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States: We're burying dead voters

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Responding to a report finding [nearly 2 million registered voters who are dead](#), officials in states with the highest percentage of deceased still on the rolls say they are working to make sure casting a ballot doesn't turn into a horror show.

Having dead voters on the rolls could result in a person voting by absentee in the name of a recently deceased friend or relative, but that's very rare, election experts and state officials say. And people certainly shouldn't fear that the 1.8 million deceased individuals the [Pew Center on the States found](#) still registered to vote across the country will turn into reanimated, ballot-casting corpses.

One of the biggest issues for elections offices is that voters don't always die in the state they're registered in — for some individuals, that means they escape the state's death registry or Social Security system and end up sliding under the radar. Unless the offices exchange data with other states, employ third-party data mining companies or are notified by the families, they often have no way of knowing about the dead voters that fall through the cracks.

A [2010 report](#) that used the same data from Catalist — a leading aggregator and processor of voter information — as Pew did for their survey found that Washington, D.C., Ohio, Virginia and South Carolina all had over two percent of voters on their rolls estimated to be dead, among the highest of the states.

But Alysoun McLaughlin of the District of Columbia Board of Elections and Ethics said D.C. has become a dead voter registration success story since then, clearing off 98,000 lifeless voters from their rolls in 2010.

"When Catalist pulled that list, we were doing a lot of business in a very paper way that we then converted to doing electronically," she said. "We were getting lists from Social Security and the DC Dept. of Vital Records and we literally had a person here with a paper list and a highlighter who would look up voters one by one."

Then, in 2010, the city completely revamped the process — the data began getting sent in and matched electronically. Once they went high-tech, the officials scrubbed their voter registration roll against the list of the deceased and were able to delete almost 100,000 dead people.

Now, each week, the elections board receives the electronic list of deceased voters from D.C.'s Dept. of Vital Records, McLaughlin added.

In Virginia, Deputy Secretary of the State Board of Elections Justin Riemer said the state tries to stay on top of its list with data from the state's death registry and statistics from the Social Security Death Index. At the local level, registrars often monitor newspaper obituaries or hear about people that have died from word of mouth.

But sometimes, he said, deceased people simply won't come to their attention. And with

dead people staying on the rolls, Riemer said, that could always lead to people casting ballots in their names.

“List maintenance, one of the main purposes, is to prevent voter fraud,” he said.

And other states with the highest percentage of dead voters on the rolls are also making moves to clean up — in Ohio, the Secretary of State’s office is teaming up with Pew for its new data exchange initiative to share information with several states.

Ohio Secretary of State Jon Husted, who says they update the voter rolls every three months based on information from the state’s Dept. of Health, noted that “we do a pretty good job in the state, but if someone dies outside of Ohio, we wouldn’t know that.”

“Some of the things we’re trying to do are to move to an electronic registration system where it is easier to track voters, and we’re working with Pew on trying to exchange data with other states and hopefully begin to improve this,” he said.

In Orange County, California, Registrar of Voters Neal Kelley is working aggressively to tackle the very problem of voters dying outside his jurisdiction.

A year ago, the elections office moved beyond just relying on information at the state and local level and also started taking data from a third-party data mining company. The registrar sent the registered voter file and the company, Lorton, scrubbed all the data and matched up birthdates and Social Security numbers to national lists — something state and local election offices don’t have access to.

“When we did this about a year ago, we ran through our registered voters and found 300,000 that hadn’t voted in eight consecutive elections,” he said. “Then we found that 2,000 were dead and still on the rolls — now we have a much cleaner list than in the past.”

For the year to date, Orange County has removed 14,885 individuals due to deaths. As a comparison to last year, the registrar removed 11,306 — the increase this year takes into account the couple of thousand people that had been on the rolls before the access to national data.

“We’re being overly aggressive in this area,” Kelley said. “And it saves the taxpayer money — we’re not sending out materials that we don’t need to.”

Meanwhile, an investigation is currently under way in South Carolina over allegations that 953 ballots have been cast in past elections in the names of deceased voters. The state’s Election Commission director Marci Andino told the House Election Laws Subcommittee on Jan. 25 that none of the six sample names they were provided with by the state’s attorney general showed any sign of voter fraud. One was an absentee ballot cast by a voter who died before Election Day and the others were a result of clerical error.

The key to combat any potential fraud is for election officials to overhaul their voter registration systems and keep lists well-maintained, Pew suggested in the Tuesday report.

Voter registration systems may desperately need improvement, but there’s no need to fear

zombie voters casting ballots come Election Day, Justin Levitt, an associate professor of law at Loyola Law School and an expert in elections, said.

“From all of the evidence we’ve seen in the past, this study should not be a call to arms to take up arms against the coming zombie voter hoard,” Levitt said. “There’s no doubt that people will say we have to clamp down on the elections to make sure dead people aren’t voting, but all evidence suggests they aren’t voting. They’re just on the voter rolls and they’ll be swept off.”

And while the nearly two million figure “isn’t good, it also a pretty small percentage of the records out there. For any record keeping system, it’s not terribly surprising,” he noted.

“It’s not comforting to see 1.8 million dead people on the lists, but there are a lot of other mistakes on the rolls,” Levitt said. “The thing that gets lost the most — and shouldn’t — is that it does not translate to 1.8 million dead people voting. Those are 1.8 mill people who are listed on the rolls that have passed away and haven’t been cleaned off.”

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