

# GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY

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## geo info

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### Solution Summary

» **Synopsis:** A look at one county's usage of an elections mapping tool to improve the voting process.

» **Jurisdiction:** Putnam County, Ohio.

» **Technology:** GeoElections WebTools mapping software.

One of the Founding Fathers' greatest ideas was the notion of a state's rights. Each state can, for the most part, make and pass laws without impacting other states' affairs.

Voting practices vary wildly from state to state, but when considering that counties also mandate how an election takes place, voting styles can vary exponentially, even from one county to the next.

The most common disparity is how a citizen actually votes. The subject of intense scrutiny in recent elections, voters may choose their candidate on a punch card, an optical-scan ballot or an electronic voting machine.

Learning about candidates and ballot issues also varies by state and county. Most citizens are familiar with sample ballots, which are mailed to registered voters. This gives voters a comprehensive first look at the candidates and issues on which they can vote.

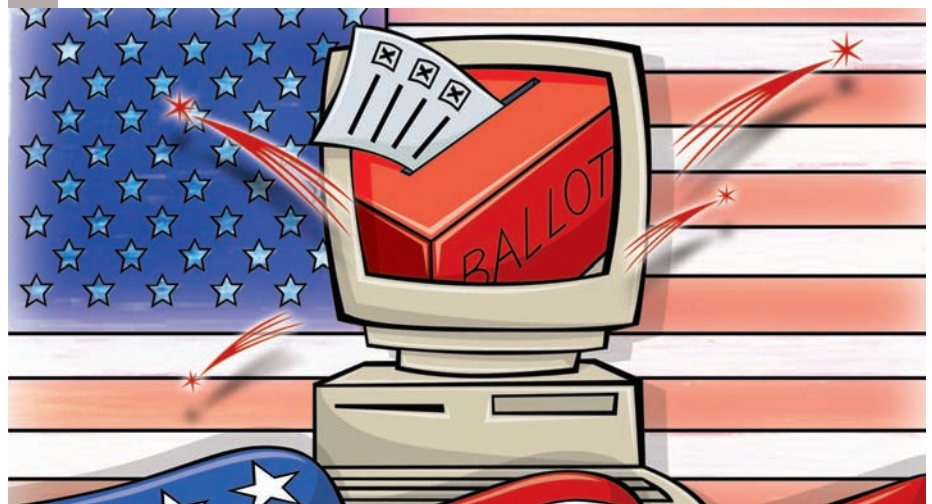
Some states, however, do not require county elections boards to distribute sample ballots. One such sample ballot-free county in Ohio has implemented a new online service to change the way citizens vote. Where once there were no sample ballots, such information is now available online.

### Electing GIS

Located in the northwestern corner of Ohio, Putnam County, home to approximately 35,000 residents, has made a big change in how elections are conducted.

# Voting Made Easier

*Putnam County, Ohio, moves election information online.*



In March 2006, the Putnam County Board of Elections implemented software called GeoElections WebTools, created by Florida-based International Computer Works (ICW). The software presents county governments with an innovative way to not only offer sample ballots online, but also a new way to manage all aspects of an election.

"We first learned about the mapping system at an election conference in

Columbus about four years ago," recalled Ginger Price, director of Putnam County's Board of Elections. "Our voter-registration vendor had partnered with ICW, and it was actually our voter-registration vendor who told me about it and did a demonstration of it. I was quite impressed."

The software is essentially an electronic package for managing elections. Every election year, officials face the

challenges of incorporating new streets, new voters and other variables into their voter registration system. For small counties like Putnam, the task can be overwhelming.

Development of the software began in 1995 as a project ICW took on for Wyoming. The original goal was to develop mapping software for county elections clerks to make edits to the U.S. Census Bureau files called topologically integrated geographic encoding and referencing (TIGER/Lines).

TIGER/Line files are rudimentary, electronic topological maps that were developed and used by the Census Bureau in 2000. The TIGER files, as they are commonly known, are not the visual maps we're accustomed to today. Instead, they are data sets that describe maps and require a GIS tool to be displayed.

Though the Census Bureau acknowledges on its Web site that TIGER files are created using outdated technology, they are, as ICW discovered, still useful for a base map on which to overlay modern GIS tools and mapping data.

"We start with the raw TIGER file, and sometimes we get 911 data, parcel maps or aerial photos, and we bring the TIGER [file] up to the level of exactness that is required for this type of application," said ICW CEO Ken Tozier. "We interoperate with voter registration systems. So from our GIS stuff, our TIGER editing tools and GeoElections, we export a file." If counties add a street to the map, they can transactionally export it, and it's imported into the voter-registration system, Tozier said, so if a voter who lives on that street comes in to register to vote, that request for registration can be processed.

Along with mapping geopolitical features, the software also gives Putnam County the ability to offer online sample ballots that are specific to an address. By visiting the county's Web site <<http://putnam.noacsc.org/county>>, residents can simply enter their address to pull up a map of their district. Once at the Web site, voters can find out pertinent information about the voting process.

When a resident enters an address, a map will appear with numerous animated symbols, each indicating specific information. A blue dot represents the user's address and a red star indicates the polling place. The user can also find information such as current elected officials, candidates for office, the sample ballot for each party, election calendars, precinct maps and voter-registration forms.

"We can just send [sample ballots] to the Internet, and it saves us a lot of time," Price said. "It eliminates us having to do the research, look things up, make copies, put things together, mail it out and all that. So it's a cost-savings there." Voters can even pull up their specific ballots and print them off. "It leaves us out of the picture, really, other than the fact we've spent all the time and energy putting this stuff on there prior to an election," Price said. "It saves us time when we're closer to an election."

#### Youth-Inspired Innovation

In addition to election management and mapping tools, GeoElections WebTools also includes a feature that, while not yet proven useful, is certainly creative: a built-in lesson plan for teachers to use in the classroom. Access to the lesson plan can be gained through the

## Survey Summary

After asking civics teachers throughout Florida the following questions and receiving positive responses, International Computer Works incorporated a lesson plan into the WebTools Web site that breaks down what elections are and how they work, and provides instructions on how to hold a mock election using printed sample ballots, among other things.

### Amount of time teachers spent on WebTools site.

Average time spent on site	23 min
Median time spent on site	20 min
Max. time spent on site	45 min
Min. time spent on site	5 min

### Will the lesson plan PDF file be useful as course material?

YES	68%
NO	16%
MAYBE	16%

"Maps and More" link on the county Web site, and by then clicking the "Just for Teachers!" button at the bottom of the page.

The lesson plan breaks down what elections are and how they work while incorporating interactivity with the Web site. The lesson plan also provides instructions on how to hold a mock election using printed sample ballots and includes worksheets, vocabulary words and computer lab activities.

ICW incorporated the lesson plan into the Web site after surveying civics teachers throughout Florida, asking them how useful a lesson plan would be — the results made a compelling case for it.

"It's the younger people who really like to go online and do everything that way," Price said. "There are some teachers out there who are interested in teaching the younger ones about voting. It's kind of exciting, I think, to go online and put in your mom and dad's address and actually see what they're going to be voting on." 🌐



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*"It all begins with the map."*

