II. Voter Registration

Voter registration

Task Force on the Federal Election System
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Summary of conclusions

1. Registration to vote is widespread but far from universal. In 1996, seventy-one percent of voting age citizens were registered to vote.

2. Voter registration is the mechanism of balance between two types of errors: the inclusion in the electorate of people who are not eligible to vote and the exclusion from the electorate of people who are. The trend since enactment of voter registration has been to scale back restrictions on access. Even so, the registration laws in the United States are among the most demanding in the democratic world.

3. Voter registration laws depress voter turnout by raising the cost of the exercise of the franchise. The National Voter Registration Act has mitigated many of the most restrictive voter registration practices. The most significant restriction that remains is the lengthy closing period, although it too has been capped, at 30 days.

4. The primary sufferers of voter registration are migrants and the less educated. Sixteen percent of the population changes residence each year, and the registrants among them must reregister at new addresses. The young, the poor, and renters are more likely to move and less likely to register. The less educated are less likely to be motivated to register and less likely to have the skills to manage it, giving rise to sizable differences in voter registration by education.

5. The National Voter Registration Act has complicated voter list management. In response, states have taken administrative steps to deter registration by non-citizens, to overcome the problems caused by delegation of voter registration responsibilities to driver's license bureaus, government service agencies, and third-party registrars, and to eliminate duplicate and lapsed registrations. The measures include the incorporation of separate check-offs for citizenship on voter registration applications, the adoption of statewide voter registration systems, and the use of numeric identifiers for voter registration.

Registration as a voter is the first step toward the exercise of the franchise, in every state except North Dakota. Participation in that first step is broad, but far from universal. In November 1996, 71.0 percent of American citizens of voting age reported that they were currently registered to vote. Of registrants, 82.3 percent reported that they had voted in the 1996 presidential elections.[1] Together with voter turnout, rates of reported voter registration have fallen steadily since 1968.

[1] Survey self-reports of voter registration exhibit the same sawtooth pattern as voter turnout: higher in presidential election years and lower in midterm election years. In 1998, 67.1 percent of the voting age citizen population reported registration. Sixty-eight percent of the registrants reported voting.

Voter registration and voter turnout vary markedly across states. Registration tops 80 percent in Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, all of which have Election Day registration.[2] Less than 65 percent of voting age citizens are registered to vote in Hawaii and Arkansas.[3]

A brief history

Voter registration has a long history in the United States. Massachusetts in 1800 was the first state to require registration of voters, but the idea did not spread very far or very fast. Until 1860, voter registration was found almost exclusively in New England. Starting after the Civil War, and accelerating after the end of Reconstruction in 1877, voter registration spread rapidly. Between 1876 and 1912, nearly half of the northern states wrote registration requirements into their constitutions, and many more adopted it by statute. By 1929, only three states, Arkansas, Indiana, and Texas, lacked any form of voter registration, although eleven others limited its application to cities above a specified size.[4]

In the North and West, voter registration was typically a "progressive" measure, promoted as an antidote to the corrupt practices of urban political machines. It was an important piece of a larger set of progressive governmental and electoral reforms, which also included the civil service, direct primaries, and the secret ballot (often called the "Australian" ballot, after the country of origin). In the South, registration became part of the far-reaching system of electoral Jim Crow that included the white primary, literacy tests, and the poll tax.

The effect of the set of electoral reforms on voter turnout in the United States was dramatic. In the South, where registration was one of the milder restrictions on the exercise of the franchise, voter participation dropped from 64.2 percent of the adult male population in 1888 to 29.0 percent in 1904.[5] Outside the South, where registration was the major new burden on voters, turnout fell from

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[2] North Dakota respondents report 91.0 percent registration, even though North Dakota does not have voter registration. Either 9 percent do not realize this, or the question is confusing in a state with no voter registration.

[3] The rates of registration and turnout reported in the text come from the Current Population Survey 1996 Voter Supplement. Based on people's self-reports to Census interviewers, the CPS estimates of both registration and turnout are probably inflated slightly. Tables at the end of this report also calculate registration and turnout from official statistics reported to the FEC by the states. For reasons discussed later, rates of registration calculated from official statistics are probably significantly inflated. Turnout rates calculated from official statistics, on the other hand, are probably deflated. First, voter turnout is usually calculated on the denominator of voting age population, which includes non-citizens who are not eligible to vote. Second, voter turnout is usually calculated on the basis of votes cast for president, but not everybody who turns out at the polls in fact casts a vote in the presidential contest. In the state estimates reported in the table, the numerator is the larger of the vote for president, the vote for senator, or the vote for U.S. representative. In 1996, more votes were cast for senator than for president in eight states (Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Montana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and South Dakota); more votes were cast in total for U.S. representative than for president in one state, Missouri.

[4] Application of voter registration only to urban areas was common in the earliest legislation. The first registration law in Pennsylvania, for example, applied only to Philadelphia. In 1929, the last states that limited registration to urban areas were predominantly agricultural and midwestern: Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

[5] Turnout in the South was even more dismal in some of the individual states. Between 1920 and 1944, on average, less than 25 percent of the voting age population participated in presidential elections in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia. South Carolina's voter turnout was the lowest in the nation: just under 10 percent. During this period, of course, the greatest part of the African American population was denied the franchise, but turnout calculated on the base of the voting age white population was little better.

86.2 percent in 1888 to 67.7 percent in 1912. Nationwide, voter participation in presidential elections fell from its historic peak of 82.6 percent in 1876 to its historic low of 48.9 percent in 1924.

The effect of the electoral reforms on the incidence of vote fraud is the subject of a lively debate among historians and political scientists. One side argues that voter registration lowered voter turnout in part by excluding ineligibles and phantoms from illegal participation in elections. The other side counters that voter registration lowered voter turnout by deterring the legitimate participation of voters deemed by the middle-class progressive reformers of the era to be ignorant and manipulable. Nobody has a very good method for assessing the extent of vote fraud either before or after the reforms, but the cleverest inquiry into the issue suggests that both sides may be right. Using stories from upstate New York newspapers from 1870 to 1916, Gary W. Cox and J. Morgan Kousser found that the electoral reforms—in particular, they say, the Australian ballot—changed the mode of electoral corruption but not the fact. Before the reforms, they argue, parties engaged in "inflationary" corruption—they bought votes and recycled voters. After the reforms, however, parties pursued "deflationary" corruption—they either paid opponents to stay home or they kept opponents away from the polls. Voter registration was just as much a weapon in partisan electoral conflict as vote fraud.

Throughout the last century, voter registration laws have been mechanism of balance between two kinds of errors: the inclusion in the electorate of people who are not eligible to vote and the exclusion from the electorate of people who are. The earliest registration laws were so restrictive that they seem decidedly draconian viewed from 2001. In 1929, 18 states still required voters to reregister periodically, typically every one, two, or four years. In 1962, 38 states required at least one year of residency in the state as a condition of voter registration. In 1972, 17 states purged voters from the registration rolls if they had not voted within the last two years, and 23 others purged voters if they had not voted within a period ranging from two and one half to eight years. Finally, in 1960, 23 states with 40 percent of the eligible electorate required voters to register more than 30 days before the election, and no states had yet adopted Election Day registration.

Through time, the trend has been to scale back restrictions on access to voter registration. By 1972, periodic registration had nearly disappeared—only two states, Arizona and South Carolina, still mandated it, every ten years—and now every state makes registration permanent. The Voting Rights Act Amendments (VRAA) of 1970 and a succeeding decision of the Supreme Court effectively mandated a maximum thirty-day residency requirement for participation in federal elections in the fifty states. The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, better known as "Motor Voter," prevented states from purging voters from the rolls for not voting. The 1970 VRAA mandated a registration closing date no more than 30 days before Election Day, and the 1993 NVRA prompted three more states to adopt same-day voter registration (to gain exemption from the provisions of the Act), bringing the total to six: Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Access to voter registration is now more liberal than it has been since registration's wide-scale adoption a century or more ago.

Still, the registration laws in force throughout the United States are among the world's most demanding. In the United States, the burdens of voter registration fall primarily on the voters themselves. In most of the rest of the democratic world, the government takes responsibility for the creation of voter rolls. In the United Kingdom, registration officers either send a form to every residential address or conduct a door-to-door canvass. In most of continental Europe, governments require citizens to register their addresses, from which information they generate voter rolls. The restrictiveness of American voter registration is one reason why voter turnout in the United States is near the bottom of the developed world. The turnout rate for registrants in the United States, about 80 percent, is just about average for the world's established democracies. The turnout rate for eligible citizens, about 55 percent, is well below.

The effect of voter registration on voter turnout

Social scientists who have examined the relationship between registration requirements and voter participation agree that registration depresses turnout. Registration depresses turnout because it imposes a cost on voters. Before the NVRA expanded the availability of voter registration sites, registration required a special trip to the registrar's office, often during business hours only. It often required the completion of a complicated form and the presentation of proof of identity and residence. Finally, it had to be—and still must be—accomplished well before Election Day. Writing in 1978, the authors of the pioneering study of the effects of voter registration, Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger, put it this way: "Registration is often more difficult than voting. It may require a longer journey, at a less convenient hour, to complete a more complicated procedure—and at a time when interest in the [election] campaign is far from its peak."

Rosenstone and Wolfinger examined a variety of voter registration requirements for their effect on voter participation, employing survey data gathered by the Current Population Survey in its 1972 Voter Supplement. They found that regular registrar's office hours, evening and Saturday registrar's office hours, and the availability of absentee registration each contributed a small but discernable amount—2 to 5 percentage points—to the likelihood of voter turnout. Consistent with findings from other studies, they found that the single most important impact on voter turnout was the length of the closing period. By their estimates, residents of states with 30-day closing periods were between 3 and 9 percentage points less likely to vote than people who could register on Election Day. Taking all the registration requirements in effect in 1972 together, they estimated that voter turnout nationwide was about 9 percentage points lower than it could have been had all the states adopted the most generous voter registration provisions. Registration laws, they found, were especially burdensome for voters with less education, who had less interest in participation and smaller stores of skills and knowledge with which to negotiate the bureaucratic task of registration.

Since 1972, the legal structure of voter registration has changed markedly, particularly owing to the implementation of the National Voter Registration Act. NVRA broadened access to voter registration by

1. Requiring states to make voter registration applications available in driver's license bureaus and social service agencies;
2. Requiring states to design procedures for registration by mail, either by allowing application by mail or by allowing requests for applications by mail;

which, taken together, essentially solve the problems of availability—of office hours, of office locations, and of absentee registration—that Rosenstone and Wolfinger found to discourage voter turnout. Indeed, of the 41.5 million applications for voter registration reported by the 43 states affected by the provisions of NVRA in 1995–96, 33.1 percent originated in motor vehicle offices and 29.7 arrived by mail.[6] Voter registration has risen by about 4 percentage points because of greater access under NVRA, according to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

NVRA left the patchwork of state closing periods largely unchanged. It caused three additional states to adopt same-day voter registration, bringing to seven the total number of states which do not require voters to take action before Election Day. The six states with Election Day registration—and the one state, North Dakota, without voter registration—are smaller, more rural northern tier states with histories of clean elections. Residents of the seven states are 5.6 percent of the voting age citizen population.

Voter registration closing period, by state

State	Days before election	State	Days before election
Alabama	10	Nebraska	28
Alaska	30	Nevada	31
Arizona	29	New Hampshire	0
Arkansas	30	New Jersey	29
California	15	New Mexico	28
Colorado	29	New York	25
Connecticut	14	North Carolina	25
Delaware	20	North Dakota	No registration
D.C.	30	Ohio	30
Florida	29	Oklahoma	25
Georgia	29	Oregon	21
Hawaii	30	Pennsylvania	30
Idaho	0	Rhode Island	30
Illinois	28	South Carolina	30
Indiana	29	South Dakota	15
Iowa	10	Tennessee	30
Kansas	15	Texas	30
Kentucky	28	Utah	20
Louisiana	30	Vermont	10
Maine	0	Virginia	29
Maryland	29	Washington	30

[6] The 1998 Current Population Survey found that 35.6 percent of new registrants said they had registered at motor vehicle agencies. Another 10.0 percent registered by mail. About 16 percent registered at an official registrar's office.

Massachusetts	20	West Virginia	30
Michigan	30	Wisconsin	0
Minnesota	0	Wyoming	0
Mississippi	30		
Missouri	28	U.S. Average	22.1
Montana	30	U.S. Median	28

Source: Democratic National Committee

In the 43 other states, closing periods range from 10 days in Alabama, Iowa, and Vermont to 31 days in Nevada. Thirty states with 63.3 percent of the eligible population have closing periods of four weeks or more. On the other end of the scale, seven states with 15.7 percent of the eligible population require closing periods of 15 days or less. On the whole, closing periods have shortened over the last 25 years, but not dramatically. Twenty-three states have reduced their registration closing periods, most notably by 21 days in Arizona and Georgia and by 15 days, just this year, in California.[7] But in the same period, ten states have moved up the date by which citizens must register to vote.

Voter registration and residential mobility

By its nature, because voter registration is linked to residence, it has its greatest impact upon people who have moved. In the United States, that is a substantial number. Between March 1999 and March 2000, 16.1 percent of the population over the age of 1, or 43.4 million people, changed residences.

Before NVRA, in most states, the voting age citizens among the migrants would have needed to reregister in order to vote in their new jurisdictions of residence. (Under the 1970 Voting Rights Act Amendments, movers could still vote by absentee ballot at former addresses.) NVRA required states to devise "fail-safe" procedures to accommodate registrants who had moved within county but who had not yet reregistered at new addresses. States were required to issue a full ballot, whether regular or provisional, to registrants who had moved within the same precinct. For registrants who had moved within county but to new precincts, states had to allow voting either in new precincts or in old precincts or give voters the option of voting in some combination of old precinct, new precinct, or central location. For the 2000 election, 15 states allowed voting only at the old polling place, 16 allowed voting at the new polling place, and 10 gave voters options for where to vote.[8] NVRA's fail-safe provisions cover the majority of movers. In 1999–2000, 56.2 percent of all migrants, or 24.4 million people, relocated to new homes within the same county.

The National Voter Registration Act did nothing, however, to back up registrants who move out of county or out of state. The eligible voters among the 20.3 percent of migrants who move into a new county in the same state (8.8 million people) and the 19.4 percent who move out of state (8.4 million people) must still reregister before they can vote.[9] Because of the availability of registration

[7] California's county registrars opposed the shortening of the closing period on the grounds that 15 days left too little time to enter new registrants on the rolls and to generate accurate registrations lists for Election Day. As one registrar told us, to shorten the closing period will necessarily be to make greater use of provisional ballots.
[8] The remaining states are the six exempted from NVRA—Idaho, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—two states that did not respond to the FEC survey, and Oregon, which votes by mail.
[9] The remainder is 4 percent of migrants who move abroad.

in government service agencies and registration by mail, reregistration is easier since NVRA than it was before. But it is still a step that citizens must take in order to exercise the franchise.

The difficulty of reregistration is distinctly more acute for citizens who relocate to new counties and new states within the registration closing period. The median state has a closing period of 28 days, and 63.3 percent of electorate cannot register for at least the 28 days before the election. Because Election Day must be no earlier than November 2 and no later than November 8, the people who are blocked from reregistration by the closing period are predominantly people who relocate in October, when 10.4 percent of all moves occur. In 1993, the year from which these data derive, 485,000 citizens of voting age moved to a new county during October, and 535,000 eligible citizens moved to a new state during October. Therefore, a reasonable estimate of the number of eligible voters who are not accommodated by fail-safe and who cannot reregister at their new address because of moves during the closing period is a little over one million, or about 0.6 percent of the voting age citizen population.[10]

Everybody who moves into a new county or into a new state may vote in person or by absentee at her former address, as specified under the 1970 Voting Rights Act Amendments. The logistical difficulties of obtaining an absentee ballot from afar during the chaos of a move probably mean that relatively few migrants who are blocked from registration by the closing period actually vote. Two other legal provisions go further in accommodating citizens caught in this predicament. The first is Election Day registration, which removes the impediment of the closing period for both inter-county and inter-state migrants. The second, which helps in-state migrants alone, is an expanded use of provisional ballots. Under Washington law, registrants who move to a new county within Washington may cast a provisional ballot. Election officials send the provisionals to the jurisidictions of most recent registration, which accept votes cast for offices in common.

The characteristics of movers and registrants

The complications of voter registration affect people differently. As we will see, some of the demographic differences between people who are registered and people who are not trace to differences in interest in the electoral process and differences in the possession of the skills necessary to complete the task. But some of the differences trace as well to the characteristics of people who move and people who stay put.

First, residential mobility is greatest for young adults. One third of people in their twenties, but only one twentieth of people in and beyond their sixties, move in a year. Voter registration, accordingly, affects the young more than the old. Barely more than half of young adults were registered to vote in 1996, versus nearly 80 percent of adults over 65 years of age. Residential mobility is one of the most important factors in the low rates of voter participation among young adults.

Percent of people who moved within the year,
by age, race, and home ownership

	Percent

[10] Another population that is ensnared by registration closing periods is members of the armed forces who are discharged within the closing period. We have been unable to find data on either the number of annual discharges from active duty or their distribution through the year. But the number of people affected is certainly much smaller. In 1998, only about 1.4 million Americans were on active duty in the armed forces, 1.1 million of whom were posted stateside.

	movers
Age	
20-24	35.2
25-29	32.4
30-44	22.0
45-54	9.3
55-64	7.0
65-84	4.3
85 +	4.7
Race and ethnicity	
White	15.3
Black	19.2
Hispanic	21.0
Ownership	
Homeowners	9.1
Renters	32.5

Source: Current Population Survey, 2000

Second, people who rent their homes are vastly more likely to move than people who own their homes. Nearly a third of renters move in a year, versus only a tenth of owners. The greater mobility of renters makes a dramatic difference in voter registration. Nearly three quarters of people who live in owner-occupied housing, but not even half of people who live in rental housing, are registered to vote.

Voter registration, by age, race, education, and home ownership

	Percent registrants of voting age citizen population
Age	
18 – 24	53.5
25 – 44	68.1
45 – 64	77.8
65 +	79.5
Race and ethnicity	
White	72.0
Black	66.4
Hispanic	58.6
	Percent registrants of voting age population
Education	
Less than 5 years	28.4
5 to 8 years	44.2
9 to 12 years	47.9
High school graduate	62.2
Some college	72.9
Bachelor's degree	78.9
Advanced degree	83.7
Home ownership	
Reside in owner-occupied unit	73.0
Reside in rental unit	49.2

Source: Current Population Survey Voter Supplement, 1996

Not every demographic difference in voter registration traces to mobility, however. People with advanced degrees are 20 percentage points more likely than people educated through high school and 50 percentage points more likely than people educated into grammar school to be registered to vote. To be sure, the better educated enjoy greater residential stability than the less educated. But the better educated are also better equipped to take on the task of voter registration. After years in a classroom, they are more likely to know that they must register to vote. They are more likely to know how, when, and where to register. They are more likely to be interested in politics, more likely to feel effective in politics, and more likely to be part of groups that encourage them to take part in the electoral process. In short, they are more likely to be motivated to register and more likely to have the skills to manage it.

Because of the mix of circumstances, motivation, and skills that go into decisions to register to vote, voter registration is skewed modestly toward the more advantaged parts of American society, overrepresenting older, wealthier, better educated, residentially stable whites and underrepresenting younger, poorer, less educated, residentially mobile blacks and Latinos.

Administration of voter registration

The successes of the National Voter Registration Act in easing access to voter registration have come at a definite cost: by their own testimony, NVRA has complicated the professional lives of elections officers. Some worry that NVRA has made it easier both for people who are eligible to vote to register legally and for people who are ineligible to vote to register illegally, increasing the risk of election fraud. More voice the concern that NVRA has put a large part of administration of voter registration in the hands of agencies that are not responsible for conducting it conscientiously and correctly. Finally, many contend that NVRA has complicated voter list management, making it more difficult to eliminate duplicates and to delete the records of people who have left the jurisdiction by migration or by death.

During the congressional debate over NVRA, critics charged that the Act increased the probability of election fraud, and especially the probability of illegal registration and voting by people who are not citizens of the United States. None of the election administrators with whom the Commission has spoken seems preoccupied with non-citizen registrants, but they freely admit the likelihood that non-citizens appear on registration lists, albeit, in their judgment, in small numbers. Voter registration has been made easier just as the immigrant population has soared. The foreign-born population of the United States rose from 6.2 percent in 1980 to 7.9 percent in 1990 to 10.4 percent in 2000, the largest proportion since 1930. The foreign-born make up 24.9 percent of the population of California and 19.6 percent of the population of New York.

To require proof of citizenship for voter registration would raise objections from civil libertarians and advocates for ethnic communities, especially the fastest-growing, Latin American and Asian. It would also be notably burdensome for the vast majority of Americans who are either native or naturalized citizens. None of the most common forms of identification, such as driver's licenses and Social Security cards, are restricted to U.S. citizens. Definite proof of citizenship requires certified birth certificate or naturalization papers, neither of which is necessarily close at the registrant's hand. In fact, given the relative difficulty of access, proof of citizenship would probably be more easily accomplished by naturalized citizens than by native-born citizens, many of whom would need to obtain a certified birth certificate from the county of their nativity.

Twelve states have recently taken less burdensome steps to deter registration by non-citizens. In every state, applications for voter registration include the applicant's signed affirmation of qualification for voter registration under the laws of the state. The attestation of a false affidavit is a felony and a deportable offense. But the twelve states go further, requiring applicants to check a separate box to indicate whether they are a citizen of the United States or not.[11] (Most warn applicants to proceed no further if they checked "No.") Significantly, the twelve states that require a citizenship check-off include the six with the largest percentages of non-citizens in the nation.[12]

States with citizenship check-off for voter registration

State	Percent non-citizens of voting age population, 1996	Percent foreign born, 1997
Alabama	1.4	1.3
Arizona	12.9	14.4
California	20.9	24.9
Connecticut	6.1	7.5
Florida	10.2	16.4

[11] Nine of the twelve, however, also accept the national mail-in voter registration form, available from the Federal Election Commission. The national form does not include a check-off for citizenship status.

[12] Four of the states that have a permanent bar on felons' voting rights include such a check-off on voter registration applications: Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Maryland	4.8	8.6
Michigan	3.0	4.5
New York	13.2	19.6
Texas	10.3	11.3
Utah	4.5	5.9
Vermont	1.6	3.0
Virginia	3.4	6.6

Source: Offices of the Secretary of State, individual states; U. S Census Bureau, "Profile of the foreign-born population in the United States, 1997," Current Population Report Special Studies, Series P23-195; 1996 Current Population Survey Voter Supplement

The delegation of voter registration responsibilities to agencies other than registrars has been a more active concern among election administrators. They cite an array of problems. Motor vehicle bureaus and public service agencies fail to forward applications in time for them to be entered onto the public registry.[13] Third-party registrars—political parties, advocacy groups, and citizens' groups that conduct registration drives—delay to send applications or fail to send them at all, sometimes inadvertently and sometimes deliberately. Agencies and third-party registrars take applications that are incomplete or inadmissible: applications with postal box addresses rather than street addresses, applications that are unsigned. Finally, election officials cite public confusion. People arrive at the polls convinced that they are registered to vote by virtue of having obtained a driver's license.

A number of states have adopted measures to meet these administrative challenges. Closer integration of voter registration with other government records is one solution. In the late 1990s, for example, Michigan created its Qualified Voter File (QVF), which is so closely linked to motor vehicle records that the driver's license number became the registration ID number and the voter registration address became the driver's license address. Changes to one record automatically cause changes to the other. In other states, broader use of provisional ballots creates an audit trail for problem points.

Finally, election officials contend that NVRA has created new problems of voter list maintenance. NVRA set new and stricter standards for purging voter registration rolls. It allowed registrars to remove registrants from the rolls (subject to particular safeguards) only at their own request, because of criminal convictions, death, or mental incapacity, or because of a change of address. It prohibited registrars from deleting registrations on the sole basis of extended non-participation in elections or on the basis of relocation within jurisdiction. It required registrars to retain registrants who did not vote and did not respond to mailed inquiries on the list, but as "inactive" registrants, for a period of two general elections.

Because of these stricter list maintenance provisions, NVRA by all accounts has caused voter registration rolls to swell. The official number of registrants, active and inactive, exceeds the voting age population of numerous counties and two states, Alaska and Maine.[14] To be sure, registration rolls have never been lean: most jurisdictions purged their lists less frequently and less completely

[13] The most recent FEC report to Congress on the implementation of NVRA noted that the incidence of such problems had increased three-fold since the Commission's last survey.
[14] After a recent purge, registration in Maine is now below 100 percent of voting age population.

than they could.[15] But where informed estimates placed lapsed registrations at 15 percent of total registrations before NVRA, they now place lapsed registrations at 25 percent of the total.[16]

The list maintenance provisions of NVRA have given a substantial boost to efforts to create statewide voter registration lists, which have doubled in number since 1993. Statewide lists permit election officials better to eliminate duplicate registrations, in that 76.5 percent of residential relocations occur within the same state. They also enable better integration of voter lists with other governmental databases, such as motor vehicle registrations, vital records, and corrections records.

According to officials who administer voter registration, however, the greatest current impediment to efficient list management is the lack of a unique numeric identifier for each registrant. Names, addresses, and dates of birth of the same people listed in two different sources frequently do not match because of alternative forms, abbreviations, similarities to others' names, or simple data reporting or data entry errors. (Death records, for instance, originate in hospitals, where hospital staff take reports from family members in a time of bereavement.) While still subject to mistakes in data reporting and data entry, numeric identifiers would vastly reduce the number of ambiguous matches and simplify list maintenance.

The most obvious numeric identifier, the Social Security number (SSN), is prohibited from new use in voter registration by the Privacy Act of 1974. The eight states that currently require Social Security numbers for registration adopted them for use before the passage of the Act. Four additional states require the last four digits of the Social Security number. Sixteen states, in New England, the Upper Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest, do not use numeric identifiers.[17] Of the rest, 16 request full SSNs, three request the last four digits, and five request driver's license or state ID numbers. Although large numbers of registrants comply with the request for an identifying number, provision of the information is not universal.[18]

Previous proposals to allow broader use of Social Security numbers for purposes of identification have met strong opposition. On the grounds of an abstract right to privacy, civil libertarians have resisted turning the Social Security number into a national identity number. Many citizens would be uneasy about broader and more public use of a number that is already linked to financial and credit records.

[15] According to Election Data Services, 218 counties reported registrations in excess of 100 percent of county population in 1992. Two hundred nineteen reported the same in 1996. Federal Election Commission, "Implementing the National Voter Registration Act," March 1998: 5-15.

[16] The problem of over-subscribed lists is not peculiar to voter registration. Thirty states currently have more driver's licenses on issue than they have population over the age of 16. The largest overage is Wyoming's, where licensed drivers are 158 percent of population.

[17] This list includes five of the six states with Election Day registration. The exception is Idaho.

[18] Moreover, most states have only recently begun to request numeric identifiers, and they lack them for nearly everybody who registered prior to the request.

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Rates of voter registration and turnout, by state, from survey self-reports, 1996

State	Percent registered of eligible	Percent turnout of registrants	Percent turnout of eligible
Alabama	74.9	75.2	56.3
Alaska	76.8	79.0	60.7
Arizona	67.2	80.8	54.3
Arkansas	64.9	80.0	53.1
California	70.9	86.4	61.3
Colorado	72.7	84.1	61.1
Connecticut	74.5	83.7	62.3
Delaware	65.6	85.4	56.1
D.C.	77.8	81.6	63.5
Florida	68.8	82.0	56.4
Georgia	67.8	75.1	50.9
Hawaii	60.8	78.2	47.5
Idaho	70.5	87.9	62.0
Illinois	72.0	82.1	59.1
Indiana	69.3	81.5	56.5
Iowa	75.3	83.7	63.0
Kansas	70.5	89.9	63.4
Kentucky	69.7	76.0	53.0
Louisiana	74.5	84.2	62.7
Maine	83.6	82.9	69.3
Maryland	69.2	85.3	57.2
Massachusetts	71.9	84.5	60.8
Michigan	74.2	80.8	59.9
Minnesota	80.7	85.4	69.0
Mississippi	72.2	77.0	55.6
Missouri	76.2	80.8	61.6
Montana	75.9	89.7	68.1
Nebraska	67.1	82.3	62.6
Nevada	65.8	81.0	53.3
New Hampshire	78.2	83.8	61.0
New Jersey	70.1	86.4	60.6
New Mexico	68.9	80.5	55.5
New York	70.2	83.5	58.7
North Carolina	70.3	78.9	55.5
North Dakota	91.0	72.8	66.2
Ohio	69.5	85.8	59.6
Oklahoma	70.9	83.5	59.2
Oregon	76.0	83.7	63.6
Pennsylvania	67.2	83.9	56.4
Rhode Island	76.1	84.4	64.3
South Carolina	68.4	79.9	54.7

South Dakota	75.1	86.2	64.7
Tennessee	66.5	80.5	53.6
Texas	69.0	74.7	51.5
Utah	67.6	82.1	55.5
Vermont	73.1	82.8	60.5
Virginia	68.8	84.9	58.4
Washington	72.6	85.8	62.3
West Virginia	65.2	77.5	50.6
Wisconsin	80.6	80.4	64.8
Wyoming	71.9	92.7	66.7
United States	71.0	82.3	58.4

Source: Current Population Survey, 1996 Voter Supplement

Rates of voter registration, by state, from state reports, 1996

State	Percent of voting age population		Percent of voting age citizen population	
	On register	On register as active	On register	On register as active
Alabama	84.9	76.9	88.3	80.0
Alaska	110.4	97.6	118.1	104.5
Arizona	79.6	71.5	91.2	81.9
Arkansas	73.1	73.1	74.9	74.9
California	73.1	68.6	92.3	86.6
Colorado	82.0	66.8	85.2	69.5
Connecticut	79.7	75.9	87.4	83.2
Delaware	76.6	73.2	80.3	76.7
District of Columbia	93.8	85.6	104.8	95.5
Florida	73.2	67.9	82.6	76.5
Georgia	70.3	70.3	73.6	73.6
Hawaii	63.2	61.2	73.7	71.5
Idaho	81.6	81.6	86.4	86.4
Illinois	85.2	76.1	92.3	82.4
Indiana	79.8	79.8	83.3	83.3
Iowa	83.1	81.5	86.6	85.0
Kansas	75.9	75.9	80.7	80.7
Kentucky	81.8	81.7	82.8	82.6
Louisiana	81.7	79.2	83.8	81.2
Maine	106.0	106.0	110.9	110.9
Maryland	70.4	67.5	75.0	71.9
Massachusetts	82.3	75.2	90.5	82.6
Michigan	94.4	94.4	98.1	98.1
Minnesota	89.7	89.7	93.7	93.7
Mississippi	92.8	88.1	94.8	89.9
Missouri	83.7	83.7	86.0	86.0
Montana	90.1	90.1	92.1	92.1
Nebraska	83.8	83.8	88.3	88.3
Nevada	64.3	59.6	73.8	68.5
New Hampshire	86.7	86.7	88.9	88.9
New Jersey	71.4	68.1	80.3	76.6
New Mexico	68.5	60.3	74.2	65.4
New York	74.9	70.5	87.3	82.2
North Carolina	78.2	76.6	82.7	80.9
North Dakota	No voter registration			
Ohio	82.0	82.0	84.8	84.8
Oklahoma	81.8	81.8	85.2	85.2
Oregon	87.2	81.4	91.5	85.3
Pennsylvania	74.0	73.4	77.5	76.9
Rhode Island	80.3	80.3	88.3	88.3
South Carolina	73.2	65.5	75.0	67.1
South Dakota	89.5	86.5	92.3	89.2
Tennessee	76.7	74.6	77.8	75.6
Texas	77.5	70.2	87.5	79.3

Utah	80.3	80.3	84.1	84.1
Vermont	86.6	86.6	90.0	90.0
Virginia	65.4	62.6	69.4	66.5
Washington	78.4	74.8	82.5	78.7
West Virginia	68.5	67.1	68.8	67.4
Wisconsin	Registration not reported to FEC			
Wyoming	67.6	67.6	69.9	69.9
United States	76.3	72.8	83.3	79.5

Source: Federal Election Commission, Implementing the National Voter Registration Act, March 1998, Appendix A; Bureau of the Census, Reported Voting and Registration among Citizens, by Gender, for States, August 1998.

Rates of voter turnout, by state, from state reports and election returns, 1996

State	As percent of voting age population	As percent of voting age citizen population	As percent of registrants	As percent of active registrants
Alabama	47.7	49.6	56.2	61.9
Alaska	56.9	61.0	51.5	58.3
Arizona	44.7	51.2	56.1	62.5
Arkansas	47.2	48.3	64.6	64.6
California	43.9	55.4	60.0	64.0
Colorado	52.8	54.9	64.4	79.0
Connecticut	56.2	61.6	70.5	74.0
Delaware	50.4	52.8	65.7	68.8
District of Columbia	44.0	49.2	46.9	51.4
Florida	48.1	54.2	65.7	70.9
Georgia	42.4	44.4	60.3	60.3
Hawaii	40.5	47.2	64.1	66.1
Idaho	57.9	61.4	71.0	71.0
Illinois	49.3	53.3	57.8	64.7
Indiana	48.8	51.0	61.2	61.2
Iowa	57.7	60.2	69.5	70.8
Kansas	58.9	62.6	77.6	77.6
Kentucky	47.4	48.0	58.0	58.1
Louisiana	57.1	58.4	69.7	71.9
Maine	64.1	67.1	60.5	60.5
Maryland	46.6	49.7	66.3	69.1
Massachusetts	55.0	60.5	66.9	73.2
Michigan	54.4	56.5	57.6	57.6
Minnesota	64.1	66.9	71.5	71.5
Mississippi	45.4	46.4	49.0	51.6
Missouri	58.2	59.8	69.6	69.6
Montana	62.1	63.4	68.9	68.9
Nebraska	55.9	58.9	66.7	66.7
Nevada	38.3	44.0	59.6	64.3
New Hampshire	57.1	58.8	66.1	66.1
New Jersey	51.0	57.3	71.4	74.8
New Mexico	45.4	49.2	66.4	75.3
New York	46.6	54.3	62.2	66.0
North Carolina	46.3	48.9	59.2	60.5
North Dakota	57.7	58.7	No voter registration	
Ohio	54.3	56.2	66.3	66.3
Oklahoma	49.7	51.8	60.8	60.8
Oregon	57.1	59.5	65.5	70.2
Pennsylvania	49.0	51.3	66.2	66.8
Rhode Island	52.0	57.1	64.8	64.8
South Carolina	41.9	42.9	57.3	64.0
South Dakota	60.5	62.4	67.6	70.0
Tennessee	46.9	47.6	61.2	62.9
Texas	41.3	46.6	53.2	58.8

Utah	49.9	52.3	62.2	62.2
Vermont	58.1	60.3	67.1	67.1
Virginia	47.5	50.5	72.8	76.0
Washington	54.8	57.6	69.9	73.2
West Virginia	44.9	45.0	65.6	66.9
Wisconsin	57.4	61.1	Registration not reported to FEC	
Wyoming	59.4	61.5	87.9	87.9
United States	49.1	53.7	64.4	67.5

Source: Federal Election Commission, Implementing the National Voter Registration Act, March 1998, Appendix A; Federal Election Commission, 1996 General Election Votes Cast for President, Senate, and House, October 1997; Bureau of the Census, Reported Voting and Registration among Citizens, by Gender, for States, August 1998.

Numeric identifiers for voter registration, by state

	Request			Require	
State	Full Social Security Number	Last 4 digits of Social Security Number	Driver's license number	Full Social Security Number	Last 4 digits of Social Security Number
Alabama	•				
Alaska	•				
Arizona		•			
Arkansas	•				
California			•		
Colorado	•				
Connecticut					
Delaware	•				
D.C.	•				
Florida					•
Georgia				•	
Hawaii				•	
Idaho	•				
Illinois	•				•
Indiana	•				
Iowa	•				
Kansas	•				
Kentucky				•	
Louisiana	•				
Maine					
Maryland	•				
Massachusetts					
Michigan			•		
Minnesota					
Mississippi	•				
Missouri					•
Montana					
Nebraska					
Nevada				•†	
New Hampshire					
New Jersey					
New Mexico				•	
New York					
North Carolina			•		
North Dakota	No voter registration				
Ohio	•				
Oklahoma					•
Oregon					
Pennsylvania					

Rhode Island					
South Carolina				•	
South Dakota	•				
Tennessee				•	
Texas	•		•		
Utah		•	•		
Vermont					
Virginia				•	
Washington					
West Virginia		•			
Wisconsin					
Wyoming					
United States	16 states + DC	3 states	5 states	8 states	4 states

†Nevada allows use of a driver's license number or state-issued voter ID number as an alternative.

Source: Federal Election Commission, National Voter Mail-In Registration Instructions.