

Eight voters register by use of mobile touch-screen devices

May 17 2010, By Ken McLaughlin

The Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters made history Friday when it allowed eight county residents to register to vote by writing their signatures on iPads, iPhones and other mobile touch-screen devices.

It was thought to be the first time an election official in the United States, possibly in the world, permitted anyone to register to vote that way.

Voting rights advocates cheered the news as a major milestone in making it easier for millions of people to register to vote, but critics worry digital signatures could be difficult to verify and pave the way for [voter fraud](#).

County Registrar Jesse Durazo made the decision to permit the electronic signatures after the county Board of Supervisors and county counsel gave their blessings to the proposal by Verafirma, a Silicon Valley company whose partners include San Jose political strategist Jude Barry.

The company has been stymied in court in its efforts to allow Californians to sign initiative petitions on mobile devices rather than on paper petitions in front of supermarkets. So Durazo's decision was a welcome victory for the fledgling company.

"It's truly awesome and fantastic that a county registrar is allowing this to happen. It's a huge, huge step," said Thomas Gates, vice president for

civic engagement at Rock the Vote, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that registered 2 million new voters in the 2008 election. "We're supportive of anything that modernizes the antiquated voter-registration system in our country.

Barry said Verafirma will now move ahead and try to make the technology available in every one of California's 58 counties by the November election.

Some election officials have raised concerns about possible voter fraud, as well as privacy and security issues, in regard to electronic signatures. But the founders of Verafirma point out that Wells Fargo Bank is so confident in the technology that it allows customers to open a bank account with an electronic signature.

The new technology also appears to be ahead of current election laws. A spokeswoman for California Secretary of State Debra Bowen expressed some concern that California election codes don't mention things like the 3-year-old iPhones or the brand new iPad. But Bowen does not have the authority to tell the county registrar to reject the signatures of the eight county voters who agreed to be guinea pigs, Secretary of State spokeswoman Nicole Winger said. So unless someone sues to stop Durazo from registering the voters, the electronic signatures will stand.

Barry, who called electronic signatures "the future of voting," said Verafirma has developed new software on a website that will allow people to use the National Voter Registration Act form to produce a "secure electronic signature" in the same way shoppers sign their name after swiping a credit card at supermarkets and large drug stores.

But, he said, the new technology does a lot more than that. As a person writes his or her name, the software records the speed at which someone signs, the way they cross their "t's," dot their "i's," and their "e's."

"Every stroke, the timing of each strike, the curve, the shape and the order of the strikes are all captured in real time," said Vermafirma co-founder Michael Marubio. "The way you signed your name can then be played back on a computer screen like a movie."

Marubio, who has worked in the digital signature business for 15 years, said the software is located on a muscular Google server. "So if 300 million people decide to use this tomorrow, the server won't blink," he said.

Durazo was at an all-day meeting on Friday and could not be reached for comment. But his spokesman, Matt Moreles, said the registrar's office will treat the eight signatures submitted on the electronic forms "like any other registration form."

The signatures will not be stored electronically. They'll simply be printed out.

After the new voters sign their ballots at the polls or mail in a ballot, those signatures will be compared against the printouts.

Winger said one concern is that registrar workers will have to compare an electronic signature with one created with pen and paper. And as anyone who has ever used one of the signing machines at Trader Joe's knows, they often look quite a bit different.

But Moreles said registrar workers are confident they'll be able to match the signatures -- particularly since workers are trained to watch for variations in signatures, which often change over time.

County Supervisor Dave Cortese said Verafirma's proposal was discussed Monday in closed session because of potential litigation -- and that the full board was enthusiastic. County Counsel Miguel Marquez

also signed off on the plan, clearing the way for Durazo's approval.

"If we have voter registration fraud going on, it's not going to be because of electronic signatures," Cortese said. "The tone in the room was much more in the direction of exuberance than concern. We certainly don't want to serve as a bottleneck to a good thing."

The eight voters created their electronic John Hancocks at either Barry's office downtown or at a table set up outside the student union at San Jose State University in the past two weeks.

The first to sign was Tim Howell, a 24-year-old public relations major at SJSU.

After a friend noticed the call for volunteers on Facebook, Howell registered on an iPhone.

It wasn't the first time he had tried to register. But when he tried the first time in 2008, the registration card he mailed in apparently never got to the registrar -- so he never got the chance to vote.

"This time it was easy," Howell said, "and I guess it's cool to make history."

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