

How to Research Incoming Voter Registration Applications

You know the saying, “Good data in, good data out; garbage in, garbage out?” Well, it’s true, especially in the case of our voter registry. The accuracy of incoming voter registration information affects the accuracy of the overall registry. If bogus applications clog up our registries, then bogus voter registrations can be used to cast bogus ballots. In a report recently conducted by Pew Research Center, they estimated that 23% of our nation’s registry is invalid. There are a number of contributing factors to account for the poor condition of our rolls; this Research Project will focus on just one of them - Errant or Fraudulent Voter Registration Applications.

In recent years, we’ve seen case after case of intentional voter registration fraud. These tactics tend to include efforts to intentionally overwhelm government officials with massive numbers of voter registration applications, limiting their ability to properly review the applications and often resulting in unqualified applications being added to the voter registry. True the Vote has found that citizen-led efforts to review incoming applications can often result in stopping these tactics and increasing the overall accuracy of those applications that are submitted. Here’s how you can help:

1. Familiarize yourself with role of a Volunteer (or Deputy) Voter Registrar. Volunteer Voter Registrar training courses are generally conducted by your county, municipality, or governing board. Contact the appropriate elections agency to find a course in your area.
2. Submit a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)* letter to request both electronic and hard copies of all voter registration applications (VRA) submitted to your county or municipality during a specific window of time – example: June 1 through July 31.

*Some states use a term other than FOIA to describe a request for public documents. Determine what term your state uses and adapt your letter accordingly.

In 2008, community organizing groups ACORN and Project Vote registered 1.3 million new voters, intentionally overwhelming local election officials across the nation. When checked, 400,000 of the applications were rejected. How many more fraudulent applications went unnoticed due to lack of manpower and resources? You can help prevent this from happening again.

Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press has a great FOIA letter generator program posted online. It will guide you through all the necessary steps in formatting an effective FOIA letter.

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3. Recruit a small team of volunteers to help review the applications. Teachers and school registrars are particularly well suited for this effort because they are accustomed to working with lots and lots of handwritten forms
4. Purchase multicolored highlighters and “post- it note” tabs. Give each volunteer a different color highlighter and “post-it note” tabs.
5. Assign one volunteer to review one section of data on the VRA. Focusing on only one section will help the volunteer quickly recognize common irregularities.

Sections to Review

- contact information
- date VRA was signed (compared to the date submitted)
- acknowledgment of citizenship status
- birthdate
- Deputy Registrar information if applicable



6. Highlight errors and omissions. Examples include:

- blanks
- over-marking (writing over preexisting information provided by applicant)
- incomplete addresses
- birthdate (too young to vote on election day)
- signature missing or not matching printed name

7. Tab the major concerns.

Examples include:

- applicant identifies self as non-citizen
- applicant name and signature don't match
- multiple applications with same name, especially if they indicate conflicting information

8. Sort the documents in a variety of ways to identify specific errors or patterns.

Examples include:

- Sort in alphabetical order to find multiple applications under same name
- Sort by voter registrar name or number errors, as well as those with no errors

9. Compile an initial report of findings. List number of total documents received from FOIA requests, as well as total number of each error or concern found.

10. Use this initial report of findings to steer future FOIA requests for specific data subsets. FOIA request examples include:

- If you find a Volunteer Voter Registrar who makes repeated error - submit a FOIA request for VRAs completed only by that individual.
- If you find any VRAs on which the "I am not a citizen" box was marked by voter - submit a FOIA request to determine whether that applicant was rejected or approved for registration. An example for this type of FOIA can be found [here](#)

11. After you have fully analyzed all (or at least a representative sample) of the VRAs, compile a final report of findings. This report should then be submitted to your county, municipality, or whatever agency oversees elections in your community.

Please also submit a copy to True the Vote. Send your report to reports@truethevote.org or submit online in the Volunteer Portal. Your findings help us better recognize the repeated problems and patterns across the nation.

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What to Do With Your Findings

Schedule a meeting to discuss your findings with the appropriate person. Bring your report with you, as well as samples of your findings. Topics for Discussion:

- Introduce yourself, your organization, your program, your purpose, your process, and your findings
- Discuss what you found
- Ask them to explain the safeguards their agency uses to prevent invalid VRAs from being added to your community's voter registry.
- Ask them to explain if and how they protect the voter registry from being targeted by individual Volunteer Voter Registrars or by groups who continually submit problematic VRAs
- Ask them what will be done with the findings you've provided
- Assure them that you want to work with them to help increase the accuracy of your voter rolls.

There are many other important pieces of information you may want to inquire about:

- what is their process of removing deceased voters?
- what is their process for removing duplicate registrations?
- how often are the voter rolls update?
- how often are inactive voters purged from the rolls

NOTE: Demonstrating your interest in the accuracy of your voter rolls will normally be met with gratitude. In some cases, you may experience skepticism as to the legitimacy of your purpose. It is rare to find people who are willing to support nonpartisan efforts to follow the law and uphold the integrity of your state's electoral process. All the more reason that your work, your assistance, and your communications should reflect True the Vote's credo – free and fair elections, regardless of political party affiliation.

Future FOIAs can be submitted to inquire about the final disposition of certain VRAs. For example, were they registered to vote? Was their registration rejected? Were they removed from the rolls?

Once a voter is registered, the FOIA process is no longer the appropriate vehicle for action. In order to officially question the registration of a voter, the Citizen Challenge process must be used. Find out more about Citizen Challenges in our Research and Data Collection trainings and forums, hosted online at www.truethevote.org. Have questions? You can always contact us at research@truethevote.org