

Voter Roll Purges: Dos and Don'ts

Voter list maintenance ensures accurate rolls and efficient election administration. But purges must be conducted lawfully and prudently, so eligible voters are not removed.

Purges can go wrong in a number of ways. For example, in 2019, Texas sought to purge nearly 100,000 voters who were purportedly noncitizens, but the state's data was faulty. In 2017, Indiana passed a law that directed a purge of voters suspected of relocating, without giving those voters notice (which violates federal law). [Reporting](#) in 2019 revealed that Iowa had removed voters from the rolls improperly because of incorrect criminal history information and weak matches between the list of those with felony convictions and the voter rolls. Federal courts stopped the problematic purges in [Texas](#) and [Indiana](#). [Iowa](#) committed to fixing their procedures in response to calls for reform.

Still, some activists encourage extreme purge practices as a voter suppression tactic. In [2017](#) and [2019](#), activists sent a series of letters to local election officials threatening them with legal action if they do not undertake more aggressive purges. Tellingly, since 2013—when the Supreme Court struck down the formula for determining which jurisdictions needed federal approval to change their election laws—jurisdictions with a history of racially discriminatory election practices have increased their purge rates more than other jurisdictions.

To help avoid erroneous and problematic purges:

- **DO audit source lists.** States should review and confirm the accuracy of any lists of potentially ineligible or relocated voters before relying on that data to cancel registrations.
- **DO conduct voter list maintenance programs well before an election.** The National Voter Registration Act (“NVRA”) requires systematic purges to be complete 90 days before a federal election.
- **DO give public *and* individualized notice in an advance of a purge.** Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Public and personal notice of an upcoming purge gives voters the chance to correct and avoid errors.
- **DO encourage voters to check their registration statuses.** Although the burden to prevent wrongful purges should not be on voters, voters can take steps to protect themselves from mistakes.
- **DO maintain a list of purged voters on Election Day.** If a voter's name is not on the rolls, poll workers should check to see if that voter was purged, and make sure eligible voters can cast a ballot that counts.
- **DON'T ignore legal protections against purges.** Federal law sets forth important protections for purges and election administrators should be very familiar with the obligations of the NVRA, the Voting Rights Act, the Help America Vote Act, and any existing state protections.
- **DON'T initiate a purge based on unsubstantiated claims.** A comparison of Census data and county voter registration figures does not mean a jurisdiction is failing to remove ineligible voters.
- **DON'T use weak matching criteria.** Matching birthdays and last names, for example, do not alone establish that the ineligible person on one list is the same person on the voter registration list.
- **DON'T turn voters away from the polls.** If voters' names are not found on the rolls or purge lists, they should be given provisional ballots. Provisional ballots should be carefully examined and counted unless there is affirmative evidence that the voter is ineligible.