

## **Eagleton 2008 Study Voter Registration Information on NJ State and County Web Sites: Easier to Find than in 2006 But Still A Challenge**

The experience of finding voter registration information on New Jersey's state web site and on the 21 county web sites improved significantly since a similar study was first conducted in 2006, according to an October 2008 study conducted by the New Jersey Project of the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University.

The goal of both studies was to provide useful feedback to county administrations that could be incorporated in efforts to improve the content of election information and accessibility to it on their sites. .Because counties are responsible for managing elections, their web sites should be useful sources of information about registration and voting. As dependence on the internet grows and reliance on newspapers for information wanes, the need for easy-to-use web sites increases.

Eagleton's first study in 2006 revealed that finding information about voter registration on county web sites was challenging, requiring multiple clicks with no clear connection to *elections* or *voting*, since those words did not appear without searching. That changed in 2008.

### **Summary of What was Learned in the 2008 Study**

1) Voter registration information was easier to find at the state and county levels in 2008 than in 2006. During the recent election, this information was easily recognized on the front page of the state's web site, [www.nj.gov](http://www.nj.gov), and on the Division of Elections recently upgraded web site, [www.njelections.org](http://www.njelections.org),

2) The 2008 study found that 10 of the 21 counties placed information on their front pages leading citizens to voter registration information. Two counties – Hudson and Middlesex -- had voter information clickable from their front pages. Eight other counties made it easy to get this information through pull-down features such as *how to* or *forms*. On the sites of the other 11 counties, would-be voters still had to use numerous clicks to hunt for registration information by looking at listing such as *government* or *departments*. Overall, county web sites showed constructive changes that make it easier to get voter registration information.

3) The improvements in the web sites made before the 2008 election are to be applauded. However, citizens could be better served, and efficiency of elections services enhanced, with continued attention to how individuals can get to voting information faster and with more details such as deadlines, who can register and where, how to use machines, and voting rights details. Many sites simply provided the voter registration form without additional guiding information. The voter registration deadline was not usually displayed prominently. Pull down tabs for *How to* or *Hot*

*Links* are helpful in getting to voter information, but these are not always obviously visible and may not include language that clearly signals relevance to elections.

4) If voting or election information was not on the front page, a visitor to the site often had to guess where to go next, trying terms such as *government* or *boards and commissions*. Web sites provide little clarity about which office is connected with voting and registration. A statement from the State Division of Elections characterizing who does what in election administration – that is, the County Clerk, the Board of Election, Superintendent of Elections or Commissioner of Registration – would be useful on the county sites.

### **A National Web Site Study**

A national study of state web sites conducted in the fall of 2008 produced similar results to the New Jersey study. Researchers with *Make Voting Work* at The Pew Center on the States, in conjunction with the Neilson Norman Group, conducted the study to explore the accessibility of election information on the web sites of the 50 states. Based on criteria such as how easily users can navigate the sites, how organized the sites are, how much information is available to users, and how much users could understand and use the information, Pew devised a usability scale from 1 to 100 to rate the states' homepages. New Jersey's web site was among the highest ranked sites. The Pew study concluded that all states could improve their web sites; voter and election information was difficult to find; and making this information available and accessible on web sites could yield a return on investment for election officials. The Pew study also includes recommendations for the states.

The complete study can be found here:

[http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/VIP\\_FINAL\\_101408\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/VIP_FINAL_101408_WEB.pdf).

The Make Voting Work web site can be found at the homepage for The Pew Center on the States: [www.pewcenteronthestates.org](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org).

In addition, the federal Election Assistance Commission issued "Best Practices for Voter Information Web Sites" in November 2008. Check [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov).

### **How the Eagleton Study Was Conducted.**

Ingrid W. Reed, director of the New Jersey Project, asked a senior work-study student, Diane Nguyen, to look at each of the 21 county web sites to find out how easy it was to locate the voter registration form and how many clicks it took to find it.

In collecting this information, Nguyen randomly selected the web sites, but those that were observed later in the process may have benefited from what was learned at the beginning of the process. Since citizens looking for such information on the internet would not likely have had a similar experience before, the estimate of ease of access may not be accurately reflected – that is, it might be more difficult for a novice user.

County-by-county notes about the experience of seeking information in October 2008 from the web sites of New Jersey counties about voter registration are included here.

### **County-by-County Findings**

A rating of "A" means election information is on the front page of the web site or in a pull-down feature. A rating of "B" signifies that a voter has to guess where to look for registration information.

**Atlantic:** On the home page, I found nothing on voter registration. I clicked on the link on the left, *Government*, which led me to a series of choices. Under government I immediately found the *Voter Registration Form*. Overall it was simple and straightforward to do in two clicks after making the choice to click on *Government*. Rating: B

**Bergen:** Located on the front page in the center column under *Constituent Services*, I found a link marked *Vote/Election Services*. I clicked the *Vote/Election Services* link, which led me to the Bergen County Board of Elections website. On the left side I found the link marked *Voter Information*; this led me to the *Voter Registration Form* in both English and Spanish. The front page was a little bit cluttered, but overall it was very simple to find the voter registration form. Rating: B.

**Burlington:** On the front page under *Hot Links*, I found a link marked *Voter Registration Information*. This led me to the *Superintendent of Elections and Commissioner of Registrations* web site, where I found the *Voter Registration Form*. The site also provides information such as *When and Where to Vote*, and *Who Can Register to Vote*. Very straightforward and helpful. Rating: A.

**Camden:** *Elections* was not on the front page, but I looked under the column *County News*, in case the information might be there even though it is not technically news. I found *Voter Information*, clicked on the link, which led me to the *Voter Information* page where the voter registration form link was located. I clicked on the *Voter Registration form* link, which led me to the form. Rating: B.

**Cape May:** On the home page, I found nothing on voter registration. I then clicked *Departments* located on the left side column. This link gave me a directory of all of the Departments' home pages. I clicked on the *Board of Elections* link, and located on the front page of the Board of Elections page was the *Voter Registration Form* with a reminder of the registration deadline. When I clicked on the *Voter Registration* link, it led me to a PDF file of the form. Rating: B.

**Cumberland:** The voter registration information was not directly on the front page. It showed up as a separate item under the "How do I" function. I clicked *Register to Vote* and then clicked on the *Voter Registration form*. This led me to a PDF file. Rating: A

**Essex:** On the main page, I could not find anything on voter registration. I clicked on *Departments* listed at the top. Then I clicked on *Essex County Clerk*. This led me to the county clerk website. On the left hand side I clicked on *Voter Registration*. When I clicked on this link, it provided a PDF file version of the form, also available in Spanish. This site was a little bit hard to navigate. Rating: B.

**Gloucester County:** I could not find anything on the main page. The site had a search function, which leads you to a Google search where I typed in "voter registration." The first link that came up was the *NJ Voter Registration Application* in a PDF form. Rating: B.

**Hudson:** On the main page toward the right side, I scrolled down and found the *Voter Registration Info* link, which leads to the New Jersey Division of Elections web site, where I could download the *Voter Registration Form* in English or Spanish. Rating: A.

**Hunterdon:** On the front page located on the left column under *Quick Links*, I found the *Voter and Election Information* link. I then clicked on the link *Register to Vote*, which gave me a link to download the voter registration form. Rating: A.

**Middlesex:** On the front page at the bottom, I clicked *Voter Information*, which leads to a page with two links. The first link was the *Board of Elections*. I clicked the *Board of Elections* link, then *Voter Forms*, which led me to a page where I could simply download the form online. Rating: A.

**Mercer:** The *Voter Registration* link is located on the front page under *Features*. I clicked the link, which led me to the Mercer County Voter Registration site. This provided information on who can register and where to register. This link also provided the *Voter Registration Form*. Rating: A.

**Monmouth:** Nothing on the front page. Under the "How to" pull-down, I clicked on *Register to Vote*, which provided me with the registration form. Another way to find it without using the pull-down function was to click on *Government*. Then click on *County Clerk*. Then click on the *Election Division* on the right hand side, where the registration form is provided. Very simple once the pull-down function is located. Rating: A

**Morris:** The front page had nothing specifically about voter registration. However, on the left side, I clicked on *Forms* which led to the *Voting/Elections* headline, and underneath I found the *Voter Registration Forms* in English and Spanish. Rating: A

**Ocean:** Located on the front page under *Public Information* is the *Voter Registration Form* link which took me to a page with "select here for the form". Clicking that took me to

the New Jersey Division of Elections web site, where the forms are located for easy download. Rating: A

**Passaic:** There was nothing located on the front page. On the sidebar I clicked on *Departments*. Then I clicked on *Elections* at the top, and at the bottom right under *Election Links* is the link for the *Voter Registration Form*. A click on the *Voter Registration Form* link led to the New Jersey Division of Elections web site, where the forms were located for easy download. Rating: B.

**Salem:** There was nothing located on the front page. At the top I clicked on *County Government*, then clicked on *Departments*. I then selected the *Election Board*, and on the center of the page was a *Voter Registration Form* link leading to a PDF file. Rating: B.

**Somerset:** There was nothing on the front page on voter registration. At the top I clicked on *Government*, then *Departments*, and selected the *Election Board*. In the center part of the page was *Voter Info*, which leads to a page with voter information and a *Voter Registration Form*. Very helpful once I got there and easy to use. Rating: B.

**Sussex:** There was nothing on the front page on voter registration. On the front page I clicked on *Departments*. From *Departments* I clicked on the *Board of Elections*, and then clicked on the *Voter Registration form link*, which was located towards the bottom of the page. Rating: B.

**Union:** There was nothing on the front page on voter registration. At the top I clicked on *Government*. I then clicked on the link marked the *Board of Elections*, where I found the voter registration link at the top. Rating: B.

**Warren:** There was nothing on the front page about voting, so I clicked on *Info Center*, which led me to the *Voter Registration* link. I also checked *Directory*, then clicked on *Offices, Agencies and Boards*, and then clicked on *Board of Elections*. I was able to access something on voter registration, but this site did not give me a link, only the address of the Board of Elections. Rating: A

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Malissa Pansa-ad, a senior at Douglass College who conducted the 2006 study, contributed to the 2008 study and editing the report.

For more information and to provide comments on and suggestions for this study, contact Ingrid W. Reed, Director, New Jersey Project, Eagleton Institute of Politics at 732-932-9384 x232 or [Ireed@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:Ireed@rci.rutgers.edu).

The 2006 and 2008 County Web Site Study can be found at:  
<http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/NJProject/CampaignsElections/Countywebsitestudy2007.pdf>

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