



## **Voter Registration: An International Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The United States is one of the few democracies in the world where the government does not take any responsibility in registering its citizens. This one-of-a-kind, self-initiated voter registration process acts as a major barrier to voter turnout and leads to often-inaccurate voter rolls.

In contrast, the international norm is a process of government-mandated automatic voter registration of every citizen who reaches voting age. This report explores how other major well-established democracies (Canada, Australia, Sweden, Italy, New Zealand and others) concretely manage to build comprehensive, inclusive, accurate voting rolls that leave no voters behind while ensuring a high level of privacy. As it turns out, many of these “best practices”, could easily be implemented in the U.S. context to modernize our voter registration system.

This report takes a closer look at youth voter registration practices. Young voters are difficult to register; yet as first-time voters, their political participation is particularly crucial. Various strategies, in the U.S. and abroad, have been successfully implemented to target this particular segment of the population. The best approach actually seems to be the creation of a provisional list (16-year-old pre-registration), combined with high school-based registration drives and birthday card programs for 17 and 18 year olds.

## Introduction

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The United States ranks 140 out of 163 countries based on turnout of the voting age population since 1990, according to experts who study elections abroad.<sup>1</sup> The voter registration system can be considered partly responsible for this low voter turnout. In 2006, 32.43% of citizens 18 and older were unregistered according to the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>2</sup> And yet, once registered, people are much more likely to vote: in 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau reported participation rates of more than 85 percent of registered voters. One can thus consider our voter registration system responsible for leaving so many citizens behind. In 2001, a commission chaired by Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford concluded, “The registration laws in force throughout the United States are among the world’s most demanding ... [and are ] one reason why voter turnout in the United States is near the bottom of the developed world.”<sup>3</sup>

## A Self-Initiated System

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The United States is one of the few democracies in the world where the government does not take any responsibility for registering its citizens (voters must take the initiative and register themselves to vote), while the international norm is a process of government-mandated automatic voter registration of every citizen who reaches voting age. As a consequence of this opt-in, self-initiated system, the U.S. voter rolls are not as comprehensive and inclusive as they should be. In most western democracies where the government takes the onus of registering voters, the registration rates are much higher (i.e. about 90% in Canada, 91% in Indonesia, 93% in France, and up to 97% in Japan). Many academics have highlighted that this state-initiated, automatic, approach to voter registration serves to enhance inclusion, particularly of those with special needs (i.e. voters in hospitals and prisons, disabled people, the homeless, the poor, the illiterate, etc.).<sup>4</sup> For such people, a system that depends on self-registration may well have a repressive effect on their willingness or capacity to be included on the list of eligible voters. One could add that our voter’s lists are not as clean and accurate as they could be, either, as the frequent polemics about alleged voter registration “fraud” involving ACORN during the 2008 presidential election highlights.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Voter turnout since 1945: a global report*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2006, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p20-557.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Carter and Ford: National Election Commission, Report of the Task Force on the Federal Election System, chapter 2 “Voter Registration” [http://www.tcf.org/publications/electionreform/99\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.tcf.org/publications/electionreform/99_full_report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> i.e. Loyola Law Professor Rick Hasen, former Federal Election Assistance Commission Chairwoman Rosemary E. Rodriguez have endorsed the idea. It has also received favorable mention from Ohio State Law Professor Dan Tokaji.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Rob Richie and Adam Fogel’s article : [http://www.ajc.com/opinion/content/opinion/stories/2008/10/30/richieed\\_1030.html](http://www.ajc.com/opinion/content/opinion/stories/2008/10/30/richieed_1030.html)

## The Voter Roll: An Essential Democratic Feature

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According to the ACE project, voter registration is one of the more costly, time-consuming, complex, but also essential aspects of the electoral process.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, clean and complete voter rolls are an vital tool in every democracy: by confirming that citizens have met all the eligibility requirements and that each eligible citizen is registered to vote once and only once, the voter registration process ensures the validity of the vote and helps to confer legitimacy on the electoral process. The voter list may also be used in voter education and may be provided to political parties and candidates to help them in their campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. Periodic Enumerations

To implement a more inclusive voter registration process, some states conduct door-to-door enumerations, with election officials contacting each household in person. Most of the time, enumerations are conducted during the campaign period, and electoral administrators do not intend to maintain or update the list for future use. The enumeration process is repeated each time an election is called.

This method was traditionally used by Canada and Australia. Enumeration turned out to be especially labor-intensive. For example, in their 1998 elections, Canada hired 110,000 enumerators. The cost is high because several visitations are necessary for those initially missed or not at home, even though at some point the onus shifts to the absent individual to take some minor steps to become registered. The process is also highly time-consuming, and in Canada, the campaign period had to be extended to allow for development of the voter rolls. The enumeration period is timed to provide an up-to-date roll for federal elections, but this timing does not necessarily suit the state and local election cycles, leading to costly duplication in the registration processes. For all these reasons, the enumeration method tends to be an extremely costly<sup>8</sup> and inefficient process.<sup>9</sup>

Having the registration undertaken just before the election can potentially produce a high level of enrollment (for instance in Canada, 98% of voters were registered), and the information compiled is often accurate and up-to-date – the enumeration captures those who have changed residence as well as new citizens and the newly age eligible. The timely nature of post-writ enumeration also means that the false listing of those who had emigrated or passed away was kept to a minimum. On the other hand, in many countries where enumeration is still practiced, such as Indonesia, Albania, India, Pakistan, and

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<sup>6</sup> Voter registration activities consume an average of 15.7-percent of Electoral Management Bodies budgets according to the Global Survey on the Cost of Registration and Elections (CORE) survey, conducted by ACE in 2003, surveyed 178 Election Management Bodies (EMB) around the world

<sup>7</sup> “An overview of voter registration”, ACE Project Network, <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vr/vr10>

<sup>8</sup> The cost of the final door-to-door enumeration, which was conducted before the 1997 general election was \$71.4 million.

<sup>9</sup> “From enumeration to the National Register of Electors, an account and an evaluation”, Jerome H. Black, IRPP, Choices august 2003

Bangladesh, this “rushed” job leads to compromises in quality, giving rise to accuracy and completeness problems.<sup>10</sup> Also, as registration takes place during the campaign, the quality of the list sometimes becomes itself an important election issue, providing opposition parties with an opportunity to criticize the government and call into question the legitimacy of the rolls. An interesting practice that helps avoid that kind of appearance of political manipulation is a bi-partisan approach to the enumeration, as formerly practiced in Canada: in urban areas, enumerators worked by pairs, each being appointed on the recommendation of a specific party. Then, the preliminary lists were revised under the same bipartisan approach in order to correct the inaccuracies or omissions that may have occurred.<sup>11</sup>

Because of these political disadvantages, the increasingly mobile lifestyle of citizens and growing safety concerns for canvassers, both Canada (1996) and Australia (1998) turned their traditional enumeration-based registration system to continuous list systems. Very few democracies still use periodic enumerations today, the most notable case being the United Kingdom, where to this day each head of household has to register everyone living in that home during the annual electoral census. The electoral register in the U.K. is maintained on a continuous basis, allowing citizens to modify their personal data monthly without waiting for the annual census.<sup>12</sup>

The U.K. government has recently announced a reform to shift to individual voter registration for the autumn 2010 canvas (on a voluntary basis) and the 2015 canvas (on a compulsory basis). More importantly, the reform proposed by the government would introduce a data-sharing partnership feature in the U.K. voter registration system by allowing electoral registration officers to obtain relevant and restricted data from public authorities, such as the Revenue and Customs administration and the Department of Work and Pension. The government is casting this reform as a way to “provide greater protection against voter fraud,” but also as a way to efficiently register the three million people that currently slip through the cracks of the enumeration system.<sup>13</sup>

With all its flaws, the periodic list system may be particularly appropriate in specific cases: where infrastructure is lacking to maintain a continuous list, where population mobility is high, or where there is opposition to the maintenance of lists of citizens by the government. Also, countries with other registration system sometimes conduct targeted door-to-door enumerations to complement their registration program and boost the registration rates in high-mobility areas. An analysis of registration rates in Canada, which has used a data-partnership automatic system since 1998, highlights that some information, notably changes of addresses, are not 100% captured by the government agencies. Students and highly mobile citizens have a much higher probability not to be registered at their current address. Other categories of citizens likely to slip between the cracks include people in hospitals or extended health-care facilities, if lists of residents

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<sup>10</sup> ACE project network

<sup>11</sup> “*From enumeration to the National Register of Electors, an account and an evaluation*”, Jerome H. Black, IRPP, Choices august 2003

<sup>12</sup> The Representation of the People Act of 2000 allows for continuously updated voter rolls.

<sup>13</sup> *Individual voter registration to replace household surveys*, The Telegraph, 03/03/09.

are not provided and homeless persons. To remedy these issues, Elections Canada sometimes conducts door-to-door registration campaigns in selected neighborhoods, such as new subdivisions, student residences, or areas with highly mobile residents. The target areas for these additional registration efforts are identified through an analysis of the National Register of Electors to compile a list of residents who have moved frequently in the past. In-person enumeration also includes areas where the voter rolls tend to be of lower quality. In 2004, for instance, officials visited 780,000 more addresses, completed 74,000 more revision forms, and left 140,000 more forms for residents who weren't at home than in 2000.<sup>14</sup> This process does not seem to be very cost-efficient, since the price tag was \$5 million in 2004.

## **2. Increasing the Convenience of the Process**

### **Election-Day Registration**

Election Day Registration can be implemented in a self-initiated system as a way to increase the registration rates thanks to a more convenient process for the voter. It can also be implemented as a part of a state-initiated system designed to ensure that no one slips through the cracks (there are various reasons why one could be omitted from the voters lists in an automatic system: voters may be ill or on a trip during the registration period, they may have recently moved or recently satisfied eligibility requirements).

Election Day Registration (EDR), also called “same day registration,” allows eligible voters to register and cast a ballot on Election Day. In the United States, nine states currently have EDR (Maine, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Idaho, New Hampshire, Wyoming, Montana, Iowa, and North Carolina).<sup>15</sup>

Various studies have revealed that EDR states have had higher voter turnout than non-EDR states for over 25 years.<sup>16</sup> Voter registration deadlines close before the media and the public fully focuses on elections: the final weeks of a campaign often are politically decisive. In addition, EDR is time saving because voters can do all the paperwork on the same day. This process enables active people—women who have to look after their children, young people, geographically mobile people or persons with disabilities—to register more conveniently. Some opponents argue that EDR could facilitate voter impersonation, but in reality, “EDR may deter voter fraud, since the registration process is conducted under the eye of the voting station official and requires a variety of legal documents.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada on the 38<sup>th</sup> general election, Elections Canada, [http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=gen&document=part1\\_div1&dir=rep/re2/sta2004&lang=e&txonly=false](http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=gen&document=part1_div1&dir=rep/re2/sta2004&lang=e&txonly=false)

<sup>15</sup> Election Day Registration: Best Practices, an implementation guide. Regina M. Eaton, Cristina Vasile, DEMOS <http://www.demos.org/publication.cfm?currentpublicationID=8FCFEFB2-3FF4-6C82-55E0B61E47C0A787>

<sup>16</sup> Demos In the 2004 American presidential election, average turnout in the EDR states was 12% higher than that of non-EDR states (63,2% in non-EDR States, versus 75,1% in EDR States)

<sup>17</sup> Demos Election Day Registration Fact Sheet

Proof of residence and proof of identity are always required, but the list of accepted identification varies depending on state. In Canada and in several US states (notably Iowa), voters can sign an affidavit affirming their identity or a fellow voter can vouch for them if they do not have the proper identification.<sup>18</sup> This process allows people who have recently moved and thus have no proof of residence to cast a ballot. In the U.S., the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) requires states to collect information from voters that could be used to crosscheck their identity and residency with other state databases. For example, voter rolls must be linked to the driver's license database. In some states/countries, additional security provisions have been implemented: the election authority may keep a separate list of people who register on Election Day. Later, political parties may review the list of these voters.

In Montana, Election Day Registration cannot be completed at the polling location, but only in county offices or courthouses (only places where the voter registration database is available) where officials say they can perform necessary checks to make sure a voter has not cast a ballot previously or has been issued an absentee ballot in another part of the state. According to DEMOS, the incremental cost of implementing EDR in new locations in 2004 was a maximum of \$250 per precinct. It is not more costly to register people on Election Day at the polls than in the weeks before an election at a registration office. EDR allows local election offices to save money on pre-election staffing. Per-capita election administration costs in major cities using EDR—including Minneapolis and Milwaukee—are approximately \$3.50 per voting-age person.<sup>19</sup> The implementation of EDR in California would cost \$6 million annually (and no net cost to counties), according to several estimates.<sup>20</sup>

### **Register By Mail/On-line Registration**

An increasing number of countries are allowing mail-in voter registration—including Germany, Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The mail-in registration processes are quite similar in these countries: registration forms are available online or/and in public service agencies and can be returned by mail to the Board of Elections. According to Elections Australia, the return rate is higher when the form is pre-addressed and postage is pre-paid. In Australia, it is possible to fax the completed and signed form, and even to scan it and send it by e-mail.

New technologies, notably the Internet, also offer interesting opportunities for voter registration systems. Two U.S. States, Arizona (since 2003) and Washington State (since 2007), allow citizens to register to vote or transfer a registration to a new address via

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<sup>18</sup> Election Day Registration in Iowa, Iowa Secretary of State, [http://www.yawp.com/ican/ICANVote/EDR\\_Q\\_A.pdf](http://www.yawp.com/ican/ICANVote/EDR_Q_A.pdf), Elections Canada website: <http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=ele&dir=ids&document=index&lang=e&textonly=false#three>

<sup>19</sup> In comparison, California counties spend between \$3 and \$4 per voting-age person to run elections

<sup>20</sup> DEMOS report “California Votes: the promise of EDR”

[http://archive.demos.org/pubs/california\\_votes.pdf](http://archive.demos.org/pubs/california_votes.pdf)

Fiscal impact note for proposition 52 (EDR) in California, as reported by the League of Women Voters (<http://ca.lwv.org/lwvc/edfund/elections/2002nov/id/prop52.html>)-

Internet. The applicant is required to enter his or her driver's license or state ID card number, which is used as a signature. To ensure the security of the process, a randomly generated security number is presented to each user to make it more difficult for an automated hacking program to fraudulently fill out voter registration applications via the website. The implementation of on-line registration in Washington State is too recent to be assessed, but Arizona reports a significant success with online voter registration: 70% of all registrations are received using Internet, and registration increased by 9.5 percentage-points in the two years since the on-line registration program was instituted.<sup>21</sup> This experience has proved that on-line voter registration is technologically feasible, secure and efficient. Other states, notably Oregon, Indiana and California, are considering implementing similar systems.

International examples also demonstrate the usefulness of online voter registration systems. Elections New Zealand provides a direct and interactive on-line voter registration system since 2005. Voters can register on-line (even for first registrations) and can review and edit their registration information – the voter roll is available on Elections New Zealand website. Some other countries (Canada, Denmark, Australia, Britain) are looking into implementing such mechanisms.<sup>22</sup>

Mail-in and on-line registration systems increase the convenience of the registration process. On-line systems in particular offer interesting new functionality for voters and administrators: online programs would allow voters to make all desired transactions, at any time and from any Internet terminal, by accessing a single Internet site, which would eliminate time and distance constraints that are often a barrier to registration. It would also empower the elector by giving them ownership of their registration information and the opportunity for self-service. This system is widely seen as an efficient solution to increase the registration rate among difficult-to-target groups, such as youth and high-mobility populations. As many feasibility studies concluded, Elections Authorities would also benefit from such on-line registration system since it would allow a reduction in labor-intensive transactions and calls.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, since it is more difficult to authenticate the identity of the person registering, the on-line and mail-in registration systems raise concerns about inaccuracy and voter fraud. Under these systems, an ineligible person might register; someone might register more than once either intentionally or by mistake. Any online process would require a verification system to ensure that the person seeking to register is eligible. To prevent duplicate registrations, new names must be verified before they are added to the voter rolls. A regular review of voter rolls is an effective way of minimizing error, misconduct, and potential fraud. Regarding security concerns, the Australian practice seems interesting: a “witness” who must be enrolled or eligible to be enrolled, must sign the registration form in addition to the applicant. Once the Australian Electoral

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<sup>21</sup> Washington Secretary of State and Arizona Secretary Of State websites.

<sup>22</sup> Elections Canada

<sup>23</sup> See the Online Voter registration feasibility study, 2003, on the Elections Canada website <http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=index&dir=fea&lang=e&textonly=false>

Commission has received the form and added the person on the voters list, it sends back an acknowledgement “receipt” so the voter can check the accuracy of the voter roll.

#### **4. Data-sharing agreements**

Many countries, such as Australia and Canada since the 1998 reform, have opted for a continuous updating of the voter rolls. This means that the electoral register is maintained and continually updated by the election administration. This system depends on an appropriate infrastructure to maintain the list (i.e. to obtain changes in voter information by adding newly eligible voters, deleting dead voters and updating changes in voters’ addresses). For instance, Elections Canada reports that about 17% of voter information changes each year: 13% of voters change their address, 1% die, 2% reach 18-years-old and 1% become Canadian citizens. Regular updating of the permanent list is regarded as being imperative.

Very often, election authorities form partnerships with other government bodies in order to facilitate list-updates. For instance, when citizens change their place of residence, they may inform the post office, the tax bureau, the housing authority or the health insurance system. Data-sharing partnerships are particularly important regarding deletions (i.e. death, criminal conviction, etc.) since the voter or his or her family often does not provide this information, but the government, through vital statistics offices, the department of corrections or courts, can easily obtain it. These partnerships allow the election authority to receive regular updates of changes to these bodies’ files.

Two types of registration strategies are made possible by these data-sharing partnerships:

##### **The Australian Model**

Some countries use data-sharing partnerships to identify the out-of-date information on the voter roll, then follows-up with these individuals to encourage them to register or update their information. Thus, the registration or update is not automatic and requires a direct contact with the citizens. For instance, the Australian Electoral Commission continually reviews electoral roll data and matches it with other national and state data sources (i.e. postal, immigration, driver’s license, electricity, gas and telephone supply records)<sup>24</sup> to identify:

- Addresses from which or into which people are moving (even if it is technically mandatory for the Australian citizens to submit a new enrollment form within 21 days when they move or change their name).
- Apparently vacant dwellings
- Addresses where electors in different surname groups are enrolled, or where no enrolment review has been conducted for a specified timeframe.

Then, the AEC checks these addresses either by an in-person visit, mail or telephone, sending registration forms to these addresses and taking follow up action to encourage them to register. A good example of these follow-up actions is the Monthly Mail Review

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note, though, that data-sharing partnership with these authorities also assists the AEC in confirming the enrollment details at approximately 43 percent of occupied enrollable addresses without the need for direct contact with the residents

System, where a letter is sent to all the identified addresses each month (this represents about 4 million letters a year) to remind voters to update their enrolment details. Where no response is received to the first letter, a second letter is mailed, or fieldwork, including door-knocks, is undertaken. When the AEC receives information that a person is no longer living at their enrolled address, a notice is sent to the elector advising that their name will be removed if a satisfactory reply is not received. Each year approximately 2% of all voters are removed through this process. The only automatic deletions are the ones based on information on recently deceased persons, supplied by the State Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

### **The Canadian Model**

Data-sharing agreements actually make it possible to automatically update the electoral register without any direct contact between the voter and the election authority.

In Canada, information from federal data suppliers is automatically transferred to Elections Canada (see chart below). However the “active and informed” consent of the individuals concerned is needed for the government agencies to be allowed to forward the information to Elections Canada. On income tax returns, the Canada Revenue Agency includes a section that Canadian tax filers can check to have their name, address and date of birth forwarded to Elections Canada. A similar section exists on Citizenship and Immigration’s application forms (for new Canadians) and on Canada Post’s Change of Address form. The Canadian opt-out system ensures an adequate protection of freedom of opinion and freedom of speech, since citizens can easily choose whether or not they want to be registered.

### **Annual changes to elector information and the sources of data used to maintain the National Register of Electors**

<b>Change</b>	<b>Electors Affected</b>	<b>% of Electors in Register</b>	<b>Data Suppliers</b>
Address	2,915,000	13	Canada Revenue Agency; Canada Post Corporation (National Change of Address Service); provincial and territorial motor vehicle registrars; provincial electoral agencies with permanent voters lists
Persons reaching the age of 18	390,000	2	Canada Revenue Agency; provincial and territorial motor vehicle registrars; provincial electoral agencies with permanent voters lists
New citizens	130,000	1	Citizenship and Immigration Canada
Deaths	160,000	1	Provincial and territorial vital statistics registrars; provincial electoral agencies with permanent voters lists

The most widespread example of this type of data-sharing agreement is partnerships between Postal Services and the Election Management Body. In New Zealand, people who move complete a “Mail Redirection Request” at the New Zealand Post office, so that

their mail is delivered to their new address. New Zealand Post then sends information about the change of address to the Register of Electors so that it can be updated. Minnesota has recently implemented a similar system where the office of the Secretary of State obtains on a monthly basis a list of registered voters who have filled permanent forwarding orders with the USPS.<sup>25</sup> The Secretary of State's office then forwards the information to the appropriate county auditor, who updates the voter lists and sends a notice to the new address of the voter. In cases where the USPS data indicates that a voter has moved to another State, the auditor sends a notice indicating that the voter is no longer eligible to vote in Minnesota. Then, unless the voter contacts the auditor within 21 days, the auditor changes the voter's status to "inactive" and sends a follow up piece of mail notifying the voter of the change. Returned mail information is also forwarded to the Secretary of State.

The data-partnership strategy seems quite cost-efficient: in Australia for instance, the total cost associated with voter roll administration activities (i.e. data entry, purging, data-matching programs, including all activities with no direct contact with voters) in 2004-2005 (no elections) was A\$46 million (USD \$30 million, or USD\$2.10 per voter), and A\$58 million (USD \$38 million, or USD\$2.70 per voter) in 2003-2004 (electoral period).

## 5. Civil register systems

The civil registry approach is practicable in countries (particularly in Europe and Latin America) where the state maintains for administrative reasons a register of the whole population including basic data, like age, residence, citizenship, and ID number. For instance, in Sweden, the Tax Administration maintains a Population Registration Database for administrative purposes, shared with other government agencies on a need basis. Its day-to-day updating is handled by the local offices of the Tax Administration thanks to information details provided by other agencies that frequently interact with the public (i.e. social insurance office, municipalities, police, etc). In Denmark, all citizens and residents of Denmark are included in the national register, *Det Centrale Personregister*, where each person is assigned a personal number of ten digits, which include the person's date of birth. The register, which is maintained by the Ministry of Welfare, is used for tax lists, voter lists, the universal health care system, official record of residence, and other purposes. Italy, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands also have Resident Population Registries, maintained by municipal-level administrative offices. In these countries, inclusion on the list is mandatory and citizens are often required to report changes of their information to the officials who maintain the list within a specified time. In many cases, citizens who fail to report their change of address to the authority in charge are subject to a fine.

Civil registry systems can also rely on the existence of national citizen IDs, which allows information about citizens to be managed coherently and comprehensively. Many Latin-American countries (i.e. Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua) combine the preparation of their voter rolls with the issuance of a national ID card and Civil Registration (both issued by the Electoral Management Body), which seems to be an extremely efficient configuration. Lists of electors can be compiled easily whenever an election is scheduled

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<sup>25</sup> Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, bill H1546-0  
[http://www.sos.state.mn.us/docs/summary\\_automatic\\_address Updating\\_law.pdf](http://www.sos.state.mn.us/docs/summary_automatic_address Updating_law.pdf)

to take place by identifying in the registry the people who are qualified to vote. For instance, the Swedish Electoral Authority purchases<sup>26</sup> an electoral roll for each electoral district extracted from this Population Registration Database 30 days before the date of elections. This electoral roll contains only the persons who have the right to vote in the concerned election. Similarly, in Italy, the Municipal Electoral Offices maintain and continuously update a General Archive of Electors, composed of:

- A list of electors to be included from the voters lists (people who have recently turned 18, new residents of the municipality, etc.)
- A list of electors to be excluded from the voters lists (people no longer residing in this area, deceased, disqualified for any reason).

This information is used to periodically update the voter lists (at least twice a year). Several extraordinary revisions also take place before an election.

This is the least expensive process of putting together voter rolls, because most of the costs have been incurred for maintaining the registry from which the relevant information is collected. According to the CORE Surveys, the cost for voter registration in most countries using a civil registry system is rather low. For instance, in Sweden, the 2004 European Parliament Elections costs of voter registration represented less than 0.5% of the total cost of the elections (about USD\$ 0.017 per registered voter)<sup>27</sup>. In Spain, costs related to the routine production and monthly update of voter lists is part of the regular budget of the National Institute of Statistics, which totaled 200 million euros in 2004. The costs are not officially calculated separately in the Institute's budget, but could be more than 15-percent of the total (USD \$9.7 million dollars, or USD \$0.30 per voter).<sup>28</sup>

Automatically updated systems are also less time-consuming and the building of the rolls can take place closer to Election Day. In such a system, the election authority's role in the process is usually limited to scrutinizing the registration data for errors and omissions, and undertaking revision and production of the final list used on Election Day. Also, the process of pulling together up-to-date and accurate voter lists is very quick, which is an important feature in countries with parliamentary systems that do not have set dates for elections, like in the U.S.

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<sup>26</sup> The Electoral Agency pays a fee for this information: the amount for the Euro referendum in 2003 (most recent data available) totaled 500,000 kroners (\$64,000). The amount is calculated on the basis of the number of persons in the register with the per-name being 2-5 ore (1 kroner = 100 ore).

<sup>27</sup> Additional costs (approximately USD \$2 million in 2004) involved the printing and dissemination of voting cards to all eligible voters. These figures do not include the hidden cost shouldered by the Swedish Tax Administration in maintaining the population registration database (including salaries and other operational expenses). In 1997, 614 employees at the cost of USD \$48,768,000, managed population registration

<sup>28</sup> CORE Case Study [http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/europe/ES/es-spain\\_core-part-ii-pdf.pdf/view?searchterm=spain](http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/europe/ES/es-spain_core-part-ii-pdf.pdf/view?searchterm=spain)

Lists of voters are distributed to the municipalities for a five-day revision period before every election and the municipality undertakes an extensive outreach effort to inform the voters of this reviewing period. Following revision, the Office of the Voter Registry distributes voter lists to each polling station and to the political parties. In 2004, these operations cost 13 million Euros, or \$USD 16 million (USD \$0.50 per voter), but these numbers include the management of "external voting" (vote by mail).

The major drawback of this system is the concern of citizens and privacy advocates about data sharing among government institutions. If the concerns are widespread, a civil registry may be simply unacceptable despite its usefulness. A good illustration of these concerns can be found in the great suspicion in the U.S. around the Carter-Baker Commission's recommendations. The Commission called for all voters to produce a standard photo identification card before being allowed to vote (either the REAL ID Card or a free photo ID provided by the states).<sup>29</sup>

## **Privacy Concerns**

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One widespread concern about these more inclusive ways of creating voters lists is the potential loss of privacy. In this regard, the registers specifically created for electoral purposes (periodic enumeration systems) need not include as much information as other types of registers and can therefore be more protective of personal data. However, many countries using data-sharing agreement and civil register systems have implemented creative ways to protect their citizen's privacy through the registration process:

### **Independent Agency Model**

The independence of the Electoral Management Body, avoiding political partisanship in the administration of elections, is one of the basic guarantees that help protect the privacy of voters.

- In Canada, the head of the electoral agency (Chief Electoral Officer) is nominated by parliament (appointed by a parliament resolution in a way that allow all parties represented there to contribute to the selection process), reports only to parliament and serves until retirement or resignation (this person can only be removed for cause by the Governor General, following a joint address of the House of Commons and Senate).
- The Australian approach to Electoral Management Body is quite similar, with statutorily independent bodies presiding over Commissioners. Perhaps most importantly, the individuals who run the federal and local election authorities occupy statutorily created positions; each is the Electoral Commissioner of his or her jurisdiction.

### **Opt-out provisions and silent registration**

Citizens in some countries with universal voter registration have the option of keeping their personal information confidential. Various reasons exist for these privacy concerns: people that have been subject to domestic violence, victims of crimes, and certain occupational groups such as police, judges, magistrates, and celebrities may wish to remain anonymous.

### ***The Canadian Model: the Principle of Active Consent***

The Canadian National Register of Electors contains basic information about each person—name, address, sex and date of birth—which is transferred to Elections Canada

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<sup>29</sup> Building Confidence in the US Elections: report of the Commission on Federal Election Reform, September 2005, American University, [http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/report/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.american.edu/ia/cfer/report/full_report.pdf)

only with the “active and informed consent” of the individual voter. For instance, on its income tax returns, the Canada Revenue Agency includes a section that Canadian tax filers can check to have their name, address and date of birth forwarded to Elections Canada. According to Revenue Canada, about 81% of tax filers agree to the transfer—an indication that informed consent does work.<sup>30</sup> Tax filers must give new consent for their details to be passed to Elections Canada every year, since people might not remember one year to the next whether they have given consent and another person may complete their tax return.

In addition, Canadian citizens have the right to have their information excluded from the National Register of Electors or prevent its transfer to the provinces and territories by writing to the Chief Electoral Officer. In this case, they still can vote using Same-Day registration at the polls, or by registering with the office of the returning officer at the time of an election.

### ***The Oceanian Model: Silent/Anonymous Voter Registration***

“Silent” or “anonymous” voter registration procedures were introduced in New Zealand and Australia in the 1980s as a means to allow certain categories of voters to not have their details appear on the voter roll. This provision seemed particularly necessary in these two countries because of the compulsory feature of the voting process (compulsory voting in Australia, compulsory registration in New Zealand). During the last electoral cycles, 0.35% of the New Zealand’s registered voters and 3.4% of the Australian voters were “anonymous” voters.<sup>31</sup>

At first blush, “anonymous registration” appears to be inconsistent with the principle of openness and transparency in the electoral process, since it does not allow the lists to be reviewed by citizens or political parties. This is why election management bodies in both Australia and New Zealand have sought to restrict access to this option to a relatively small number of individuals with legitimate reasons for wishing to remain anonymous. People requesting placement on the “silent voters list” must provide evidence their personal safety and security otherwise would be at risk, by completing an application form and a statutory declaration and supporting documentation setting out in detail the nature of the personal risk.

In Australia, silent enrolment means that the address (and the address only) of the elector will not be shown on any publicly available (published or circulated) electoral roll. In New Zealand, anonymous voters are only registered on the confidential electoral roll, the “Unpublished Electoral Roll,” which can only be viewed by the Registrar of Electors. Their enrollment details are not released to anyone, they do not appear at all on the published roll and the elector's details are not even supplied to local election officials. Both Australia and New Zealand also share the practice of making the list of “silent

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<sup>30</sup> 5% refused, 11% left the consent box blank in 1996-1997. See the Data Quality study on Elections Canada website :

<http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=ins&document=index&dir=int&lang=e&textonly=false>

<sup>31</sup> According to the ACE project <http://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/archive/questions/replies/648740563>

voters” available for scrutiny by a small number of party officials who take an oath to maintain the confidentiality of the list.

In Australia, “silent electors” can vote by mail (when they request a silent enrollment, they can also apply to be registered as permanent postal voters), pre-poll (early voting) or with provisional ballots on Election Day. In New Zealand, anonymous electors are required to cast a Special Declaration Vote (SDV), as their details are not on the roll used in polling precincts. In Sweden, the law regulating public access to the voters roll (Notification Register Act, Personal Information Act and Secrecy Act) are based on a similar principle: the public is generally allowed access to the population registration database through the local tax office, unless the person to whom the information applies will suffer a disadvantage as a result of the divulgement of the information.

### **Use of Personal Details**

In Canada, the voter roll is made available to a select group of people, including political parties and members of the House of Commons each year, and candidates at the time of an election. This information can only be used for electoral purposes, such as in soliciting contributions and recruiting members. Any other use of this information is illegal. In Italy, voter rolls are public documents, accessible, under the Constitution and the Italian Data Protection Act, for electoral, research or general interest purposes. The Supervisory Authority for Personal Data protection ensures that there is no abusive usage of the voter rolls.

### **Privacy Commissioner**

In Canada, a Privacy Commissioner has the right, at any time, to audit how information from the National Register of Electors is collected, stored, updated and used to ensure that the elector’s right to privacy is respected. Similarly, in Italy, an independent authority (Supervisory Authority for Personal Data Protection) regulates public access to the civil registry.

### **Registering Young Voters**

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Voting levels have historically been lowest among young people, and the registration process seems to be the primary barrier to their electoral participation. It has been estimated that 2% of the electorate attains voting age every year, but for various reasons (high mobility, reduced level of political attentiveness, lack of strong stake in their community of residence, etc.) these first-time voters are difficult to register. According to a 2005 Harvard University study, students are “more likely [than any other cohort of Americans] to cite registration mistakes or a lack of registration knowledge as a reason why they did not vote.”<sup>32</sup> And yet, there is some evidence that “those who do not vote when first they have an opportunity to do so, fall out of the voting pool.”<sup>33</sup> Effectively registering first-time voters may have a positive effect on participation in the long term. It

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<sup>32</sup> From Student Association for Voter Empowerment (SAVE) Fact Sheet:  
<http://www.savevoting.org/studentvoteract.html>

<sup>33</sup> ACE Electoral Network

is thus an important challenge for the election authority to launch initiatives to increase registration of first-time voters.

### **1. Provisional registration systems**

Some countries (i.e. Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, and two U.S. States (Florida and Hawaii)) have implemented provisional registration systems, by extending the effective period in which young people can enroll, in particular by adding a year in which they can be placed on a provisional list of electors. The election authority automatically moves those on the provisional list to the active voter roll upon their reaching the legal voting age.

This method provides the election authority with a considerably longer period of time in which to contact, and be contacted by those who are coming of voting age. It also provides the voters that turn 18 a few weeks before the election the same opportunity to register as those who turn 18 long before Election Day. In addition, it decreases registration activity during the revision period or before the voter registration deadline, leading to reduced burden on local election administrators.

The efficiency of the provisional registration system greatly varies between countries and states. The highest registration rate among the 17 year-olds seems to be in Australia, where approximately 16% of 17-year-olds are on the provisional list according to the Australian Electoral Commission (56% of 18 year-old are registered).

### **2. School-based registration drives**

In some countries (i.e. Australia, Canada), the electoral authority launches university and college campuses registration campaigns, using educational materials specially designed to target the youth.

This method seems particularly efficient when combined with a provisional registration system: in Australia, for instance, the Electoral Commission enters into agreements with high schools for registration activities: it pays a small per-capita amount of funding to the school, based on the number of students at the school who are registered on the provisional list of electors. The registration effort, thanks to the advance registration system, can take place in high school not only on college and university campuses. These policies acting in concert targets a broader group of students and allows for the introduction of civics classes into the curriculum for all students.

In the U.S., the Higher Education Act of 1998 requires universities to make a “good faith effort” to offer voter registration to students, but only 17% are in full compliance according to a 2004 Harvard University’s Institute of Politics and the Chronicle of Higher Education study.<sup>34</sup> In addition, efforts to engage young Americans in the democratic process focused on college students, missing about half of young voters who are not in

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<sup>34</sup> Harvard University Institute of Politics and Chronicle of Higher Education, “Survey of College and University Voter Registration and Mobilization Efforts”, September 13, 2004  
Full Text at: [www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/chronicle\\_poll\\_2004\\_summary.pdf](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/chronicle_poll_2004_summary.pdf)

college, including a disproportionate number of African-American and Latino students. This is why some U.S. states have developed creative approaches to school-based registration drives, to reach the majority of young people.

These practices and bills include: providing a voter registration form with every high school diploma (Florida failed bill S 436 in the 2008 legislature), requiring high schools to provide a summary of voter registration requirements and organize an annual registration drive coupled with civic education classes (New Jersey A-2752, South Carolina HB3604), allowing voter registration at offices of public high school guidance counselors (Louisiana HB 990), requiring schools to publish a report of their voter registration practices (California AB 183) or even making voter registration a requirement for graduation. These practices could be particularly efficient in states like Florida and Hawaii, who allow 16-year-old pre-registration. On a federal level, the Student Voter Act would require all universities that receive federal funds to offer voter registration to students at the same time they register for classes (thus designating universities that receive federal funds as “voter registration agencies” for purposes of the National Voter Registration Act).<sup>35</sup>

### **3. Birthday cards**

In Canada and some U.S. States (i.e. Minnesota, California, Michigan, Arizona), the election authority, by sharing data files with motor vehicle authorities, tax authorities or other government agencies, puts together a list of electors turning 18. It then generates a piece of direct mail to these electors, which may include political education material, and a voter registration form.

This method has several advantages: it personalizes the contact with the citizen, and allows a civic education dimension, which is more likely to boost participation and political activity among the youth. In addition, it is extremely cost effective. The non-partisan group Rock The Vote’s 2007 experiment found that direct mail operations generate a completed registration for \$5-7 per application.<sup>36</sup> According to the group’s website, six percent of those mailed a form completed the application in Rock the Vote’s 2007 test; eight percent returned the registration form when also sent an email reminder. In addition, birthday card programs seem to have slightly better results than regular direct mail programs. Interestingly, Rock the Vote also found that “official-looking” direct mail pieces have the best rates of return, which suggests that such operation would be more efficient if conducted by government agencies than by third parties and partisan groups.

A good example of birthday card program is Victoria (Canada). The Victoria Electoral Commission sends a birthday card to electors turning 17 to congratulate them on being eligible for the provisional electoral roll. 27% of 17-years old are on the electoral roll

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<sup>35</sup> *Student Voter Opportunity to Encourage Registration Act of 2008* introduced in Congress in 2008 by Representatives Jan Schakowsky and Steven LaTourette as well as Senator Dick Durbin)

<sup>36</sup> More cost/registration comparative data on <http://www.completecampaigns.com/article.asp?articleid=117>

This rate is 10 percentage points higher than in Australia, where there are no birthday cards but a similar advance registration system.

#### **4. Youth Medias**

##### **New technologies**

Young citizens tend to use the Internet more than the general population. On-line registration (see part 1) systems are likely to be particularly effective in increasing registration among youth. Also, electoral authorities have developed the use of Internet for their outreach activities targeting young people. For instance, Elections New Zealand uses social network sites like Bebo and has launched a “young voter” website, designed in consultation with young people (<http://www.ivotenz.org.nz/>) Another successful use of new technologies in New Zealand was the introduction in 2005 of a text messaging service where eligible applicants could request enrollment form via text message. In the first two weeks of the campaign, the Center received close to 18,000 text messages. This represented two times more enrolment forms than where sent in 2002, when this program did not exist.

##### **“Edutainment”**

The electoral authority may also take the lead on “edutainment” activities, currently organized by non-profit groups or PACs in the U.S., notably by Rock The Vote, a nonpartisan group that uses music and popular culture to engage and incite young people to register to vote. Indeed, the election authority might host and/or sponsor events that appeal to young electors (music concerts and festivals), and then weave registration activities into this event (by having the entertainers encourage attendees to complete voter registration forms that are provided by the election authority). Although information about the cost-per-enrollment for this initiative is not available, New Zealand officials (New Zealand has been a pioneer on this domain with the Let’s Get Loud Campaign), describe this strategy as “highly effective.”<sup>37</sup>

#### **5. Automatic registration**

Some countries automatically register young citizens to vote. These countries may or may not automatically register all other citizens. France, for instance, has a self-initiated system except for 18 years old voters, who are automatically added to the rolls. These automatic registration practices use traditional data-sharing partnerships, with the census authorities or other government agencies. In France, all 17 year-olds have to attend a Selective Service one-day event, in which the census authority registers them. Their personal details are then transferred to their local election authority so that they can be automatically registered on the voter rolls.

In some countries with automatic voter registration programs (i.e. Belgium, Germany) young people are added to the lists if they turn 18 by Election Day. In others (i.e. Spain,

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<sup>37</sup> Increasing youth voter registration, best practices in targeting young electors, Keith Archer, July 2003. Available on line at [http://www.elections.ca/eca/eim/article\\_search/article.asp?id=51&lang=e&frmPageSize=&textonly=false](http://www.elections.ca/eca/eim/article_search/article.asp?id=51&lang=e&frmPageSize=&textonly=false)

Italy), where the lists are not updated continuously, the 17 year olds are also added to provisional lists if they turn 18 before the next revision.

### **Institutional structure**

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A country’s voter registration process allows it to compile voter lists for elections at every level of government. This is why the institutional structure of the election authorities varies widely among countries.

#### **Top-Down Process: The Australian Model**

Australia has a single election authority—the Australian Electoral Commission—that is responsible for maintaining up-to-date electoral rolls for federal, State and Territory and local government elections. There is a single national registration database and voters’ entries on the federal electoral roll are coded to indicate if the voter is also eligible for elections in the relevant state or territory. This way, each State or Territory concludes a “Joint Roll Agreement” with the AEC and can then be provided with an accurate extract from the federal electoral roll for its own elections.

#### **Bottom Up Process: The Italian Model**

By contrast, in Italy, voter lists are generated by drawing from the Resident Population Registry, maintained at the local level by Municipal Registry Offices.

#### **Election Authorities in Italy**

Municipal Electoral Commission	Composed of municipal councilors, elected by the municipal council. Presided by the mayor.	Ascertains qualification/disqualifications to vote and residence location of the voters.
Territorial Electoral Commission	Composed of persons proposed by the political parties and elected by the provincial council + 1 member appointed by the prefecture. Presided by a Deputy Prefect	Decision about inclusion or cancellation of any citizen from the lists of electors and adjudication of appeals
Electoral Office	Municipal Electoral Commissions + Territorial Electoral Commissions, under guidance of the ministry of interior	Generation, approval, certification of the voters’ lists, monitoring all periodic or extraordinary revisions.

#### **Interacting Institutional Levels: The Canadian Model**

Since 2000, Elections Canada has shared Register data and/or collaborated on registration initiatives with provincial electoral agencies in British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Prince Edward Island, and with municipal electoral agencies, including that of the City of Winnipeg. These efforts allow all agencies to

improve data quality, minimize duplication of effort, and save money. Provincial electoral agencies can use the NRE to prepare their local elections, but also contribute to improving its quality through gathering information from health care agencies, individual electors (locally registering or/and updating their information at the polling place), or the public curator (responsible of tutorship and curatorships).

## **Conclusion**

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The current self-initiated system for voter registration in the U.S. is anachronistic and inefficient and could be greatly improved by implementing other techniques to keep the rolls up-to-date. The first easy steps to be taken towards universal registration are the implementation of some kind of on-line registration opportunities and a significant expansion of Election Day Registration. But, most significantly, data-sharing agreements should be conducted with more government agencies, notably with vital records maintained in each state, county-based Clerks of Court, USPS, and tax offices on every level of government. On these agencies applications and records, citizens could have the opportunity to register to vote by checking a box to assert their “active” consent and declare they are American citizens.

Specific programs should be implemented for the registration of young voters. The best approach to targeting the youth seems to be the creation of a provisional list (16 and 17-year-old registration), in conjunction with high school-based registration drives and birthday card programs at 17 and 18 years old. Also, the U.S. system could be improved by allowing room for federal level supervision (or certification) of the voter lists (in a European fashion), or interoperability of voters list between States, as the Carter Baker Commission recommended. Of all the democracies studied, only the U.S. has no national lists or standards for voter registration.



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