

Maintenance of Voter Registration Lists: A Brief Introduction

A 2012 review of state voter lists found that approximately 24 million voter registrations in the United States are inaccurate or no longer valid.¹ In developing processes to identify and remove such ineligible voters, election officials seek to protect the rights of those who are eligible while minimizing opportunities for electoral fraud and reducing the administrative costs associated with generating election materials for individuals who cannot vote. This Short Subject provides an overview of the procedures election officials use to manage databases of registered voters and remove invalid registrations.

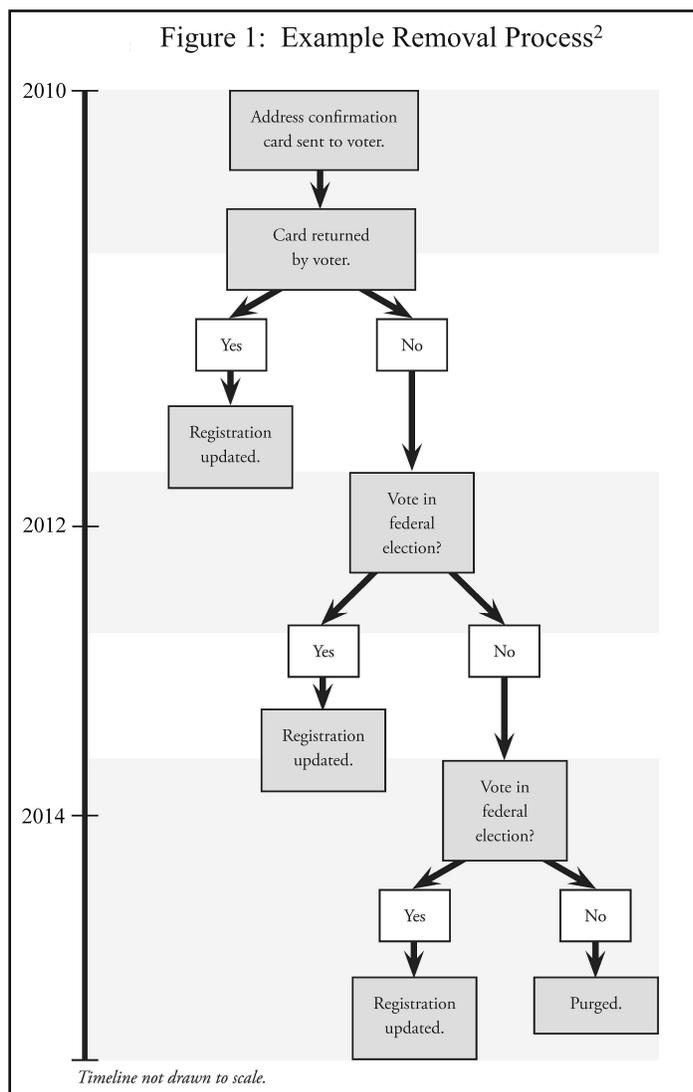
WHAT ARE VOTER REGISTRATION LISTS?

Most U.S. elective offices are tied to geographically-defined constituencies. Voters must reside in a given geographic region in order to vote in a particular election. When individuals register to vote, information about their identity, residence, and eligibility are entered into databases administered by counties and states. Elections officials are responsible for maintaining the accuracy of these lists. This is not an easy task as maintenance programs must make an effort to purge ineligible voters while avoiding the accidental removal of eligible voters.

CURRENT LAW

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) and Help America Vote Act (HAVA) outline federal requirements regarding the maintenance of voter lists and the procedures for removing individuals. State programs must be nondiscriminatory and maintenance cannot be conducted within 90 days prior to a federal election. In California, an individual voter may be purged because of death, mental incompetency, criminal conviction, or by request from the voter. Registration can also be cancelled when it appears that an individual has moved to a different county.

Figure 1, adapted from a Brennan Center report on purging, illustrates the process. While the events that



activate the address confirmation process vary, the most common triggers are undeliverable election-related mail and information in the USPS's National Change of Address database.

LIST MAINTENANCE PROCEDURES

Figure 2, reproduced from an Orange County Registrar of Voters' report on voter list maintenance, provides an example of the various reasons voter registrations are cancelled. The easiest, but least used, method of removal occurs when voters notify election officials

that they have moved or otherwise wish to cancel their registration with a particular county. More often, officials rely on returned mail from the post office or notifications from the DMV to identify individuals who may have moved and are no longer eligible.

Data matching is a tool that allows officials to link records from their voter list to other databases that may include information concerning eligibility. These external sources include state death or felony records, the USPS National Change of Address database and Address Change Service, and the Social Security Death Index. Some states share voter lists with each other to identify individuals who are registered in multiple states. One of the most talked-about data sources is the Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) database administered by the Department of Homeland Security, which some states hope to use to determine the citizenship status of individuals on their registration rolls.

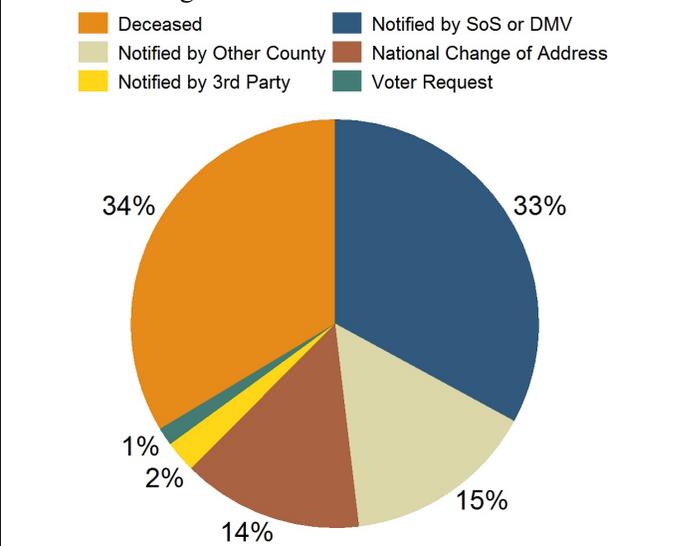
CONTROVERSIES ASSOCIATED WITH PURGING

Systematic list purges and other maintenance procedures help officials ensure that voter rolls are accurate and current. If it is true that 24 million registration records are inaccurate or no longer valid, current efforts might be insufficient. However, more aggressive attempts to clean voter lists may increase the likelihood that eligible individuals are also removed.

Voting rights activists argue that purges are often based on error-ridden databases and that matching procedures can incorrectly link multiple records. In cases where individuals are not given notice of cancellation or an opportunity to challenge their removal from voter lists, nontrivial portions of the electorate could be disenfranchised. An extreme example of this occurred during Florida's 2000 purge, where as many as 12,000 eligible voters were removed from registration lists.²

A recent controversy regarding voter list maintenance concerns attempts by states to remove individuals who are not U.S. citizens. Following a series of lawsuits among state governments, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Justice Department, several states were given permission to use immigration data from the SAVE system to identify ineligible individuals. Embedded in this debate is the question of whether the federal law prohibiting removal in the 90 days before an election applies in the

Figure 2: Most 2012 Removals in Orange County Due to Death or Change in Residence³



case of noncitizens. This issue is particularly contentious as attempts to identify noncitizens disproportionately affect the Latino community and purges undertaken within 90 days before an election may increase the likelihood that eligible voters are removed incorrectly from voter lists.⁴

CITATIONS

1. Pew Center on the States. (2012). Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient: Evidence that America's Voter Registration System Needs an Upgrade. http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2012/Pew_Upgrading_Voter_Registration.pdf
2. Perez, Myrna. (2008). Voter Purges. The Brennan Center for Justice. <http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/voter-purges>
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4. National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. (2012). Latino Voters at Risk: The Impact of Restrictive Voting and Registration Measures on the Nation's Fast Growing Electorate. <http://www.naleo.org/downloads/LatinoVotersatRisk.pdf>

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