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No-confidence vote on voter rolls

*BY ROCHELLE RILEY
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Detroit election officials confirmed Monday what an analysis of census and population records shows: The city has more registered voters than it has residents over the voting age of 18.

But Detroit is doing nothing wrong. The problem? The 1993 National Voter Registration Act, which took effect in 1995, requires local officials to wait two federal election cycles before purging their voter rolls. That means that all cities carry ineligible voters each year.

Kurt Metzger -- director of the Detroit Area Community Information System, the city's newest data center -- did the new analysis using 2000 U.S. Census data, SEMCOG population figures and the age distribution report in the 2007 American Community Survey.

He estimates that Detroit's population is about 853,000, which includes 603,000 people over 18 -- 30,000 fewer than the city reported as its total of registered voters.

"Even if you had 100% voter registration, which we know we don't have, you could not have numbers that high," he said. "Nationally, 67.6% of Americans are registered to vote. For African Americans, it's 60.9%."

Metzger estimates that Detroit's voter registration is closer to 422,000.

"He's right," Daniel Baxter, director of elections in Detroit said Monday -- but not about the number.

Following, amending the law

Baxter said that a city mailing in 2005 resulted in 47,000 cards returned as undeliverable.

After federal elections in 2006 and 2008, those names were removed from the rolls. Baxter said that the city will report its voter registration next month at about 575,000.

But not being able to remove the names sooner meant that, for two election cycles, city officials had to report registration higher than they knew it was.

Detroit City Clerk Janice Winfrey said her main second-term initiative is to work with Congress to amend the law.

"Our rolls are very clean, but because of NVRA, we can only purge after two federal elections," she said. "The problem is when people ask us for our voter files, we have to give them those numbers, including those we know are to be canceled. So when those guys run those statistics, it may appear that our files are bloated."

Until there is an amendment, Winfrey said, "I'm following the letter of the law."

Detroit has purged 128,000 voters since 2006.

Fairness and accuracy

Metzger, who began his career in 1975 with the U.S. Census Bureau and has worked since for Wayne State University and United Way of Southeastern Michigan, said his findings also call into question a state report of 98% voter registration for last November's election.

If the state total is "an accumulation of local government reporting their number of registered voters, then the problems pointed out in Detroit are replicated in larger cities across Michigan," he said.

The problems always have been about fairness and accuracy. The national law was changed to prevent disenfranchisement. But, before the law, cities could purge their rolls every year. And Detroit did.

Voter registration is always a moving target. Cities purge records when people leave or die but when they don't respond, the wait is longer.

As Detroit prepares for its second of four city elections this year, one would hope to get a true sense of who is electing whom.

The law should be amended so cities don't have to wait four years to get a glimpse of the big picture -- and how to make it better.

Contact **ROCHELLE RILEY** at rriley99@freepress.com.
