



# Vermont Leverages Civix Technology to Run Successful, Secure Elections

**L**ike many other states, Vermont faced enormous election challenges in 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state had to shift to mail-in voting to keep residents safe from potential infection. But the transition itself posed obstacles. On top of that, state election officials had to stay on top of cybersecurity threats that have been an issue long before the worldwide health crisis turned everything upside down.

By deploying technology tools from Civix to handle the unprecedented nature of the election and leveraging Amazon Web Services' (AWS) GovCloud to bolster cybersecurity, Vermont was able to run a successful general election process throughout the state.

## AN UNPRECEDENTED SHIFT

Conducting an election in 2020 “was orders of magnitude more difficult than previous years,” according to

Will Senning, director of elections and campaign finance in the Vermont Secretary of State’s Office. “It was the professional challenge of my lifetime, and I doubt that there will ever be another one as challenging again.”

The primary source of the challenge was the pandemic and its impact on virtually every aspect of life — including elections. For public health reasons, many citizens would not or could not vote in the usual public polling locations.

Vermont government leaders faced the challenge of protecting the health and safety of voters and election workers during a pandemic involving a highly contagious, deadly virus that spread through human contact. And human contact is typically a fundamental part of election administration, Senning says. That’s true whether it’s officials working in their offices before and

after the election processing ballots and counting results, or citizens and workers being present at polling places on Election Day.

The health crisis forced the state to quickly shift gears to a vote-by-mail format. State officials made the decision in April 2020, with the approval of the state legislature, to mail out a ballot to all eligible, registered voters in the state for the general election in November.

“That’s not something we had done in the past,” Senning says. “Vermont has always been a state where you had to request your absentee ballot.”

The state has had an early voting process in which citizens could request ballots by a number of means, including online, by phone or in person. Absentee voters had the option of returning the ballots to the town clerk’s office, at the polls on Election Day or by mail.

“People were used to absentee balloting and the notion of early voting,” Senning

says. “But we had never proactively mailed a ballot out to all voters on a checklist. And while that may sound simple, it’s a decidedly different animal; it’s a monumental task.”

A major challenge was making sure the correct ballots were sent to the right voters. The state has 275 different ballot styles, driven by the house member elections for the Vermont legislature. A single district might have a single ballot style in five or six towns, while a single town might be split up into three or four ballot styles.

In addition, the mailing had to include a return envelope with the correct clerk’s address on it for that voter, so that it could be returned to the right location to be counted.

## FROM BALLOTS TO BAD ACTORS

As Vermont officials faced the challenge related to getting the right ballots to and from the right voters in time for the election, the state also had to address existing and emerging cybersecurity threats — some of which could impact the elections.

Cybersecurity threats from foreign actors and others had been a focus of the election administration for the previous three or four years, and prior to the pandemic officials had been gearing up for that to be a big challenge in 2020. The state treated security as a parallel issue alongside the pandemic.

U.S. intelligence agencies had warned that bad actors would attempt to interfere in the election, possibly by disrupting voting processes. Vermont leaders were concerned about cyberattacks that could flood election websites with traffic and

shut down voting infrastructure or ransomware attacks and they knew they needed to examine their various election systems and identify vulnerabilities.

## ENSURING AN EFFICIENT AND SECURE ELECTION

To address the logistical challenges of switching to a mail-in election format and growing cybersecurity threats, Vermont relied on a technology solution from Civix that leverages the cloud.

Vermont is using the Civix Election Platform, which includes modules such as voter registration; a centralized voter registration repository that registers and stores statewide voter information; My Voter Portal, a public access portal for voter registration information; and Election Night Reporting, which allows state officials to accumulate, report and securely share election results in real time.

The state has been using some of the Civix components for years to track absentee ballot activity during elections, but the system was never more important to Vermont than in 2020. The Civix team was easy to work with and responsive, and quickly made any modifications and additions needed to the system.

The primary addition was creating an export file for the ballot mailing that had all the data needed. It came down to applying an appropriate six-digit code to each voter that indicated the correct return clerk address and ballot style. The code was placed everywhere it needed to be within mailings to ensure there were no mistakes.

For the 2020 election season, Civix moved all its elections management systems into its Security 360 environment

hosted in AWS GovCloud. This is complemented by full audit capability and continuous monitoring of event data from systems, environments and leading security tools. This helped ensure strong security for all election-related systems and data for the state.

The Civix system enabled Vermont to manage the election process efficiently and securely, including making sure the right ballots went to the correct individuals and clerks. It enabled quick changes, rapid response and the necessary scalability. As a result, the process was a resounding success.

## BUILDING CONFIDENCE FOR THE FUTURE

The Civix technology will play an important role in future elections in Vermont, especially given that the state is considering a bill that would make universal mail-in ballots a permanent feature of general elections.

Election officials will work with Civix to continue refining the system as they prepare for the next election cycle.

Vermont continues to receive high scores in evaluations of how well states run their elections. But the primary reason for deploying the technologies and enhancing processes is to ensure the democratic process of fair and secure elections continues, Senning says.

“Running elections effectively and efficiently is important because it is core to our democracy,” he says. “We need people to have confidence in the results.”

*This piece was developed and written by the Government Technology Content Studio, with information and input from Civix.*



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