# ELECTION REFORM
Briefing

Statewide Voter Registration Databases

Qualified, motivated to participate, yet turned away from the polls. In November 2000, it happened to more than a million voters at polling places around the country.

The U.S. Census estimates that in 2000, 7.4 percent of 40 million registered voters did not vote because of registration problems. Accurate, up-to-date registration lists can help safeguard against disenfranchisement and serve as a guardian against fraud. In short, they can foster confidence in the election system.

Florida offers a well-documented example of how flawed maintenance of a registration system can disenfranchise voters. Before the 2000 presidential election, the state hired ChoicePoint, an out-of-state company, to identify ineligible voters in order to "purge" its registration list. Hundreds of qualified voters were erroneously removed from their county's registration lists and, as a result, they were denied the right to cast ballots.[1]

Removing eligible voters is one problem. Another is failing to remove ineligible voters or duplicate records, which some advocates have suggested can leave lists vulnerable to fraud and questioned election results.[2]
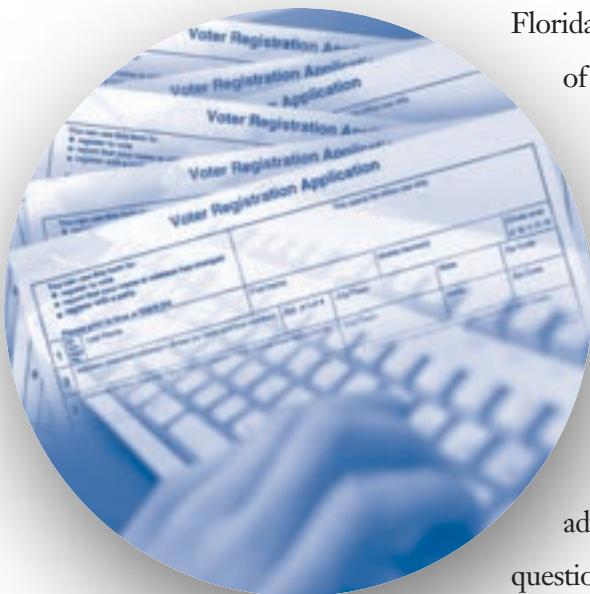
Managing voter registration records is no small challenge. In 1999 and 2000, states processed more than 46 million registrations, of which half were new applications. More than 13 million individuals were removed from registration lists and another 18 million stand to be removed before the 2002 election.[3] These numbers are due, in part, to the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), commonly known as the "motor voter" law. It made registration more accessible and set rules for how to maintain lists.

Statewide, as opposed to decentralized, voter registration systems can help. Each of the national task forces and commissions studying election reform in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential contest recommended that states develop such systems. Similarly, both of the leading election reform bills in Congress call for statewide registration systems. Proponents argue that such systems can:

- Increase accuracy. In a mobile society, states are positioned to track voters' moves within the state, to identify duplicate registrations, and to match their list against other state agency records.

- Help states comply with NVRA by facilitating the transmission of registrations completed at motor vehicle bureaus and other state agencies.

- Reduce the cost of list management by eliminating duplicative state and local activities, automating functions, and removing duplicates.

For this briefing, the second in a series to examine election reform issues, the Constitution Project and *electionline.org* surveyed election administrators nationwide about the states' role in voter registration. Specifically, the briefing surveys what statewide systems are in place, what role a state plays in managing voter records, and how states comply with the requirements of "motor voter." The resulting picture reveals a significant gap between current state practice and the system envisioned in congressional legislation.

The survey also found that only a few states have created a unified statewide system for managing voter information. Most states simply compile a list of local registration lists periodically. Under either system there may be holes: transferring documents from state agencies to localities can lead to lost registrations; tracking movement can be difficult; matching registration lists against state death records and felony conviction information is spotty; and delays in mail can leave qualified voters ineligible for elections.

Price Tags and Purge Fears

A statewide voter registration database is not a panacea. Establishing a database poses distinct challenges for a number of states – and concerns for those who fear taking control of voter lists out of local hands.

First, it is expensive. Establishing a statewide list, for most medium to large states, requires an initial investment of millions of dollars and yearly upkeep that can total millions more. Massachusetts paid $3.5 million to establish a voter registration database in 1995 and pays $3 million a year to maintain it. As a component of its election reform plan passed last year, Florida's legislature appropriated $2 million for the construction of its system.

Second, the transition from one system to another is a massive clerical task, requiring the unification of data languages from voting jurisdictions and copious data entry.

Third, some civil rights groups have expressed concerns that putting control of registration list "purges" into the hands of a more centralized authority could result in voter disenfranchisement by facilitating more sweeping purges like the one conducted in Florida. (See sidebar, page 4.)

New Rules Coming

If Congress requires statewide voter registration databases most states will need to modify – or establish – new registration systems to comply.

States vary widely in their ability to meet those requirements. While 10 states have unified statewide systems in which the localities and the state share the same database, 13 states have no registration database at all.

Proposed federal legislation includes money to offset those costs, but estimating actual costs is difficult. Montana's statewide database cost $100,000. Pennsylvania will spend $8.5 million for a new system. Once established, yearly maintenance can cost over $1 million for a mid-sized state. Massachusetts spends $3 million annually to maintain its system; Georgia $1.5 million.

Background

A Growing Demand

In most states, voter registration is handled not by states but by localities.[4] Even in states with statewide voter registration systems, legal authority over registration remains, with few exceptions, at the local level.

National Voter Registration Act

In 1993, Congress passed NVRA in order to expand the opportunities to register.[5] NVRA requires states to offer voters the opportunity to register or update their registration at motor vehicle and other designated state agencies that provide federal services. In 1999 and 2000, 38 percent of new registrations originated in motor vehicle offices.[6]

At the same time, the law directs states to "conduct a general program that makes a reasonable effort to remove the names of ineligible voters." It also recommends methods for keeping lists accurate and establishes safeguards to ensure that voters are not purged simply for not voting.[7]

The Federal Election Commission, in its 1999-2000 report on the impact of NVRA, notes that many states "reported problems in the timely transmittal of voter registration applications to their offices from motor vehicle and public assistance offices [and] difficulties in readily determining whether applications were new or merely duplicative or else changes in name and address."[8]

While a statewide registration database is not mandated by NVRA, there is broad agreement that it can help states comply with both the registration and list maintenance requirements of the law. The FEC has consistently recommended that states implement such systems to help track voters and automate certain changes such as address updates.

Recent State Activity

In the past year, several states acted either to institute new systems or to upgrade or otherwise modify their existing system. In January 2002, Pennsylvania Governor Mike Schweiker signed into law a measure to establish a statewide voter registration database to replace what one lawmaker called an "outdated" system of local computerized systems.[9]

Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury is urging the legislature in that cash-strapped state not to revoke a $2 million appropriation for the creation of a statewide voter registration database. Bradbury secured approval for the idea after reports that some voters received multiple ballots in the entirely vote-by-mail state – and investigations into reports of a handful of people voting twice as a result.[10]

Colorado appropriated upwards of $1 million to make its list Internet-accessible. Florida authorized $2 million for a new statewide system, although the U.S. Department of Justice has yet to pre-clear this provision as required by the Voting Rights Act. (See sidebar next page.)

> There is broad agreement that a statewide system can help states comply with the motor voter law.

A new Indiana law requires the Secretary of State to maintain a statewide list that is Internet-accessible at the state and local level. All jurisdictions are required to transmit files via the Internet by 2004.

Possible Congressional Mandates

In the coming months, members of Congress will have to decide between two approaches for mandating statewide voter registration databases. A House election reform bill (H.R. 3295), passed overwhelmingly

in December 2001, would require each state to implement a statewide registration system "networked" to each local jurisdiction and with the ability to share information across state lines.

In its committee report, the House Administration Committee notes: "databases which simply link existing local databases do not qualify or satisfy this requirement. The intent … is to establish one database that is identical and is the same program throughout the state [where] the state has full authority for maintenance and quality matters related to the database." As described later in this report, all but three states would have to modify their systems to meet this requirement.

> "Databases which simply link existing local databases do not qualify. The intent…is to establish one database…."
>
> **– U.S. House Administration Committee**

The leading Senate bill, S. 565, would require an "interactive, computerized statewide" registration list, accessible to each state and local election officials. The bill requires state or local election officials "to coordinate" the registration list with state agency records on death and felony status. It specifically allows list maintenance to be performed by either a state or a local election official. Although the term "interactive" is open to interpretation, more than half the states at a minimum would have to change their systems to meet this requirement.

Both the House and Senate bills would also require that states establish a unique identifier for each voter. Only 26 states currently employ a unique identifier for registration records. To help gauge the impact of federal legislation, current practices are detailed on pages 10-14.

Purging and Voter Rights

Registration list maintenance, a process that involves taking lists and comparing them against others to remove convicted felons, the recently moved, the dead, and others unable or unqualified to vote, rarely received notice around the country. That was until the 2000 presidential election, when the results of a purge by a private company of Florida's voter rolls caused havoc at the polls.

ChoicePoint, a Georgia company, was hired by the Secretary of State's office to ensure that ineligible voters, including convicted felons, were removed from qualified voter lists maintained in counties around the Sunshine State. The result – according to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and even representatives of ChoicePoint – was a purge that erroneously and disproportionately removed qualified African Americans from the rolls.[23]

One check prevented this purge list from disenfranchising even more voters: counties, which control their own registration lists, had the authority to decide whether they would take the state's recommended purges. Not all did.

Some experts argue that national efforts to create statewide voter registration databases would exacerbate problems like those that arose from Florida's 2000 purge.[24] In particular, the purging process has raised concerns. "We, the voting public, must have some control over who can purge names from the statewide databases," said Penda Hair of the Washington-based Advancement Project.[25]

The U.S. Department of Justice has also signaled concern. As required by the Voting Rights Act, it is reviewing Florida's proposed statewide voter registration database. The state must receive pre-clearance before it can put all of its approved election reforms in place. In a letter, the Justice Department questioned what standards of proof would be used before purging.[26]

Other states will need to address these same questions as they move to establish similar databases.

Key Findings

Four Categories, Fifty Variations

At one end of the spectrum, some states do not keep any voter records at all. At the other end, some states are primarily responsible for the registration list. Within this wide range of statewide systems, four categories emerge:

Unified database

Ten states. In states with unified databases, states and localities share the same database. Changes are made by local or state officials, or by both. Precinct rosters for elections are created from this common list. Such systems have a number of benefits. Since changes are made directly to the database, data do not need to be transmitted to another jurisdiction. Duplicates are easier to identify and remove. The state is positioned to coordinate the registration list with other records held by the state.

To date, only small and mid-sized states have instituted unified database systems, Michigan being the largest. Nine of these ten states have fewer than 3 million registered voters.[11] Although the database may be managed by the state election office, counties usually retain authority to change voter records.[12] In only one of these states – Alaska – does the state have primary legal authority for adding, deleting or editing voter records.

Accessible compilation database

Thirteen states. Under this system, the state list is a collection of the county lists. It is updated periodi-

cally – anywhere from once a day to once a year. The state list is accessible to the counties, which allows them to query the list and check for duplicate registrations.

For the most part, localities maintain their own distinct databases. There is a lag-time between when the locality changes its records and when those changes are reflected in the state list.

Seven states – Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Iowa, Montana, North Carolina and Texas – have enacted a hybrid of this system and the unified system. In these states, localities can choose to use the state database as their own.[13] The local list is maintained by the state and any changes are made directly into the statewide database. These hybrid systems can benefit smaller counties that may not have adequate

resources to implement their own computerized systems.

Compilation database

Fourteen states. The state periodically collects registration lists from the localities, but counties cannot query the statewide list for duplicates as they update their own voter records. Updated local lists may be sent to the state anywhere from weekly to once a year. Almost all of these states notify localities of duplicates and may also match the list against other records held by the state.

No statewide database

Thirteen states. Eight states in this category maintain no voter records at the state level, although they do require the counties to send statistics on voter registration for the purposes of complying with NVRA.

Summary of Findings

Depending on how Congress defines a federal requirement for a statewide database (and how specific it is), anywhere from 40 to all of the states would need to change their current systems to comply. The survey found that:

10	states maintain a unified statewide database of registered voters
13	states maintain a statewide database that counties can access and query
14	states simply compile the county lists into a database not accessible to local election offices
13	states do not maintain a database of registered voters
26	states assign voters a unique identifier
2	states give voters access to the list online
4	states compare the list with other states

Specific Findings

Tracking the Electorate

Within these broad categories of statewide systems, practices vary. In some cases, states without centralized voter registration systems have devised other means for ensuring uniform treatment of voters and streamlining the flow of voter records from the state to the localities and back again.

Control of voter records

In 47 states, only localities have the authority to add, delete, or edit records. The survey found that the existence of a statewide list did not alter this balance. Of the 10 states with unified systems, seven preserve local control over actual registration records. States may suggest or make changes to the local list, but localities are not required to take these suggestions.

Four states – Alaska, Kentucky, Michigan and South Carolina – have taken on additional responsibilities for list maintenance. In Alaska, the state takes exclusive responsibility for changes to registration records. In Kentucky, the state takes primary responsibility for removing records; localities for adding records. In South Carolina, the state can make some changes directly to the list; localities must be notified of changes. In Michigan, branch offices of the Secretary of State enter most registration information.

Proponents of local control cite several advantages. Localities, particularly small communities, can be better positioned than state agencies to determine if information is accurate.

Local control in some cases may serve as a check on the state by providing a second layer of review before changes are made to the records.

Alternatively, some state election officials would like more control over registration records. In interviews, state election directors reported uneven data management among localities and argued state government can bring more resources to records management and can ensure greater uniformity and integrity of data. States can also streamline data management. Currently many states send data to localities that enter them into their system and then send updates back to the state office, introducing the possibility for errors at each step.

Methods to keep lists accurate

Maintaining an accurate registration list means ensuring that new records are entered, existing records are updated, and ineligible voters are removed. Good list maintenance requires constant vigilance. New data are shared every day and come from many sources at both the state and local level.

The survey focused on two components of statewide list maintenance: first, as required by NVRA, the transmission of registrations from motor vehicle and other agencies; second, cross-referencing voter records with other records such as National Change of Address, death or felony records. The survey did not

investigate local procedures to update registration lists.

Transmission of registrations. Nationally, almost two-fifths of all registrations originated in motor vehicle offices last year. States consistently report difficulties in the transmission of these registrations. In most states, NVRA registrations and updates are sent directly to the local authority, bypassing the state election office. In 15 states, NVRA registrations go to the state election office, which refers them to the correct local election authority.

Linking the motor vehicle and other state agencies to the statewide voter registration database can eliminate many of these problems. In Michigan, the motor vehicle agencies are linked electronically to the state's Qualified Voter File; new registrations and updates submitted at these agencies are transmitted directly to the statewide database. This system reduces the chance of losing registrations in transmission. Several other states and counties are investigating making the transmission electronic.

Other states have implemented unique safeguards. West Virginia keeps a separate database of registration information received from state agencies and motor vehicle bureaus. In disputes over registration status, the state thus has an independent source for determining eligibility.

Matching lists. Keeping track of a highly mobile electorate is an ongoing challenge. States match registration records against other records in an effort to keep them accurate.

Such matches may have limited utility. A number of state officials expressed concern about the quality of the data supplied by secondary sources. A General Accounting Office survey found that "a statewide voter registration system could not ensure the accuracy of a state's voter registration lists because data may not have been received or entered correctly, or inaccurate data may have been entered…. In none of the local election jurisdictions that we visited, did officials say that they received comprehensive, timely information from all of the sources they used to update their registration list."[17]

Matching records can also be complicated. For example, many voters – including family members at the same address – share the same name, making their records appear as duplicates. Conversely, two records for the same person might have slight differences, such as middle initials or spelling variations, making them appear to refer to separate people. In Washington state, a seemingly simple match for felony conviction was complicated because the state prison provided names *and aliases* for the prison population.

Every state and locality will need to decide on an acceptable degree of accuracy before changing or deleting registration records. Safeguards such as notice to the voter before a purge, the maintenance of inactive lists and purge lists, backup paper records, and provisional voting may become even more important as states attempt to clean up their lists.

There are some arrangements in the states that obviate the need for a match. In Michigan, the drivers' license and the voter registration number are the same and the files are linked. Therefore, changes to the driver's license automatically update the voter's registration.

Finally, because in most states the localities are responsible for actual list maintenance, there is no guarantee that changes suggested by the state will be made. New York, for example, pays for the NCOA program and provides information about change of address to the counties. Not all counties, however, follow up on this information.

Access to the list

Public Access. Political parties and campaigns are primary beneficiaries of statewide registration databases. Almost every state that produces a statewide list also sells that list. Lists can also be purchased directly from localities, which may have more detailed information, such as voter history.

As federal law prohibits social security numbers from being released, states that use this information must mask it when making the list publicly available. Some states mask individual voter records to protect privacy. Montana, for example, allows victims of domestic violence to restrict the release of their registration information.

Voter Access. Two states – South Carolina and Virginia – provide voters themselves with Internet access to the state list.[18] Such access assists voters in determining their registration status and correct polling places. In all instances, an individual must enter some personally identifying information in order to access the record. Only individual records are available.

Polling place access. No state provides access to the full statewide list during elections. In a handful of states, election officials can call a local registrar to check registration status and redirect a voter to the correct polling place, if necessary. There are, however, significant limitations to this approach – namely phone lines and staffing at the central location may be inadequate to resolve these questions during elections.[19]

Cost

The cost of establishing a statewide registration database is difficult to determine, in part because each state has accounted for costs differently. In some states the registration system piggy-backs other state systems. Expenses may also be shared with the counties.

The survey revealed wildly disparate actual and estimated costs from $100,000 to establish a system

in Montana to $8.5 million to build a statewide registry in Pennsylvania. Clearly, cost depends on many factors. Among them:

- What kind of features does the list offer? The development of a unified system increases cost, as does providing Internet access to voters or linking the list to other state agency databases.

- How many localities participate?

- What systems are already in place? Do localities need to computerize registration systems, standardize formats and use common software? Some states purchased new hardware and software for localities. Others were able to develop a standard interface and link existing systems.

Michigan is the largest state to implement a unified statewide registration database. It invested $7.6 million to establish a "Qualified Voter File," including the installation of new computer systems in localities. The state spends $1.4 million annually to maintain the file.[20]

Some states that are currently using mainframe systems – such as Kentucky, South Carolina and Virginia – would like to upgrade to more functional PC-based systems. These states estimate upgrades would cost approximately $2 million.

States without databases

The survey looked at the challenges facing the 13 states without statewide registration databases

should they be required by federal law. For some states, the task of establishing a statewide database would be formidable. Most but not all of the localities in these states are now using computerized systems. The localities, however, do not use uniform software nor do they use standardized fields for storing registration records.

Wisconsin, for example, has 1,850 municipalities. Most of the municipalities that register voters are computerized; however, they use different software. Linking these localities would either require a massive technological upgrade or would require transferring registration responsibilities to the county level.[21]

Unique Identifiers and Privacy Concerns

Many states have established a unique numerical identifier for each individual voter. This code helps to prevent duplication of records within a database. It may also help to match registration records against other records to keep files up-to-date; however, this is only the case when both lists use the same identifier, such as a social security number.

In 26 states a unique identifier is assigned when a voter's name is added to the database. In some circumstances, the identifier will change if the voter moves between counties. In others, the identifier remains the same.

Seven states require the Social Security number (SSN) for voter registration and in turn use that as unique identifier. Only Michigan uses the driver's license number as the voter identification number.

The most controversial unique identifier is the SSN. The federal Privacy Act prohibits states from requiring voters to provide their SSN for registration unless they did so prior to 1975. Other states request
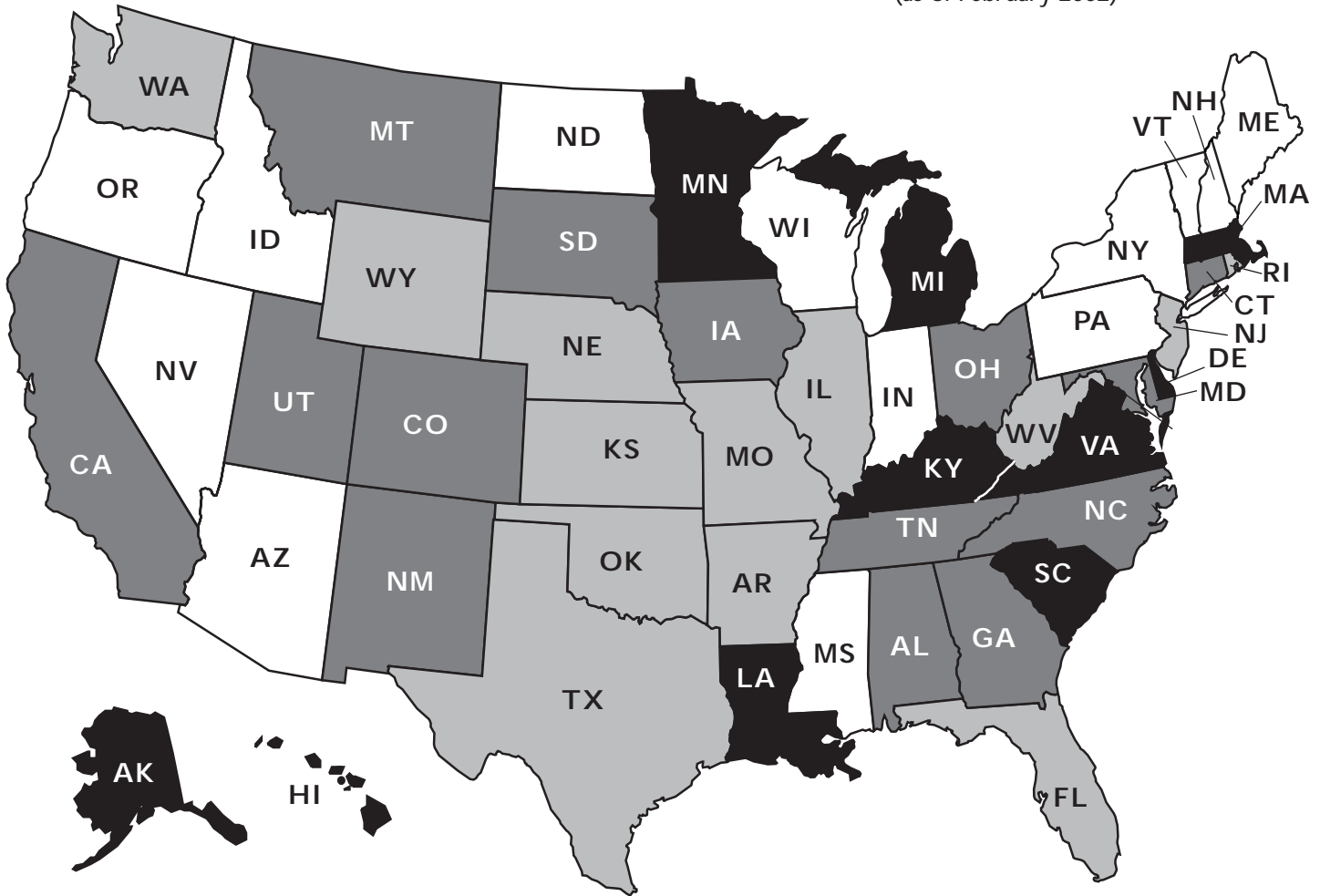
the full SSN, or the last four digits on registration applications. Since a voter is not required to supply this information, all of these states have created another unique identifier as a database management tool, but can use the SSN to match the list against others.

Proposals to amend the Privacy Act to allow states to require the full social SSN for voter registration records have been met with concern. Many argue that its use threatens privacy since many financial and other records are keyed to the SSN. Also, registration records are public documents. Use of the SSN number requires specific management practices to ensure that the number remains confidential.

Avoiding SSNs, however, does not necessarily satisfy privacy concerns. Some critics warn that, just like the SSN, certain unique identifiers – randomly generated or otherwise – could allow easy access to personal information about voters for purposes unrelated to voting. [22]

Statewide Voter Registration Databases

(as of February 2002)

WA **MT** **ND** **MN** **NH** **VT** **ME**
OR **ID** **SD** **WI** **MI** **NY** **MA**
WY **IA** **PA** **RI** **CT** **NJ**
NV **UT** **NE** **IL** **IN** **OH** **WV** **VA** **DE** **MD**
CA **CO** **KS** **MO** **KY** **NC**
AZ **OK** **AR** **TN** **SC**
NM **MS** **AL** **GA**
TX **LA** **FL**
AK **HI**

Unified database. State and the local governments share one database. Responsibility for making additions, deletions or changes may lie either with local or state election authorities or they may share responsibility.

Accessible compilation database. The statewide database is a compilation of local lists. All localities can access and query the entire list, distinguishing this type of system from the type identified below. Localities have sole authority for making additions, deletions or changes to the list. In some states, some of the localities use the state database to maintain their own voter records.

Compilation database. The statewide database is a compilation of local lists. In contrast to the system identified above, localities do not have access to the full statewide list. Localities have sole authority to make additions, deletions or changes to voter records.

No database. The state does not maintain a database of voter records. The state may pass along registration information to the local election authorities.

Please Note:

The **District of Columbia** is not included in this survey since it is a single jurisdiction.

The following states are actively engaged in establishing statewide registration databases, which could affect their classification.

- **Florida**
- **Illinois**
- **Indiana**
- **Maryland**
- **Oregon**
- **Pennsylvania**

Snapshot of the States

Unified Database

Alaska
The state has responsibility for maintaining voter records. Local governments do not have authority to change records; they have "read only" access to the state's mainframe database. Motor vehicle and designated agency applications are sent to the state election office. The state checks its list against death and felony records. The state uses the NCOA list to correct mailing addresses only when election mail is returned as undeliverable with a forwarding address. The list can be purchased. The state employs SSNs as a unique identifier if the voter agrees. The state prints precinct rosters for elections.

Delaware
Counties have authority for maintaining voter records in the state database. Motor vehicle additions and changes are entered directly into the database but must be verified by the county. The state list is matched against the NCOA list. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier if the voter agrees, otherwise a randomly-generated number is used. The statewide list is available for purchase without restriction.

Hawaii
A state database is managed by the Honolulu elections office; only counties have authority to add, delete or edit voter records. The list is matched against death records monthly. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier.

Kentucky
The state has primary responsibility for removing records. Motor vehicle and designated state agencies transmit registration information electronically to the database, followed by a hard copy sent to the county. The state matches the list against death, mental health, and felony records and conducts purges based on the matches. Counties have authority to make changes directly in specified conditions and are responsible for updating the list. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier. Only designated entities may purchase the state list. The state prints precinct rosters for elections.

Louisiana
Only the parishes have authority to add, edit or delete voter records. The state matches the list against death records, felony records and NCOA records. The list may be purchased without restrictions. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier if the voter agrees, otherwise the voter is not assigned an identifier.

Massachusetts
The state hosts an interactive central server; municipalities update records. The state matches the list against death records and forwards information to municipalities. The state also matches against NCOA. The state list is available for purchase by candidates for statewide offices. The state uses a randomly-generated unique identifier.

Michigan
The state hosts an interactive central server where Qualified Voter Files (QVF) are housed. The state matches the list against death records and the NCOA list; however, counties have final say over changes to the QVF. Motor vehicle and designated agencies make additions and updates to the file automatically. The list may be purchased without restriction. The state uses the driver's license or state-issued ID number as a unique identifier.

Minnesota
Counties have authority to add, change and delete records. Minnesota, which offers same-day registration, is exempt from NVRA. The state refers felony and death records and notifies counties of duplicate registrations. Lists are available for purchase for election and law enforcement purposes.

South Carolina
Each county is online, connected to the state's mainframe, which was put in place in 1968. Counties have authority to add, edit, and delete records; the state may purge some records and notify the counties of changes. The state matches the list against death and felony records and shares its list with other states. The state coordinates confirmation mailings to non-voters. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier. Voters can check their registration status and locate their polling place online. The state list is available for purchase by any registered South Carolina elector.

Virginia	All counties are online with the state's mainframe system. Only localities have the authority to add, delete and edit records. The state matches the statewide list against death, felony, and some motor vehicle records. The state matches the list against NCOA and other records to generate the list for confirmation notice mailings, which it coordinates. The state election office refers mail-in, motor vehicle, and designated agency applications to the localities. Virginia matches its lists against those of Maryland and the District of Columbia periodically. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier. Voters can check their registration status, locate their polling place, and check the status of an absentee ballot online. The state list may be purchased for political and other election purposes.

Accessible compilation database

Alabama	63 of 67 counties use the statewide database system as their own; remaining four will be online by April 2002. The list may be purchased without restrictions. The state uses a 2-digit county number followed by an 8-digit randomly-generated number as a unique identifier.
California	Most counties transmit data to the state regularly. 60 days before the election, all counties must submit updated lists; the state notifies the counties of duplicates. Motor vehicle and designated agency applications are sent to state, which transmits the data electronically to counties. The state offers free NCOA checks for counties if requested. The state refers death and felony records to counties. Database uses combination of county number and county's unique identifier. The state list may be purchased for political and other election purposes.
Colorado	Counties send updates to the state monthly – daily prior to an election. 19 counties use the state system as their own. State matches the list against death and felony records and notifies the counties of duplicates. The state matches its list against other state lists. The state employs SSNs as a unique identifier if the voter agrees; otherwise a randomly-generated number is used. The state list is available for sale.
Connecticut	143 of the 169 local jurisdictions are online on the statewide database; 15 additional towns will join by the end of 2002. The state employs a randomly-generated number as a unique identifier.
Georgia	The state matches its statewide list against NCOA records every other year and refers felon and death records to the counties. The state also matches its list against death records and has the authority to delete them from the list. The state forwards motor vehicle and designated agency applications to the localities. Georgia uses SSNs as unique identifiers. The state list is available for purchase.
Iowa	Two thirds of the counties contract with the state to enter the records into the state's database system. The state matches the state list against death and felony records and against the NCOA list. Motor vehicle and other agency registrations are transmitted electronically to the county by the state. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier if the voter agrees, otherwise a randomly-generated number is assigned.
Maryland	In 2001, Maryland passed a new law requiring the creation of a statewide database. The counties will retain authority over maintaining voter records. 19 of 24 counties are using the new system. State matches the list against NCOA and felony records. Maryland is developing a system to allow the state election office to transmit motor vehicle and designated agency registrations electronically with digitized signatures to local election officials. Maryland shares its list with other states. The new system will use a randomly-generated number as a unique identifier. Lists are available for purchase by registered Maryland voters; they cannot be used for commercial solicitation or other non-election uses.

Snapshot of the States

Montana Some of the 56 counties choose to use the state database to manage their own voter records. In the latter category, counties send the state updates periodically. The state matches the list against motor vehicle, death and felony records. The list may be purchased.

New Mexico Counties upload changes to the statewide database monthly; more frequently prior to elections. All counties must use a standardized format. 22 of the 33 counties participate in a new voluntary program that allows them to access and query the state file. The state coordinates statewide confirmation mailings based on NCOA data, refers death records to the counties, and notifies counties of duplicates. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier. The state list may be purchased for campaigns, elections, or government research purposes only.

North Carolina Counties make changes to the central database in real-time. The six counties that do not participate in the system upload data weekly in a standardized format. The state checks for duplicates and matches the list against death records and refers data to localities. The state uses a county code followed by a randomly-generated code as a unique identifier. The list is free to political parties and for sale to everyone else.

South Dakota The state database was established January 2002. Counties send daily updates to the state electronically. The state notifies the counties of duplicates. The state list is available for sale, but cannot be used for commercial purposes. The state creates a unique identifier with the first 2 digits of the county code and a random sequence.

Tennessee Counties regular upload changes to the statewide database. Counties use their own software, but the state provides a common interface with its mainframe. The state notifies counties of potential duplicates and matches the list against death records. The state uses SSNs as a unique identifier. The state list may be purchased for designated political purposes.

Utah Counties send updates to the state every two to four weeks. The state notifies counties of duplicates, matches the list against jury lists and cancelled motor vehicle licenses. The state matches the list against felony records but neither the state nor the county can purge felons, who are reinstated upon serving their sentence. The list is available for purchase.

Compilation database

Arkansas Counties send updates to the state weekly. The state checks for duplicates and refers hard copies of felony and death records to counties. The state uses a county number followed by an 8-digit number as a unique identifier. The state list is available for purchase without restrictions.

Florida Currently, the counties send updates to the state quarterly. The state checks for duplicates and matches the list against death, felony and mental health records. The list is available for purchase. Florida passed a new law in 2001 establishing a statewide database that will be accessible to counties. The Justice Department has yet to pre-clear this provision.

Illinois Currently, counties send updated lists in a standardized format to the state quarterly. The state notifies counties of duplicates. Only registered political committees may purchase the statewide list. The last four digits of a new registrant's SSN serve as a unique identifier. With funding, the state will complete work on a compilation database by late 2002 or early 2003. The new database will give counties, who will retain sole authority over voter records, full access. Counties will be required to use the statewide system.

Kansas	Counties send updates to the state quarterly. The state notifies the counties of duplicates and matches the list, annually, against the NCOA list. The state uses the last four digits of registrants' SSNs as a unique identifier. The list is available for purchase.
Missouri	Counties send updates to the state monthly or weekly. The state refers felony convictions and motor vehicle cancellations to the counties. The list may be purchased for designated purposes. The state uses the last four digits of the SSN as a unique identifier.
Nebraska	Counties send updates to the state weekly. The state matches the list against the NCOA list and death records and notifies counties of duplicates. The list may be purchased only for designated uses.
New Jersey	Counties send updates to the state monthly. The state notifies the counties of duplicates. All mail-in, motor vehicle and designated agency applications are sent to the state, which refers them to the local election authority. The state refers federal felony records to the counties.
Ohio	Counties are required to send updates in a standardized format to the state twice a year. The state notifies the county of potential duplicates. The statewide list is available for purchase without restrictions.
Oklahoma	The state database was established in 1990. All county lists are computerized; updates are electronically transmitted daily and reflected within 2 or 3 days. The state notifies counties of duplicates and refers motor vehicle and designated agency applications, as well as death records. Under state law, a registration record may only be changed based on information provided by the voter. The state conducts statewide mailings of confirmation notices. A unique identifier is created from a county code and a sequential number.
Rhode Island	Local election authorities send electronic updates to the state quarterly. There is no common data language between the localities. The state checks the statewide list against the NCOA list and notifies the local election authorities of duplicates. The state refers motor vehicle and designated agency applications and death and felony records. The list may be purchased.
Texas	Counties are required to send updates to the state on a weekly basis. 143 of the 254 counties are online with the statewide database, which they use as their own. These counties are charged a small fee for the service. The state notifies the counties of duplicates and matches the state list against motor vehicle, death and felony records. The list may be purchased only for designated uses.
Washington	Counties send updates to the state twice a year. Most counties are computerized, but do not use common software or a standardized format. The state notifies counties of duplicates and refers to them motor vehicle and designated agency applications. Washington matches the state list against felony, jury and motor vehicle records.
West Virginia	All 55 counties are computerized and use the same software with a standardized format. Counties send data to the state once a month. The state matches the list against the NCOA list and notifies counties of duplicates. The state forwards applications from the motor vehicles department and refers felony and death records to the counties. The state list may be purchased, but not for commercial use. The state combines elements of the name and birthdate to create a unique identifier.
Wyoming	Wyoming employs same-day registration and is therefore exempt from the requirements of NVRA. Counties are required to send updates to the state annually and 30 days before an election. The state notifies the counties of duplicates. A computer-generated number serves as the unique identifier. Only political entities may purchase the list.

Snapshot of the States

No database

Arizona
Counties send the state voter registration statistics only. Motor vehicle and designated agencies send registrations directly to the localities.

Idaho
The state employs same-day registration and is therefore exempt from the requirements of NVRA. 23 of the 44 counties use the same database software for maintaining voter records.

Indiana
Counties submit lists to the state; however, the state maintains no database. The state notifies the county of duplicates and conducts confirmation mailings to duplicate registrants.

Maine
Maine employs same-day registration. Motor vehicle and designated agencies send applications directly to the state election office, which then forwards the information to the appropriate local election authorities. Municipalities only send statistical information to the state.

Mississippi
Counties send lists to the state.

Nevada
The counties only send statistical information to the state.

New Hampshire
The state employs same-day registration and is therefore exempt from the requirements of NVRA. The state only collects statistical information from localities.

New York
State law requires the state to collect county lists and match them against the NCOA list annually. The state refers death, felony and motor vehicle records to the counties monthly.

North Dakota
North Dakota employs no system of voter registration and is therefore exempt from NVRA. The state maintains statistics on voter turnout.

Oregon
Counties only send statistical information to the state. Counties are computerized but do not use a common data language.

Pennsylvania
Under the current system, the state transmits registration applications received from state agencies to the counties; some are transmitted electronically. All counties have computerized lists, but they do not use standardized format. A new state law provides for an integrated voter registration database; the legislature has authorized $8.5 million for its development. Under the new system, counties will retain sole authority to update, edit, and delete records. They will also be able to access and query the state file. The new law requires the state to establish a unique identifier.

Vermont
Towns or cities send statistics on voter registrations to the state as requested. The state refers motor vehicle cancellations to the localities. Most of the 246 localities are computerized; approximately 140 use the same database software.

Wisconsin
Wisconsin employs same-day registration and is therefore exempt from the requirements of NVRA. Jurisdictions with fewer than 5,000 people are not required to register voters. Most of the 350 municipalities that do register voters are computerized, but there is no standardized format.

Methodology

Information for the map and chart was culled from interviews with state election directors, registration database administrators, and directors and from a review of state codes, web sites, and other public information. For Congressional information, firsthand sources – the bills themselves and committee reports – were used. Interviews were conducted during January and February 2002. Other background sources are detailed in the endnotes.

Resources

Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project, *Voting: What Is, What Could Be*, July 2001.

Demos, *An Overdue Reform: The Need for Statewide Computerized Voter Registration Systems*, January 2002.

Federal Election Commission, *The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act on Federal Elections 1999-2000*.

Federal Election Commission, *Developing a Statewide Voter Registration Database*, 1997.

Hansen, John Mark, "Statewide Voter Registration Systems," Task Force Reports to Accompany the Report of the National Commission on Election Reform, July 2001.

National Conference of State Legislatures, *Voting in America: Final Report of the NCSL Elections Task Force*, August 2001.

United States General Accounting Office, *Elections: Perspectives and Challenges Across the Nation*, October 2001 (GAO-02-3).

Information about specific states

Michigan's Qualified Voter File
http://www.sos.state.mi.us/election/qvf/index.html

Pennsylvania's proposed database
http://www.dos.state.pa.us/dept/sure/act61.html

Endnotes

[1] *Voting Irregularities In Florida During the 2000 Presidential Election*, United States Commission on Civil Rights 2001.

[2] A study of St. Louis, Mo.'s voter lists found some would-be "qualified" voters registered at addresses that were in fact vacant lots. "St. Louis Voter Fraud: A Primer," Office of Sen. Kit Bond, 2001; "City Checks to See if Vacant Lot Errors Mean Lost Revenue," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 6, 2001.

[3] "The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act on Federal Elections, 1999-2000," Federal Election Commission, 2000.

[4] North Dakota has no voter registration.

[5] 42 USC § 1973GG

[6] Federal Election Commission, 2000.

[7] NVRA requires states to send out a confirmation notice to voters they have reason to believe have either moved or become ineligible before purging them. Voters who don't respond to the notice are put on a list of inactive voters. If after two general federal elections the voter does not vote, his or her record may be removed. Many states and localities use NCOA records as the basis for sending out confirmation notices.

[8] Federal Election Commission, 2000.

[9] "Law Creates Statewide Voter Registry," *The Patriot News*, Feb. 1, 2002

[10] "Bradbury Hopes Lawmakers Will Fund Voter Registration System," *The Associated Press*, Feb. 4, 2002

[11] Michigan is the only exception, with more than 6 million registered voters.

[12] In Hawaii, a single city, Honolulu, and not the Secretary of State controls the statewide database in exchange for transaction fees from other counties.

[13] Localities may be charged for the service.

[14] A fee is charged for participation. Some localities may also participate directly.

[15] Virginia state law prohibits the state from sharing its list with another state. It does, however, receive lists from Maryland and DC, which it uses to update its own list.

[16] Missouri's Secretary of State attempted to determine whether fraudulent ballots were cast in the 2000 election. Records initially showed that 2,214 residents were registered to vote from vacant lots. Closer examination by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, however, revealed that the city's assessment records were out of date and erroneously listed the vast majority of these addresses as vacant lots.

[17] United States General Accounting Office, *Elections: Perspectives and Challenges Across the Nation*, Oct. 2001 (GAO-02-3) p. 97.

[18] Virginia's online system also allows voters using a government-issued password to check the status of their absentee ballots.

[19] See, for example, Advancement Project, "America's Modern Poll Tax: How Structural Disenfranchisement Erodes Democracy," Nov. 7, 2001. http://advancementproject.org

[20] Candice Miller, Secretary of State, *Michigan's Qualified Voter File System: Bringing New Efficiency to the Management of Voter Registration and Driver License Records*, Bureau of Elections (Feb. 1, 2001).

[21] Phone interview with Kevin Kennedy, Executive Director, Wisconsin State Elections Board, Jan. 23, 2002.

[22] The Privacy Foundation, "Tip Sheet: Public Records vs. Personal Privacy," May 18, 2001. http://privacyfoundation.org

[23] "Testimony Says Legal Florida Voters Blocked," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 1, 2001 United States Commission on Civil Rights, "Voting Irregularities During the 2000 Presidential Election," June 2001.

[24] "The Wrong Way to Fix the Vote," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2001.

[25] Conference, Washington, D.C., Jan. 17, 2002. Cosponsored by the Constitution Project, Advancement Project, Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project and the Century Foundation.

[26] The letter asked what sources the state would use to identify ineligible voters; what proof of identity those marked ineligible would need to prove eligibility; whether inactive voters who fail to respond to mailings will be purged immediately; and what procedures would be used to confirm the identity of an ineligible voter. U.S. Department of Justice, letter from Joseph Rich, Acting Chief, Voting Section, to the Honorable Robert A. Butterworth, Attorney General, State of Florida, Dec. 17, 2001.

electionline.org

The Constitution Project

electionline.org, administered by the Election Reform Information Project, is the nation's only nonpartisan, non-advocacy website providing up-to-the-minute news and analysis on election reform.

After the November 2000 election brought the shortcomings of the American electoral system to the public's attention, The Pew Charitable Trusts made a three-year grant to the University of Richmond to establish a clearinghouse for election reform information. Serving everyone with an interest in the issue—policymakers, officials, journalists, scholars, and concerned citizens—electionline.org provides a centralized source of data and information in the face of decentralized reform efforts.

electionline.org hosts a forum for learning about, discussing, and analyzing election reform issues. The Election Reform Information Project also commissions and conducts research on questions of interest to the election reform community and sponsors conferences where policymakers, journalists and other interested parties can gather to share ideas, successes and failures.

The Constitution Project, based at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute, in Washington, D.C., is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization that seeks consensus on controversial constitutional and legal issues through a unique combination of scholarship and activism. The Constitution Project's election reform initiative hosts the Forum on Election Reform. Meeting regularly, the Forum provides an opportunity for dialogue among election officials, voter advocates, legal experts and other interested organizations and individuals. In addition to coordinating the Forum, the Constitution Project's election reform initiative seeks to inform legislative efforts at the federal and state level through legal and policy research. To sustain momentum for reform, the initiative has and will continue to educate the public and policymakers on the critical needs of our electoral system. The election reform initiative is supported through generous grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

electionline.org
Your first stop for election reform information

1101 30th Street, NW
Suite 210
Washington, DC 20007
tel: 202-338-9860
fax: 202-338-1720
www.electionline.org

The Constitution Project

1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Suite 801
Washington, DC 20036
tel: 202-299-9540
fax: 202-299-9750
www.constitutionproject.org

Election Reform Information Project

A Project of the University of Richmond
supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts