Upgrading Democracy:

Frequently Asked Questions about Improving Voter Registration

State Voter Registration Systems Need to be Upgraded

Voter registration systems serve an important dual purpose in our democracy: allowing access to voting and preventing opportunities for fraud. Yet our voter registration system still largely reflects its 19th century origins and currently is:

Fraught with errors. Tens of millions of active voter registration records across the nation are inaccurate or no longer valid.

Unable to keep pace with an increasingly mobile society. More than one in eight Americans moved in 2008. As voters become more transient, keeping information accurate and up to date is increasingly challenging, particularly for military voters who are *twice* as likely to report voter registration problems.

Inefficient. Currently, voter registration relies heavily on unregulated third-party groups flooding the system with millions of registrations at the deadline.

Unnecessarily costly. A Pew case study found that voter registration cost Oregon almost $9 million, or $4.11 per active voter, in 2008.

An Accurate, Efficient and Cost-Effective New Approach

The Pew Center on the States is working with states to upgrade their voter registration systems to improve accuracy of voter rolls, increase efficiency and save taxpayer dollars, while enhancing the integrity of the rolls. This effort builds on initiatives already taking place in some jurisdictions.

With guidance from a working group of 42 experts, including election officials, academics and technology specialists from over 20 states, Pew has developed a comprehensive plan that applies approaches already in place in the private sector and

other areas of government to modernize voter registration. This plan involves:

Better data in. Research shows that states can dramatically improve the accuracy of information on voter lists and cut costs by drawing data from a wider array of sources to verify records and by implementing innovative tools already used in many states, such as online registration and a more automated process for registering eligible voters when they use state agencies such as motor vehicles.

Better data out. Developing an interstate exchange for data matching would enable participating states to share the cost of securely keeping their lists as current and correct as possible. The data-matching exchange would compare information on eligible voters from multiple official data sources and report back to the states on registrants who have moved or died, had changes to their voting eligibility or voted more than once. States also would receive information on unregistered individuals who are eligible to vote, allowing them to more efficiently reach out to those citizens, lessening the need for unregulated third-party registration groups.

Failsafe registration options. While this sophisticated data-matching exchange will provide states with highly accurate information, voters must be protected against any rare errors in the data. As an extra measure to ensure that eligible voters are not disenfranchised, states would provide a way for such voters to

correct information on their record and cast a ballot.

Security and privacy safeguards. Leading privacy and technology advocates have reviewed and informed the design of this system, ensuring that it incorporates the highest standards of data security. All data processed by the system would be encrypted and limited to information necessary for voter registration. Any private or confidential data would be anonymized *prior* to leaving state control, rendering information unreadable and unusable to unauthorized users, but still allowing for effective data matching. Independent audits and tamper-proof audit logs also would monitor security, and states would work with leading privacy advocacy groups to regularly review privacy policies to ensure maximum protection.

Frequently Asked Questions

How will upgrading voter registration impact cost?

The traditional system is not cost-effective, given its reliance on paper records and manual processing. Each state will need to contribute to start-up costs associated with implementing the upgraded system and configuring statewide voter registration systems to make use of the improved data. Those costs would be recouped over time as invalid registrations are removed, more registration management is done electronically, less data processing is

done by hand and mailing and printing costs are reduced. States that have already begun modernizing their systems have recovered costs within two to four years and continued to build up additional savings in subsequent years.

Pew is making a significant investment toward building the data-matching exchange, and participating states will then assume control and be responsible for funding the system's maintenance beginning in 2012. States with remaining Help America Vote Act (HAVA) funds will be able to use some of those funds to pay for any necessary capital expenditures and ongoing expenses associated with improving the administration of elections.

How will the data-matching exchange minimize privacy risks?

Privacy has been built into the design from the beginning to reduce any potential risks to security. Pew has engaged leading privacy and technology groups to apply proven safeguards that have been used successfully in the private sector and other areas of government. For instance, the data-matching exchange will:

- Preview and contain only information that is directly relevant and necessary for voter registration.

- Encrypt all data before it leaves a state's control. Further, it also will anonymize any private or confidential data (such as drivers' license numbers or the last four digits of Social Security numbers) by converting information into an indecipherable string of characters so it is unreadable and unusable to potential hackers.

- Maintain tamper-proof audit logs that track every activity conducted in the system—including access, data entry and reports—and conduct regular independent audits to monitor security as a whole.

- Establish and adhere to high standards of data privacy and security.

- Restrict use of the data, information and reports for election administration purposes only.

- Establish an advisory board of privacy experts that will provide regular guidance to ensure robust privacy protocols at all times.

Won't this result in states giving up their control over voter registration and voter records?

No. The interstate data exchange is not an official record, and states will continue to maintain control over their voter lists and records. The data-matching exchange is a tool to help states crosscheck information and keep more accurate voter rolls—not build a national database. Indeed, since states will have access to more and better data about the voters on their rolls, their ability to maintain and control their own voter lists will be enhanced.

Will the exchange automatically update or add voter records to each state's list when it finds new information or automatically register voters?

No. The exchange will give each state a report identifying questionable, duplicate or inaccurate voter records, but each state will maintain control over its own voter list and make decisions on how to update records based on the information it is provided. No action will be taken to modify or create a voter's record without an affirmative confirmation from the voter.

Will participating states still be required to comply with the National Voter Registration Act?

Yes. While the system will help states better achieve the National Voter Registration Act's goals, it will not exempt states from the law's requirements.

Will this system add a flood of unchecked individuals onto the voter rolls?

No. the system will not automatically add registrants to states' voter lists, but will allow states to add eligible citizens to their lists more efficiently. Through the wealth of information crosschecked with multiple official data sources in the exchange, states will be able to identify unregistered citizens who are eligible to vote. Each state can then implement their own procedures for reaching out to these individuals and allowing them to register. In no case will voters be registered without some affirmative act on their part indicating they desire to be registered and meet the necessary eligibility criteria.

Will this system improperly purge voters from the rolls?

No. the system will not automatically purge states' voter lists, but will allow states to eliminate inaccurate or invalid records more efficiently. The exchange will provide better data to inform each state's decisions on how to update and maintain their voter list, consistent with the National Voter Registration Act and other laws. As a result, states should see a reduction in the size of their lists—not because of improper purging, but because their lists will reflect a greater degree of accuracy in capturing eligible, active voters.

Election Initiatives seeks to foster an election system that achieves the highest standards of accuracy, convenience, efficiency and security.

For more Information, please visit pewcenteronthestates.org/elections

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