

Testimony of
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My name is Herbert Lin, and I am chief scientist at the Computer Science and Telecommunication Board of the National Research Council. The National Research Council is the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. The National Academy of Sciences was chartered by Congress in 1863 to advise the government on matters of science and technology

I am director of the Academies project on State Voter Registration Databases, sponsored by the EAC. The project is a three-pronged effort to (1) advise states on how to implement and maintain their HAVA-mandated voter registration databases (VRDs); (2) suggest ways states can improve interoperability of databases with other internal state agencies; and (3) consider ways to evolve and sustain voter registration databases to share data between states. Olene Walker, former Governor of Utah, and Fran Ulmer, Chancellor of the University of Alaska Anchorage and former Alaska Lieutenant Governor, co-chair the expert committee assembled to conduct the project. This project includes a series of workshops, which concludes with a sixth workshop March 19-20 in Cambridge, Massachusetts; an interim report released in spring 2008; and a final report to be released this fall.

I will first briefly describe the interim report and the workshop series. The interim report primarily addressed short-term opportunities for improvement in two areas—(1) enhanced public education and information dissemination and (2) improved administrative processes and procedures—that could be implemented before the November, 2008, election. The report also noted longer-term opportunities for possible future improvements to support elections in 2010 and beyond.

The report was the subject of our last testimony to the EAC, in August 2008. We have not done any systematic analysis of the impact of that report, but informal feedback suggests it was useful to the elections community.

Turning to the workshops convened in this project, they have been designed to provide state and local election officials with an opportunity to interact with technology experts regarding current implementation and future directions for HAVA-mandated state voter registration databases. To illustrate, let me share with you some of the public discussions held during our December 2008 workshop in Atlanta, Georgia.

At that meeting, state and local elections officials from around the nation discussed their “frontline” experience, obtained feedback, and shared best practices regarding the use of voter registration databases leading up to and during the November, 2008, election. The dialog highlighted several issues:

1. Overall, the elections officials felt their voter registration databases performed well, with a number of officials expressing relief that they did not have to deal with closely contested races. If races had been closer, it is possible that more VRD problems would have come to light.
2. The general public appears to be confused about the purpose for provisional ballots and how they are actually used in an election. Media interest in the number and share of provisional ballots issued in each state reinforce this hypothesis.
3. Several officials from different states reported problems sharing data used to maintain voter registration lists with other internal state agencies. Many of these problems appear to reflect policy rather than technology issues.
4. Many election officials are worried about sustaining their voter registration databases when federal HAVA funds are no longer available. Participants noted that maintenance, upgrades, and eventual replacement are required to keep their systems running.
5. Registration of UOCAVA voters still presents a special set of challenges for election officials.
6. Election officials reported record turnout. If this marks the start of a trend, they have significant implications for same-day registration, provisional ballots, staffing needs, and so on.
7. Some officials reported some success in voter education efforts using online media such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube.
8. Election officials are feeling considerable pressure, and some have faced lawsuits, regarding the HAVA compliance of voter registration databases.
9. Third-party advocacy groups are playing an increasing role in the voter registration process.

Some of these issues will be explored further in our upcoming Cambridge workshop.

This concludes my statement, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.