

Voter Registration: Database Accuracy

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All U.S. states excluding North Dakota require voters to register before being permitted to vote. These records must be stored to enable processing of voters on Election Day. The Help American Vote Act of 2002, Sec. 303 requires states to maintain a “single, uniform, official, centralized, interactive computerized statewide voter registration list...of every legally registered voter in the State.” This memo’s purpose is to describe threats to the accuracy of voter registration lists and how to measure their accuracy.

Importance of Voter Registration List Accuracy

Voter registration lists serve many important purposes. In addition to ensuring everyone who votes is registered, voter registration lists are used to communicate polling place locations and other election information such as voter guides, to transmit absentee ballots, and to select persons eligible for jury duty. Political parties and campaigns use voter registration lists to send targeted campaign messages, for voter mobilization efforts, and to determine underlying partisanship of geographies during redistricting. Polling firms use voter registration lists to conduct registration-based sampling surveys. Academics use voter registration lists for various research projects, such as the effect of mobilization messages on voter turnout.

Election administrators, political parties, candidates, polling firms, and academics thus all prefer accurate voter registration files. Voter registration files’ validity is threatened on two accounts. First, there is deadwood, people who are registered at an address but are no longer eligible to vote for any reason including that they have moved, died, or have changed their eligibility status because of a felony conviction. Second, the information on the files themselves are – like any large-scale data entry project – prone to data entry errors on names, addresses, and any other information recorded on the files.

Deadwood introduces inefficiencies. Persons who move and re-register could vote more than once and ineligible persons could vote, though there are but a handful of examples of this illegal activity. Perhaps more important are increased budgetary costs resulting from mailing polling place change notices, voter guides, and permanent absentee ballots to people who cannot or should not receive them. Campaigns, political parties, and polling firms waste valuable resources contacting phantom people who cannot vote.

Data entry errors have the potential to introduce similar budgetary inefficiencies as deadwood when resources are used to contact registered voters who cannot be contacted because of errors in their name or address. Additionally, eligible registered voters are not efficiently served by their election administration system when attempts to contact them fail. Voters with registration record errors – through no fault of their own – may be subject to challenges to their voting eligibility because their identifying information does not match voter registration records. Provisional ballots provide a failsafe means of voting, but require further resources to validate a voter’s eligibility. When data are in

error, false positive or negative matches may result when election administrators match voter registration records against other databases, such as post office change of address requests, drivers license databases, and lists of felons or deceased persons. In a few cases, allegations of fraudulent voting have resulted from poor matching techniques.

Measuring Voter Registration List Accuracy

There are many techniques to determine the accuracy of any data, though two seem most applicable here: internal examination of these data and comparison of these data with external data.

Internally, these data can be checked to verify that records have valid entries. My work with and analysis of voter registration files reveals that records may have missing or clearly erroneous entries. For example, birthdates that indicate a voter traveled from the future to vote or incorrect addresses, such as those missing a zip code or apartment numbers. The error source may not be obvious: the information may be incorrect on a registration form or it may have been incorrectly keyed into the electronic database. Still, validation at the time of data entry, such as verifying birthdates and matching addresses against known correct lists provided by the post office, can flag for further inspection potentially incorrect data. (Data on voter registration files are so notoriously bad or incomplete that parties and campaigns often contract with marketing and credit firms to match their consumer databases against the voter registration files to fill in missing and clean erroneous data.)

Such validation provides a potential Democracy Index measure, the percentage of a jurisdiction's voter registration records with missing or clearly erroneous data.

Another method to determine the accuracy of voter registration lists is to compare them with external data. Theoretically, the number of registered voters should not exceed a jurisdiction's population of eligible citizens. Yet, a jurisdiction with a high percentage of registered eligible citizens may be indicative of either a well-functioning registration regime that registers all eligible voters or a dysfunctional system with a large number of ineligible persons (deadwood) on the registration files.

In reality, the eligible population is difficult to construct. The decennial census of the population is incomplete and numbers released mid-decade are *estimates* that are inevitably adjusted when a new census is conducted. Population estimates do not account well for temporary residents, such as students and military personnel. Mid-decade estimates of a jurisdiction's non-citizen population are unavailable, and may be constructed by projecting the last decennial census forward. Publicly released felon population reports do not locate felons within local jurisdictions nor do they track well their recidivism, migration, and death rates. (No reliable statistics on the small number of voter-ineligible mentally incompetent are available.)

If we could construct a reliable estimate of the percentage of citizens (not eligible) registered to vote, this measure may be compared to survey data. The Current Population Survey (CPS), a large monthly survey used to generate important economic indicators

such as state unemployment rates, asks a small number of voting-related questions in a November of an election year, including if a person is registered to vote. The CPS may be used to generate a state-level estimate of the percentage of citizens registered to vote. A caution is that survey estimates are prone to statistical and non-statistical survey measurement error.

These measures – estimates of the percentage of eligible citizens registered to vote and a comparison of this percentage with Current Population Survey estimates – are thus limited in their usefulness in the inclusion in the Democracy Index. They may be of greater use by election administrators to identify jurisdictions that may require further investigation into the accuracy of their registration rolls.

There are measures that are indirectly related to the accuracy of voter registration files: purges, transfers, and additions to the voter registration files.

Voter registration records are removed by a process known as purging. Purging may occur through procedures outlined in federal and state code related to the failure to participate in two federal elections and non-response or undeliverable mail sent by election administrators, or matching of voter registration lists against post office change of address requests, drivers license change of address, and felon and deceased lists (see provisions in The National Voter Registration Act §1973gg-6). (There is a high hurdle for removal: The Help America Vote Act Sec. 303(a)(2)(B)(ii) requires that a purging process must ensure only “voters not registered to vote or who are not eligible to vote are removed.”)

Voter registration records of registered voters who change residences may be moved with the voter through a process known as a transfer. Some states have automatic transfer procedures for registered voters who apply for a change of address through post office or drivers license agencies. Other states permit registered voters to transfer their registration to their new polling place on Election Day.

The percent of voter registration records purged and the percent of registration transfers among all registered voters may be negatively related to levels of registration deadwood and the number of provisional ballot requests. A caveat is that excessive purging or inappropriate automatic transfers may be lead to inaccuracies.

New voter registrations are additions to the registration lists. By federal law, mail-in applications whose registration is rejected must be sent a rejection notice (see provisions in The National Voter Registration Act §1973gg-6). The percent of rejected additions may provide clues to the accuracy of voter registration lists.

Finally, the number of provisional ballots cast and counted as a percentage of voters or the number of records on the voter registration file may serve as a measure of the accuracy of voter registration records. Provisional ballots are generally understood to be a failsafe option for a voter to cast a ballot when a person’s registration record erroneously does not appear on a registration file.

There are two cautions here. First, there are multiple reasons why a provisional ballot may be cast (depending on the jurisdiction): it may be an error in a registration records, the person may not be truly eligible to vote, and the provisional ballot may serve as a registration transfer. Secondly, there are conditions other an eligible voter's record not appearing on the voter registration file that lead to rejection of a provisional ballot, such as where the person voted (for some jurisdictions it is the jurisdiction as a whole and in others it is the correct precinct) and for some jurisdictions a provisional ballot may only be used a true refuge of last resort if an error in a registration record cannot be first resolved otherwise.

Summary

Accurate voter registration lists are relevant to the proper functioning of democratic elections in two ways:

- Customer Service: Voters are ensured that they receive important election information from election administrators and campaigns. Voters are not inadvertently subjected extraordinary voting procedures due to inaccurate registration records.
- Cost of Elections: Election administration and campaigning costs are reduced when election material is delivered only to correct persons on voter registration lists.

The following measures may be considered as indicators of voter registration list accuracy for use in the Democracy Index

- Percent of voter registration records with missing or clearly identifiable erroneous data. This is the most accurate measure of the internal accuracy of registration lists, but cannot address registration deadwood directly.
- Percent eligible citizen population with a voter registration record (and related: a comparison of this measure to a similar estimate available on the Current Population Survey). This measure of registration deadwood is limited in two ways. First, it simultaneously measures inaccuracy and how well the registration system is working, with both related to higher percentages. Secondly, population and survey data are not entirely accurate. These measures may have greater use for election administrators to identify potentially problematic jurisdictions.
- Percent voter registration records with purges, transfers, and additions. Higher levels of these measures may serve as indirect measures of accuracy, with the caveat that excessive purging or inappropriate automatic transfers may be lead to inaccuracies.
- Provisional ballots cast or counted. Since there are multiple reasons why provisional ballots are cast and counted, these measures cannot serve as a direct measure of voter registration accuracy, but may have use for election administrators to identify potentially problematic jurisdictions.