

PURGING: BACKGROUND AND KEY MESSAGES

States are pressured to purge their voter rolls of ineligible voters or duplicate records. But they often do so without adequate protections for eligible voters. For example, the lists states use as the basis for purging voter rolls may be riddled with inaccuracies, resulting in the removal of many eligible citizens. The substantial discretion many states vest in election officials leaves room for manipulation of purges to remove certain votes. And although federal law requires states to follow specific procedures, such as notifying certain voters before removing their names from a list, states nevertheless conduct purges without informing individuals, denying them an opportunity to protect their rights. Unfair challenges or caging practices may also lead to the removal of eligible voters from the rolls.

ACCESS DENIED: RECENT PURGE EFFORTS IN FLORIDA AND VIRGINIA

Florida and Virginia provide chilling examples of what purging looks like. In 2012, Florida officials initially claimed to have identified 180,000 suspected non-citizens on the voter rolls, which was ultimately reduced to approximately 2,700 to be purged from the rolls. That purge list contained a disproportionately high number of Latino surnames. While Latinos compose 13 percent of Florida's registered voters, an analysis found they made up 58 percent of that group of approximately 2,700. From the 180,000 to fewer than 3,000, Florida eventually found fewer than 40 non-citizens suspected of voting illegally. When election officials attempted to purge voters again in 2013, the state suspended the effort after extensive public backlash.

In the lead up to the 2013 gubernatorial election, Virginia election boards were directed to comb through voter registration

WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

- **Key Need — Informing Voters:** More than half of likely voters have not heard about laws that change voting rules and a plurality think they make no difference — positive or negative.
- **Opportunity — Opposition to Political Meddling:** 75 percent of likely 2014 voters polled believe we must “stop politicians from doing things like creating lists of voters to purge from the rolls.”
- **Opportunity — Support for Voter Protection:** Over half of all likely 2014 voters believe that “the government should ensure that no American citizen is denied the right to vote because of complex voter registration rules or errors on the voter rolls.”

BILL INTERNICOLA: An Example Of Purging Gone Wrong

One of the many examples of someone being unfairly removed from a voter list is Bill Internicola. Internicola is a 91-year old World War II veteran who received a letter from the state of Florida asking him to prove his citizenship or be removed from the voting rolls. His case illustrates the tenuous information that too often guides voter roll purges.

files with a view to purging up to 57,000 voters who showed up on a database of voters registered in more than one state. Local officials found the list was full of errors and some refused to participate in the purge. After about two weeks of legal skirmishing, the purge went ahead when a federal district court judge denied a temporary restraining order to halt the effort.

The Virginia voter purge was a demonstration of inadequate safeguards. The data used to identify voters was of dubious quality, and registrars had little guidance on how to strike voters. It was implemented late, and voters were purged from the rolls without prior notice. The entire process lacked transparency.

FIGHTING BACK: VICTORIES AGAINST VOTER PURGES

Over the past few years, voters have won significant legal victories in Florida to combat voter purges. Voters also received a favorable decision in an ongoing lawsuit in Iowa on a proposed voter purge. Meanwhile, Virginia has introduced a bill to improve voter list maintenance to protect eligible individuals against wrongful removal.

KEY MESSAGES

Advocates engaged in campaigns to combat wide-sweeping purges of voting rolls can draw upon the following messages to reach key audiences:

- We can all agree that removing ineligible voters from the rolls is critical to protecting the integrity of our election system — but purging thousands of eligible Americans from the voter lists is plainly wrong. When politicians make lists of voters to purge, these lists are typically full of mistakes. Lots of longtime voters get unfairly caught up in the process and risk losing their rights. Voting should be free, fair, and accessible.
- Our country is founded on the principle that we are all “created equal.” Living up to this promise — to provide all citizens the same freedoms and opportunities — means that it is wrong to pass laws or adopt policies that block some eligible Americans from voting and deny them the opportunity to participate equally in our democracy.
- As the leading democracy in the world, our voting system should be free, fair, and accessible to all eligible Americans.

- In some states, politicians have developed lists and purged eligible voters from the voter rolls. These purge lists are dangerous political tools used by some politicians who want to stop certain citizens from having their say.
- Protecting the integrity of our election system is important. But politicians creating lists that include thousands of eligible voters to purge from the voter rolls is not the solution.
- We must protect our elections against voter fraud of all kinds. That includes keeping ineligible people from voting. But we must also protect the voting rights of millions of eligible Americans who risk having their right to vote taken away because politicians have created flawed lists of people to purge from voter rolls.
- Military service members who often move, college students who have changed their address, veterans, seniors, and families with foreclosed homes are most often the ones affected by deeply flawed voter purges.

For more on new voting restrictions passed since the 2010 election, visit:

www.brennancenter.org/votingsince2010

KEY FACTS

When engaged in efforts to protect voters from capricious removal from eligibility roles, some facts advocates can cite include:

- **Purges Rely on Error-Ridden Lists:**

States regularly attempt to purge voter lists of ineligible voters or duplicate registration records. But the lists that states use as the basis for purging are often riddled with errors, which, without adequate safeguards, may put voters at risk. For example, some states purge their voter lists based on the Social Security Administration's Death Master File, a database that even the Social Security Administration admits includes people who are still alive.

- **Purging Can Unfairly Target**

Minority Voters: In 2012, Florida officials initially created a list of 180,000 suspected non-citizens to purge from the voter rolls. The list was ultimately reduced to approximately 2,700, of which only 40 were investigated. That purge list contained a disproportionately high number of Latino surnames. While Latinos compose 13 percent of Florida's registered voters, an analysis found they made up 58 percent of that group of approximately 2,700.