes to voting."

Lynne Martinez, a Democrat who represents Lansing in the Michigan House, says she has unsuccessfully pushed for no-fault absentee ballots and pilot voting-by-mail programs in her state.

Martinez says allowing more people to vote by mail would not only increase voter participation, it also could lead to a more-informed electorate.

"People would have the chance to go over the ballots in the privacy of their own homes and make sure they were familiar with the issues and candidates, and then decide who to vote for," Martinez says.

### Stumbling blocks

Internet voting, no-fault absentee ballots and the all-mail system all face similar impediments. First and foremost is the concern over voter fraud. Oregon has been sued over its all-mail system by the Voting Integrity Project, which claims the system does not provide enough safeguards against fraud and violates an 1872 federal law re-



Iowa Secretary of State Chet Culver

quiring that elections be set for a certain day.

The nonprofit group says extending voting timeframes and moving the process away from elections officials are "an invitation to fraud."

Another issue is political fairness. Would an increase in voting by mail help one party at the expense of another? Martinez believes her initiatives have been derailed due to Republican concerns that they would create a larger turnout of Democratic voters.

In Ohio, though, the legislation for no-fault absentee ballots is being pushed by both Republican and Democratic officials.

The Ohio secretary of state's office rejects the idea of any kind of partisan advantage, saying in a report on the subject that political parties already are using "sophisticated voter outreach tools to encourage absentee balloting." As for concerns over fraud, the secretary of state's office cites statistics showing an increase in Ohio absentee ballots of 135 percent between 1995 and 1996 with no corresponding rise in complaints of fraud.

If it moves forward, online voting will have to pass similar tests related to voter fraud, Galbraith says. In addition, questions will be raised about whether voters without access to a computer would be disenfranchised under a system that relies more heavily on the Internet, he adds. ★

### CSG resources

More innovative state elections practices can be found on the World Wide Web site of The Council of State Governments, [www.csg.org](http://www.csg.org). Connect to the CSG Washington, D.C., office home page and follow the appropriate links. There is a compendium of election innovations available free of charge for publication and replication on the "Elections Web" Web site.