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Detroit has more registered voters than residents over 18, Census finds

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There are about 560,000 registered voters in the city of Detroit. But the 2010 U.S. Census found only 523,430 Detroiters over 18, according to [Data Driven Detroit](#).*

So that's a problem.

Detroit's voter rolls have been plagued by duplicate, incorrect or invalid registrations for a long time, and bringing the lists into compliance is a Herculean task.

"Because of the [National Voter Registration Act \(of 1983\)](#), we are required to hold onto and include in our count those who more than likely be should cancelled because they have moved, relocated and the like, or there has been no activity for a number of years," City Clerk Janice Winfrey said. "However, we have to hold them for two consecutive federal elections. So after this federal election, by the beginning of 2013, we'll have nearly 30,000 we can cancel."

In other circumstances, federal law only allows local election officials to purge a name from the voter rolls when notified by the individual or a reliable source of information (such as a death certificate) that the person is no longer eligible to vote in that district — or if a voter registration card is returned as undeliverable by the U.S. Postal Service.

Detroit Director of Elections Daniel Baxter said that his department has been working with the health department and local newspapers to get accurate information about deaths. (Neither dying nor moving automatically purges a voter from the rolls, unless, in the case of the latter, the former resident receives a new driver's license – and voter registration – in another jurisdiction.)

In Detroit, a highly transient population complicates matters, Winfrey said.

Winfrey said Congressional re-districting will help the city in its efforts to maintain the voter rolls – each registered voter will receive a new registration card, and those returned to the clerk's office marked "undeliverable" can be purged.

Baxter said that the state is working to develop a new tracking system that will help place voters on the rolls in the appropriate jurisdiction.

He also points to Detroit Mayor Dave Bing's contention that the Census undercounted Detroit. Bing said he plans to challenge the count, and hopes to add at least 40,000 to Detroit's official population of just over 713,000.

Adding 40,000 residents wouldn't fix the problem, based on the figures provided to Crain's by Data Driven Detroit. The purge would bring the number of registered voters down to about 530,000, still more than the population over 18; it's inconceivable that, should 40,000 uncounted residents be found, they'd all be over 18.

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But Detroit - and the state of Michigan - do have high rates of voter registration, said Vince Keenan, executive director of nonprofit voter education resource [Publius.org](#), thanks to the national voter registration act, which allows voters to register while applying for a driver's license or state-issued identification card.

There's been no allegation of voter fraud on Winfrey's watch. During the tenure of Winfrey's predecessor, the late Jackie Currie, it was alleged that ballots were cast on behalf of dead people, and that Currie had sent "ambassadors" to fill out absentee ballots on behalf of the incapacitated. Currie lost her seat to Winfrey in 2005, amid the controversy.

The laws that dictate when a name can be removed from the rolls reflect the value of giving a potential voter every opportunity to cast a ballot, Keenan said.

"I think the important thing about the disparity in those numbers is to understand why that disparity exists," he said. "The reason is not to allow for fraud. The reason is because at any given time you want to give voters the best opportunity possible to show up and vote.

"There are two reasons the number of voters comes up regularly. One is fraud, the other is turnout statistics. Neither trump the primary concern: that anybody who could vote in any given election has the capacity to do so."

Keenan said even when proof of deliberate fraud doesn't exist, the fear remains.

"But fear and concern about deliberate fraud does not allow you to disenfranchise voters," he said. "This is one of those areas where the threshold for cutting somebody out of the franchise should be very high."

**Figures used in this post are courtesy data clearinghouse [Data Driven Detroit](#), which is an extremely handy place to find facts and figures for southeast Michigan.*

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