ELECTIONS

Additional Data Could Help State and Local Elections Officials Maintain Accurate Voter Registration Lists

Why GAO Did This Study

Reports of ineligible persons registering to vote raised concerns about state processes for verifying voter registration lists. States base voter eligibility generally on the voter's age, U.S. citizenship, mental competence, and felon status. Although states run elections, Congress has authority to affect the administration of elections. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) sets a deadline for states to have a statewide voter registration list and list verification procedures. For this report, GAO selected seven states (AZ, CA, MI, NY, TX, VA, and WI) to represent a range of characteristics relevant to voter registrations, such as whether a statewide voter list existed prior to HAVA. This report discusses how these states verify voter registration eligibility; the challenges they face in maintaining accurate voter lists; the progress toward implementing HAVA registration requirements; and identifies federal data sources that might be used to help verify voter registration eligibility.

What GAO Recommends

To help assure voter lists are accurate, GAO recommends that U.S. Attorneys provide notices of federal felony conviction in a standardized format, and that the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts study the feasibility of sharing certain citizenship-related U.S. district court juror information with state election officials. Officials at these federal agencies agreed with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-478.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact William O. Jenkins, Jr., at (202) 512-8777 or JenkinsWO@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The methods used in seven selected states to verify voter eligibility and ensure accuracy of voter registration lists were varied and include relying on registrant self attestation, return mailings, and checking against lists of felony convictions or deceased individuals. Election officials from the selected states described some challenges that may be resolved when HAVA is fully implemented, such as reducing duplicates within the state. Other challenges—identifying duplicate registrations in other states or having insufficient information to match other data sources with voter registration lists—may continue to be issues.

The seven states are in different phases of implementing HAVA statewide voter registration lists and eligibility verification requirements. Arizona implemented its statewide voter list by the January 1, 2004, deadline, and the other six states applied for a January 1, 2006, waiver. Of those six states, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin awarded contracts to develop new voter lists that are designed to address HAVA requirements. Michigan has had a statewide list since 1998, and officials believe it is near HAVA compliant. California election officials are still considering how to meet these HAVA requirements, and in New York, legislation was passed in May 2005 to create the state voter registration lists.

Federal data sources have the potential to help state election officials identify registrants who may be convicted felons or non-citizens. While the potential number identified may be small, an election can be decided by a few votes. Regarding felons, U.S. Attorneys are required to notify state election officials of federal felony convictions, but the information was not always easy for election officials to interpret or complete. Federal jury services generally do not now, but might feasibly be able to notify elections officials when potential jurors drawn from local voter registration lists claim to be non-citizens.

Federal Juror Qualification Questionnaire

Source: U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Virginia.