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Legal voters thrown off rolls

By Richard Wolf / [USA Today](#)

Five years after passage of a federal law to create electronic registration databases to deter voter fraud, the new technology is posing hurdles that could disenfranchise thousands of legal voters, a USA TODAY examination finds.

From Florida to Washington, voters have been challenged because names or numbers on their registration forms did not exactly match other government databases, such as Social Security and motor vehicle agencies. "We know that eligible people have been thrown off the rolls," says Justin Levitt, a lawyer with the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law.

The databases are only as good as the information fed into them by applicants and election officials. That can lead to human errors as well as variations from state to state. Colorado, for instance, knocked nearly 20% of its voters off the rolls between the 2004 and 2006 elections. Arkansas purged 3%, according to Election Assistance Commission data.

Voters who have problems at the polls can cast "provisional" ballots. Election officials rule later whether those votes were properly cast and should be counted. But even that backup system varies greatly from state to state.

More than nine in 10 provisional ballots cast in New Jersey, Oregon, Maine, Montana and Alaska were approved in 2006. Michigan, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Delaware and Hawaii counted fewer than 25%, the Election Assistance Commission says.

After Florida's "hanging chads" in 2000 and Ohio's long lines in 2004, registration problems "could be the sleeper issue of 2008," says Doug Chapin of electionline.org, which tracks voting issues. "These new databases make it possible to make more mistakes faster," he says.

A day before voters begin choosing the next president, there are signs of database troubles. In Wisconsin, Elections Board Executive Director Kevin Kennedy says, "the users keep complaining that it's too complex." In Texas, Henderson County opted out of the database after voters griped about being dropped from the list. "I was just afraid to trust it," says voter registrar Milburn Chaney.

Perhaps the worst problems are in Florida, where a Gannett News Service analysis found more than 14,000 people whose voter registrations were disputed by the state because they didn't match other databases; about 75% are minorities. A federal district court ruled last month that the state couldn't deny registrations based on database matching.

Federal officials say the system is evolving — and improving. "Even with the top-notch best database in the world, you're still going to have human error," says Thomas Wilkey, the election commission's executive director.

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