

Voter Registration Safeguards

Summary

The 2003-2004 Grand Jury received a citizen complaint that the Ventura County Elections Division (“Elections Division”) was “sloppy” and not sufficiently aggressive in purging outdated voter registrations from the rolls. After investigation, the Grand Jury determined that voter rolls are updated appropriately and in a timely manner. In addition, there are several safeguards in place to insure that voter fraud and unnecessary cost are avoided.

Background

The complainant states that for most elections during the period beginning after the complainant’s move to Ventura County in 1999 until the first half of 2003, the complainant received voter information pamphlets and sample ballots for previous residents at that address. The complainant raised concerns about: (1) voter fraud, (2) inaccurate election data due to inflated voter registration rolls and (3) unnecessary printing, mailing and handling costs due to inflated rolls. The complainant expressed concern about the advent of the “permanent” absentee ballot request system, under which an absentee ballot would be provided the voter for each succeeding election, indefinitely, based on one original request. In this regard, the complainant also expressed concern that Ventura County election officials were not able to cross-check registrations against those of other counties for possible duplication.

Methodology

The Grand Jury interviewed knowledgeable officials in the County Clerk’s Office and its Elections Division.

Findings

- F-01.** The Elections Division checks for duplicate registrations at the time of application using a five-point (last, middle and first name, date of birth, place of birth) matching process. The Elections Division staff analyzes and disposes of any apparent duplicate registrations.
- F-02.** The Elections Division checks for simultaneous voter registration in all other California counties by cross-matching against a statewide database. If concurrent registrations are identified, the most recent registration is saved regardless of county and all others are purged. Currently, batches of new voter registrations are periodically forwarded to the California Secretary of State for cross-check against current registrations in every county in California. This statewide cross-check has been in place for about five years. In the very near future, that database will be made available online locally to each county, which will do its own interactive statewide matching at time of application.

- F-03.** Once a month, the Elections Division receives from appropriate county departments, a roster of county citizens who have died during the month. Names on this list are purged from the voter rolls.
- F-04.** Once a year, the Elections Division receives from the courts a list of all individuals, state wide, who have been convicted of a felony in the previous year. These convicted felons are purged from the voter rolls.
- F-05.** Every six months the Elections Division matches its complete voter registration roll against the United States Post Office address database for Ventura County. If the post office database shows that a registered voter no longer resides at the registered address, the voter is placed on the inactive voter roster. (When people move, they complete a change of address card at the post office. They rarely update their voter registration. Consequently, the Elections Division believes that the post office database is more current and reliable than the voter rolls database.) The main reason for the post office cross-match is to remain eligible for significantly reduced postal rates because of reduced volume of forwarded mail, returned mail, and dead letters.
- F-06.** A voter placed on the inactive list need not fill out a new application in order to vote. A list of inactive names is provided to the appropriate precinct. The voter need only show up at the polls, sign the roster and vote. The Elections Division will conduct a special audit of that voter's situation before counting his or her vote.
- F-07.** If a voter fails to vote in two consecutive federal elections (i.e., a "primary" and a "general" election in either order), and the Elections Division is not aware of any other contact with the voter, the Elections Division dispatches a warning post card to the address of registration which alerts the registered voter that the registration will be purged from the rolls unless the voter completes and returns the postcard as evidence that the voter remains alive and resides at the registered address. If the postcard is not returned in a timely manner, the registration is purged.
- F-08.** Until the mid-1970s, failure to vote resulted in automatic purging from the registration rolls. Now, the postcard system outlined in Finding F-07 is in effect.
- F-09.** Until 2003, a "permanent" absentee ballot was available only for those individuals who were physically challenged. In 2003, the law was liberalized to allow "permanent" absentee ballots to be issued upon request and without justification. However, there was a new restriction placed on the application. The "permanent" absentee ballot application is now automatically cancelled upon failure to vote in any primary or general election.
- F-10.** To date, the Election Division has received and acted upon 70,000 applications for permanent absentee ballots.
- F-11.** The Elections Division manually checks the signature on each and every voted absentee ballot against the voter's signature on file.

Conclusions

- C-01.** The complaint described at the beginning of this report could not be substantiated. (F-01 through F-11)
- C-02.** The Elections Division has in place all necessary and reasonable controls to insure that duplicate registrations are at an insignificant or non-existent level. (F-01 through F-11)
- C-03.** The Elections Division’s aggressive and well thought out purging process allows little opportunity for fraud or waste of valuable resources due to inflated or stale voter registration rolls. (F-01 through F-11)

Recommendations

- R-01.** The County Clerk should advertise and publish a pamphlet describing the voter registration and purging process in Ventura County.
- R-02.** The County Clerk should make the recommended pamphlet available both in hard copy at the front desk as well as on the county government web site.

Responses

Recommendation	R-01	R-02
Responses Required From:		
County Clerk	X	X