

# Talking Turnout

## Online Option Alters Registration Process

By Matt L. Ottinger

**W**hen asked about turnout projections for the upcoming November election, Jim Gavin, communications director for the Indiana Secretary of State's office, politely explains that he and his supervisors are not in the business of making such predictions.

Brad King, Indiana Election Division co-director, qualifies that when analyzing different election years, it's important to "compare apples to apples."

"What people often look to is a comparable election from before (mid-terms, presidential years, etc.)," he notes. "Or take 1994 (the year of the Contract with America for Republicans running for Congress) for example, which saw an uncharacteristically high turnout of 54%, and there was a lot of incumbent turnover. Will 2010 be like that? We don't know."

Among recent mid-term totals in Indiana elections, 2002 saw a 39% voter turnout and 2006 featured 40%. In 2008 – a historic presidential election by many standards – the United States saw a much higher 62% total (see graphic for more numbers).

King adds that while there are some with higher average turnouts than Indiana – including Minnesota, whose 2008 turnout of 75% was highest in the nation – many states are also lower.

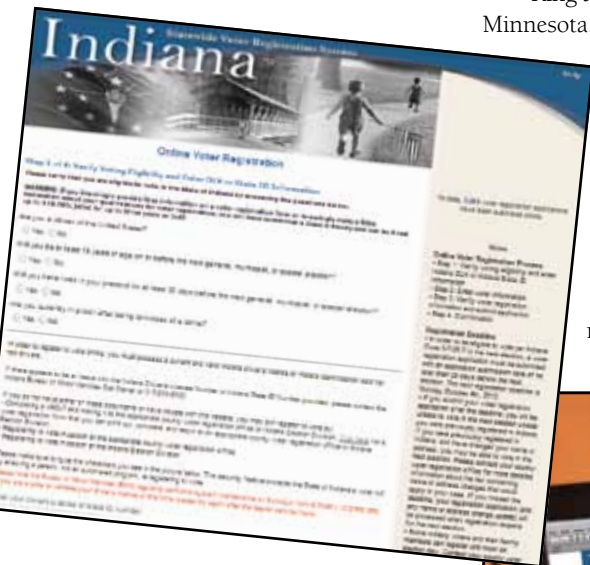
"We're normally solidly in the middle," he says.

One tool that will help more Hoosiers vote is the new Online Voter Registration system, launched in July. The development stemmed from a 2009 law passed with bipartisan support in the Indiana General Assembly that called for improving the state's paper-based system. Online registration had only been offered in seven other states at the time.

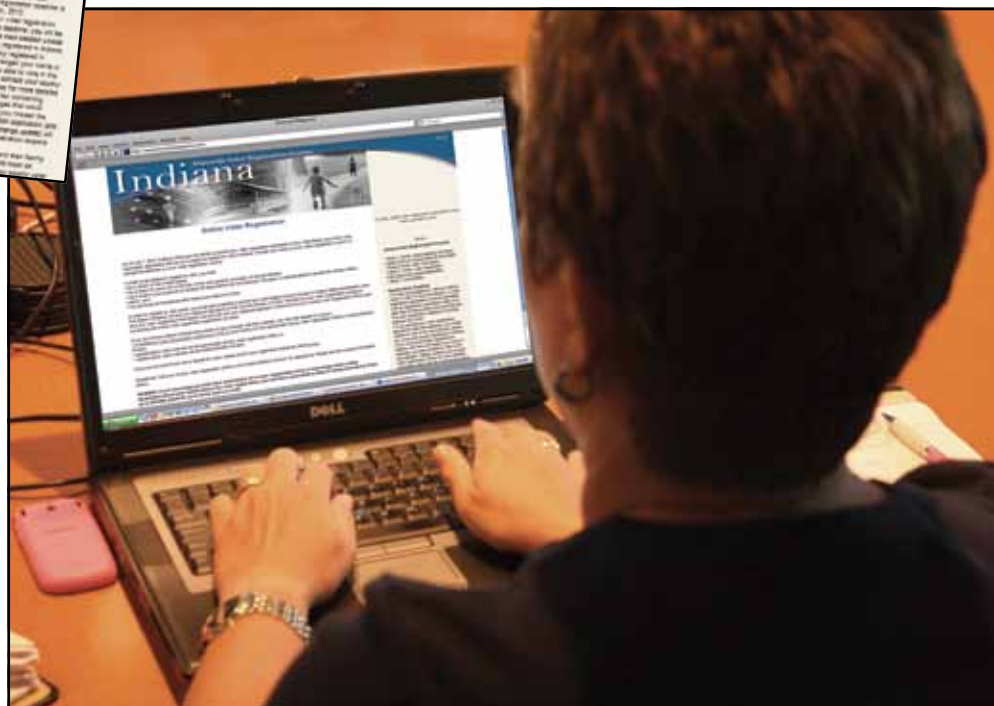
"It's just one more amazing technological leap to bring another part of the election process into the 21st century," King surmises.

Within the first week of its launch, 650 Hoosiers had used the new service to register. Voters can do so through the system until midnight on October 4.

"It's important to know that can be accessed, say, at 11:15 p.m. on October 4,"



Indiana's online voter registration technology, a product of Indianapolis-based Quest Information Systems and its FirstTuesday® software, is expected to streamline data management while enhancing accuracy and efficiency.



King explains. "So if you've missed the mail deadline, you're not totally out of luck at that point."

He adds that submitting registrations electronically is actually safer for the voter.

"If you submit it via mail, you're running the risk of it getting lost," King notes. "Or if you send it to the county, it could be misplaced. But with electronic submissions, it's virtually impossible to lose it forever; voters get a confirmation number when they register that they can always reference."

### Behind-the-scenes technology

Quest Information Systems, an Indianapolis-based custom software developer, is the company making online registration possible via its FirstTuesday® software solution.

The Help America Vote Act launched in 2002 (following a 2000 presidential election that had many Americans disheartened with voting procedures) and FirstTuesday was developed to help states streamline the registration and early voting process.

According to Steve McNear, president and CEO of Quest, the beauty of FirstTuesday is its ability to make the government's job easier.

"Before, you had 92 registries across the state (for each county), but now we can centralize it," he says. "It gives election officials much more insight into the process. Before, they did whatever they had to do to get through an election."

He adds that the transparency of the system provides a great deal of clarification and legitimacy to the process.

"Now they can see who changed voter roll records and when they did it," McNear explains. "It gives more integrity to the process."

"Historically in Indiana, every couple of years the state would have to eliminate duplicates on voter rolls," he explains. "People would move between counties and register, but never cancel the registration in their old county. We've developed algorithms for duplicate names so they can send those people postcards to ask for the proper address, and now the system looks for duplicates in real time to notify the old and new counties."

McNear points out that even though the software equips auditor offices to make the most prudent decisions, those officials ultimately have the final say regarding who can register.

"Everything comes down to a human decision," he clarifies.

Additionally, the registration process is now easier for those working to enroll voters, asserts Shannon Gibbs, Quest operations director.

"If you're at the State Fair or something trying to register people, you can just set up a computer station or pass around an iPad and people can register right there," she notes. "There is no need to worry about tracking all that paper."

FirstTuesday also helps manage campaign finance data and absentee voter information. It is used by several other states, including Colorado, Maine and Rhode Island.



### By the Numbers

#### General Election Turnout

##### 2002

Registered voters . . . 4,008,636  
 Voters voting . . . 1,562,037  
 Turnout. . . . . 39%  
 In person . . . . . 1,445,976  
 Absentee . . . . . 116,740  
 Absentee % . . . . . 7%

##### 2006

Registered voters . . . 4,295,687  
 Voters voting . . . . 1,719,351  
 Turnout. . . . . 40%  
 In person . . . . . 1,548,844  
 Absentee . . . . . 170,552  
 Absentee % . . . . . 10%

##### 2008

Registered voters . . . 4,514,759  
 Voters voting . . . . 2,805,986  
 Turnout. . . . . 62%  
 In person . . . . . 2,142,813  
 Absentee . . . . . 662,443  
 Absentee % . . . . . 24%

#### Primaries

##### 2006

Registered voters . . . 4,337,069  
 Voters voting . . . . 850,734  
 Turnout. . . . . 20%  
 In person . . . . . 789,880  
 Absentee . . . . . 60,953  
 Absentee % . . . . . 7%

##### 2010

Registered voters . . . 4,277,762  
 Voters voting . . . . 892,403  
 Turnout. . . . . 21%  
 In person . . . . . 797,718  
 Absentee . . . . . 94,673  
 Absentee % . . . . . 11%

#### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Jim Gavin, Indiana Secretary of State's office, at [www.in.gov/sos](http://www.in.gov/sos)

Brad King, Indiana Election Division, at [www.in.gov/sos/elections](http://www.in.gov/sos/elections)

Steve McNear and Shannon Gibbs, Quest Information Systems, at [www.questis.com](http://www.questis.com)