



# The Florida Senate

Interim Project Summary 2000-38

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Committee on Ethics and Elections

Senator Burt L. Saunders, Chairman

## STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION IN FLORIDA

### SUMMARY

Voter turnout in Florida is low compared to many non-Southern states. In the last presidential general election, Florida ranked 32nd overall in voter turnout (2nd only to Louisiana among southern states). However, due to an inherent statistical error which disproportionately impacts Florida, turnout in the 1990's has averaged 7 points better than reported.

There is no "silver bullet" to increase voter turnout. Most Floridians don't vote because they feel that their vote doesn't matter or they don't like the choice of candidates. Other Floridians say they don't have the time or lack objective information about candidates.

It appears the best that can be done from an elections and a legislative standpoint is to make voting ultra-convenient and provide voters with more information in an attempt to engage them in the process.

Internet voting holds the promise of greater voter turnout; a Florida Voter Guide prepared under the direction of the Secretary of State can provide voters with information about candidates and ballot issues.

### BACKGROUND

For the past few years, the media has tirelessly reported on the problem of deteriorating voter turnout in America. Widely-quoted turnout figures have led reform advocates to label the decline a "crisis of the electorate." In the 1996 general election, Florida ranked 32nd overall in voter turnout calculated as a percent of voting age population. However, it was 2nd only to Louisiana in turnout among southern states.

In the past decade, the Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, has commissioned two studies to address the issue of low voter participation in Florida --- one in 1989 to assess the reasons why voter turnout

was so low, and another in 1996 to identify strategies for increasing voter turnout.

For the 2000 election cycle, the Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections has set up the Get-Out-The-Vote Foundation to coordinate and spearhead a statewide effort to increase voter turnout.

### METHODOLOGY

Committee staff gathered all available information on voter turnout in Florida in the 1990's.

Staff met with the Division of Elections staff to obtain information and discuss options for increasing voter turnout. Staff also sent letters and e-mails requesting information and opinions from some of Florida's foremost political science scholars.

Committee staff extensively researched voter turnout, population, and demographic data in order to develop *revised voter turnout figures* for Florida.

Finally, staff researched voter turnout strategies employed by other states, as well as other technological advances which have yet to be implemented but which show promise for increasing turnout (i.e., Internet voting).

### FINDINGS

#### *Scope of the Problem*

One of the more interesting conclusions which came out of the staff's research is that while some increase in voter turnout is certainly possible, the problem is not quite as dire as reports have suggested.

The most widely-quoted turnout figures are those which measure the number of persons voting against the entire *voting age population* ("VAP"). However, because the VAP includes large groups of residents not eligible to register and vote --- particularly noncitizen

residents and convicted felons without their civil rights restored --- the turnout figures are artificially low.

This VAP error is large in Florida, which has a substantial noncitizen resident population as well as a large number of convicted felons without their civil rights restored. By factoring out these ineligible groups from Florida's VAP, staff estimates that turnout in the last four general elections was between 5 and 9 points higher than reported.

Why don't Floridians vote? A Florida Voter Study shows that nearly half of Floridians don't vote because they either feel that their vote doesn't matter (declining *political efficacy*) or they don't like the candidates. About fifteen percent stay away because they don't have enough time to vote. Nearly the same percentage say they lack objective information about candidates.

### *Options*

The report identifies seven options for increasing voter turnout:

- ◆ Internet Voting
- ◆ All-Mail-Ballot Elections
- ◆ Early Voting
- ◆ Election Day Registration
- ◆ Weekend Voting
- ◆ Election Day Holiday
- ◆ Florida Voter Guide/Voter Information

### Internet Voting

Internet voting is intriguing. It doesn't exist yet, but it soon will. The idea that voters could cast electronic ballots ("eballots") has tremendous appeal --- both from a convenience and cost-savings standpoint. The Internet represents an entirely "new frontier" in election balloting, and offers the promise of greater voter turnout.

The meteoric rise of the Internet as a mainstream communications medium is nothing short of astonishing. The Internet has grown faster than any other communications medium in history --- almost 3 times as fast as television and twice as fast as cable TV. By 2002, *the most conservative estimates* place 85 million American adults and over 43 percent of U.S. households on-line.

Demographics projections for the Internet support its continued "mainstreaming" as a communications medium. Although Internet use is currently dominated

by male thirty-somethings and upscale households, the Internet is forecast to become a true microcosm of American society in the near future.

Just a few short years ago, many considered voting on the Internet light years away. Election officials talked about it, but no one really took it seriously. Now, the rapid advance of technology is about to make the dream (or nightmare, depending on your perspective) a reality. For the 2000 general election, the Federal Voting Assistance Program ("FVAP"), in concert with the Department of Defense and local supervisors of elections in select states, will implement a pilot Internet voting project for approximately 350 overseas residents. Counties in Florida (Orange, Okaloosa), Missouri, Utah, South Carolina, and Texas are scheduled to participate. If everything goes according to plan, 100 eballots will be cast in Florida in the 2000 general election.

In addition to the FVAP program, bills to initiate studies of Internet voting were introduced in Minnesota (S.F. 979) and Washington State (SB 5662, HB 1594) in 1999. Washington State is reportedly "very interested in online voting." T. Walsh, *Public-Key Encryption Will Let Citizens Vote Via the Internet*, GOVERNMENT COMPUTER NEWS, p.1 (July 1999) (quoting Dave Elliott, Asst. Director of Elections, State of Washington). Several counties in Washington State are working with a locally-based firm to test Internet voting technologies.

In March of 1999, California's Secretary of State convened a 24-member task force to study on-line voting and make recommendations to the state legislature later this year. Finally, the governments of Costa Rica and New Zealand are also seriously exploring the concept of Internet voting. In fact, Costa Rica had planned to conduct its last national election using Internet polling places, but canceled the project at the last minute.

What do potential voters think about casting eballots on the Internet? Polls show that those who access the Internet generally favor the idea by about a 2-to-1 margin. A 1999 ActivMedia FutureScapes study of over 5,000 Internet users showed that 66 percent supported the concept, with the number increasing to 71 percent among users with at least four years of Internet experience. A recent study commissioned by ABCNEWS.com found that 60 percent of 18-34 year olds, the group with the greatest presence on the Internet, supported the idea of secure Internet voting. Predictably, the ABC News poll identified the least

support among older Americans (65+) --- the group with the smallest current presence on the Net. Nonetheless, the poll showed that 42 percent of the *overall* public already support the concept of secure Internet voting, a promisingly high number given the infancy of the Internet and the current number and distribution of users. As the Internet grows more to mirror the American public profile in the coming years, and as older Americans begin to come online to research medical information, shop from home, entertain themselves, and communicate with geographically-dispersed family members, it is not unreasonable to believe that support for Internet voting may reach or exceed the two-thirds mark by 2004 or 2006.

In addition to possibly increasing voter turnout, Internet voting offers other important benefits. It has the potential to greatly reduce the cost of elections. It will also insure that Florida's military and overseas voters receive timely and accurate ballots. On the other side of the coin, the biggest obstacles to Internet voting appear to be overcoming the potential for fraud and developing public confidence in the system.

#### Florida Voter Guide/Voter Information

In 1996, the Secretary of State created a Blue Ribbon Panel on Elections composed of legislators, supervisors of elections, academics, political party representatives, and representatives of concerned citizen groups to develop strategies for increasing voter turnout. In addition to recommending a phased-in all-mail-ballot system, the Panel recommended the creation of a Florida Voter Guide to provide information about candidates and ballot proposals:

The Secretary of State should act immediately to determine the exact costs of different types of voter guides and consider all options of distribution of such a guide. Upon determination of the most cost efficient method of production and distribution, the department should endeavor to produce the Florida Voter Guide to include: 1) information about proposed amendments to the Florida Constitution, 2) information relating to the retention of Supreme Court Justices and an explanation of the process of retention, 3) information on Statewide candidates and other candidates depending upon budget constraints, and 4) information relating to all judicial offices.

Florida Department of State, Blue Ribbon Panel on Elections, *Final Recommendations*, at p. 2-3 (Undated).

A number of states already produce such a voter guide. To the extent that it can provide Floridians with objective information about issues and judicial races, and offer a balanced presentation of candidates in partisan races, the idea appears sound. How can you argue against more unbiased information being made available to the public? The real question is one of cost. At the very least, however, it appears that placing such a guide on the Internet would be cost-feasible.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff recommends that the Legislature authorize and fund an Internet voting study commission under the direction of the Department of State. Internet or on-line voting holds the promise of reducing the cost of elections, increasing voter convenience, and increasing voter turnout. Many challenging issues such as security, fraud, and voter acceptance need to be addressed in detail, so now is not the time to embark on Internet voting. However, given the anticipated importance of the Internet in the coming years, it is time to begin investigating the issues.

Specifically, the study commission should explore the cost and feasibility of developing and implementing an Internet voting system for use in the general election in 2006. The system should allow voters to cast secure eballots, and must offer an alternative form of balloting for those without Internet access. The study commission should also be required to develop a detailed strategy for pro-actively addressing voters' concerns about fraud and fostering confidence in the system.

Staff also believes the Legislature should encourage the Division of Elections to pursue the creation and distribution of a Florida Voter Guide, to provide voters with more information about candidates and ballot issues. The Guide should be distributed, at a minimum, via the Internet.

**COMMITTEE(S) INVOLVED IN REPORT** (*Contact first committee for more information.*)

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**MEMBER OVERSIGHT**

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