

# 8 The First Step: Registering to Vote

In every State except North Dakota, before any citizen can cast a ballot, he or she must be registered to vote. Jurisdictions need a list of registered voters to be certain that only eligible citizens cast a ballot and that a voter receives the appropriate ballot and only votes once. Election officials also need to know how many polling places to establish, where to open the polling places, and how many voting machines or paper ballots will be needed. Up-to-date registration rolls also mean that citizens can be provided the correct information beforehand about when and where elections will be held.

While the specific registration requirements vary by State (see Registration), registering to vote generally means that a citizen must fill out a form that includes his or her name, current address, age, and in some States covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, race. In most States, citizens must also provide proof of identification (and sometimes citizenship) to register.

## How Many Are Eligible?

In 2006, the estimated voting age population (VAP), defined as persons 18 years and over, reported by the Bureau of the Census was 225,664,000 for the 50 States and the District of Columbia. This reflects data from the standard estimates program of the Bureau, which depicts estimates as of July 1 of the specific year. VAP data by State is shown in table 28b. These data have not been changed to reflect any shift that may have occurred between July 1 and election day (November 7, 2006).

In 2007, the Census Bureau began releasing State estimates from its annual American Community Survey (ACS) program, which showed citizenship voting age population (CVAP) estimates for 2006. The nationwide number for CVAP for 2006 was 206,286,000. The estimates are not available for counties at this time but will be by 2010. The State CVAP data are also reported in both table A on page 13 of this report and in table 28b in appendix B<sup>1</sup>.

Historically, many studies of turnout have used the VAP as the universe for participation rates, although more recently CVAP has been cited<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, because there are no consistent and reliable data by State and locality on items relating to voter ineligibility, such as the number of felons and the number of mentally incapacitated persons, these factors have not been taken into account to approximate the number of persons eligible to register to vote.

## Registration

Most States require eligible persons to register to vote in advance of the election. Six States—Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—allow persons to register on election day. (Rhode Island allows those registering on election day to vote in the Presidential election only.) North Dakota does not have voter registration.

Nearly 173 million persons were registered to vote for the 2006 elections—an increase of nearly 12.1 million over the four-year period since the last midterm election in 2002. In the same four-year period, the VAP increased 4.9 percent, and the number of registered voters increased 7.5 percent. The percentage of Americans age 18 or older who were registered to vote increased from 74.7 percent in 2002 to 76.6 percent in 2006.

In the two-year period since the 2004 Presidential election, however, the actual number of registered voters has decreased. In 2004, there were nearly 176.2 million registered voters in the nation; this number declined to 172.8 million for the 2006 elections.

Although part of the decrease is due to the absence of registration data for Puerto Rico for 2006, the number still reflects a decrease in the number of registered voters in 2006 from 173.2 million (minus Puerto Rico) registered voters in 2004.

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<sup>1</sup>Source: Bureau of the Census, American Factfinder Web site, report: SC-EST2006\_18PLUSPOP: Estimates of the Total Resident Population and Resident Population Age 18 Years and Over for the United States and States: July 1, 2006.

<sup>2</sup>However, note that estimates of the voting age population may differ, as estimates may be made throughout the election cycle.

## Registering to Vote

To be eligible to vote, a person must be a U.S. citizen, meet a residency requirement, and have attained the age of 18 by election day. Eligibility varies according to State laws. Depending on State law, persons who have been legally declared mentally incompetent or who have been convicted of a felony and have not had their civil rights legally restored may not vote.

Individuals can obtain registration applications from the local election official in that person's county or city or town of residence or through registration outreach programs sponsored by various private groups. Federal registration forms and many State forms are now accessible on the Internet.

In addition, individuals can also register when applying for a driver's license or identity card at their State's Department of Motor Vehicles or the driver's licensing offices, at offices providing public assistance, at offices providing State-funded programs for the disabled, and at Armed Forces recruitment offices.

The National Mail Voter Registration Form is the one document that allows individuals to register to vote from anywhere in the United States. The form is available at [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov).

The decrease also reflects the normal drop in registration that takes place following a Presidential election when non-voters are removed from the registration rolls (following procedures required under the National Voter Registration Act of 1993).

Between 2004 and 2006, 32 States reported actual decreases in registration numbers, while 17 States reported actual increases (excluding North Dakota, Wisconsin [only towns with more than 5,000 residents required registration before 2006], and four U.S. territories). For voter registration, States are creating a statewide voter registration database by compiling the previously decentralized county-level voter registration files. For many States, this change allowed for crosschecking of voters who moved from one jurisdiction to another but who had failed to notify their originating jurisdiction of their move. As a result, some of the decrease in voter registration numbers may be attributed to the removal of duplicate registrations.

### Active versus Inactive Voter Rolls

Once registered, a person becomes an "active voter," a designation indicating the voter is eligible

to vote in an upcoming election. In some States, a voter may be moved to an "inactive" list if the person does not vote in two consecutive Federal elections and if election officials have been unable to contact a person and verify his or her registration status. Only 40 States compiled counts of inactive registration in 2006, while 10 States (Alaska, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) and four U.S. territories either did not track inactive voters or (in Kentucky's instance) were not able to provide information on inactive voters.

The EAC's *Election Day Survey* (now called the *Election Administration and Voting Survey*), first conducted in 2004, found that different States report voter registration totals in different ways. In the 2006 survey, the EAC found that 24 States and the District of Columbia provided numbers of registered voters that included *active* voters only. In contrast, numbers from 25 States include both *active* and *inactive* voters. In California, most counties report only active voters in its registration numbers, but San Francisco and Sierra Counties combine active and inactive voters. North Dakota does not have voter registration.

Given these variances in registration numbers, the EAC's contractor compiled "reported registration" numbers for the November, 2006 general election from the States' Web sites and the State Election Directors to compare these figures to the numbers collected in the *Election Administration and Voting Survey*. These data are used in table A in this report and in table 28b in appendix B.

The 2006 survey shows that more than 160.3 million *active* voters were on the registration rolls in November 2006. In addition, more than 21.2 million *inactive* voters were tallied in 40 States. The change in *active* voters over the past two and four years, respectively, follows the same pattern exhibited in the reported registration<sup>3</sup>: an increase compared to 2002 and a decrease compared to 2004. On the other hand, the change in the *inactive* registration counts shows a steady increase in each two-year period since 2002.

Compared to the 2004 Presidential election, the current study shows at least 3.4 million fewer active voters in the nation (going from 163.7 million in 2004 to 160.3 million in 2006). This decrease is also reflected in the share of the nation's voters who were active or inactive. Active voters declined from 89.1 percent of all registered voters in 2004 to 88.3 percent in 2006. Correspondingly, inactive voters increased from 10.9 percent of all voters in 2004 to 11.7 percent in 2006.

Based on the 2006 survey responses provided by a number of States, the percentage of the voter lists that are classified as active registrants varies greatly across the States. Nine States and two territories indicated no inactive voters; 18 States indicated less than 10 percent inactive; 20 States indicated between 10 and 20 percent inactive; and two States indicated more than 20 percent inactive (California, 26.8 percent; Oregon, 21.6 percent)<sup>4</sup>.

## Percent Registered of Voting Age Population

For 2006, the reported registration data represent a registration rate of 76.6 percent of the VAP in the participating States and territories—an increase from the 74.7 percent registration rate recorded for the 2002 elections. Data for earlier years are available in the EAC's 2006 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) report<sup>5</sup>, compiled from information collected by the Federal Election Commission.

A comparison of the 2006 election with the previous midterm 2002 election cycle indicates that most States experienced an increase in the percentage of VAP that were reported as registered to vote. For example, in Georgia, the reported registration rose from 59.9 percent of the voting age population of that State in 2002 to 63.8 percent of VAP in 2006. Likewise, in Maine, the rate of registration increased from 94.3 percent to 95.5 percent over the same period.

On the other hand, a comparison of the 2006 election with the previous Federal election cycle of 2004 indicates that most States experienced a decrease in both the actual number of registered voters and in the percentage of voting age population that is registered. Nationwide, approximately 176.1 million voters were registered for the November 2004 Presidential general election. At least 3.3 million fewer registered voters were registered for the November 2006 general election. Some of this decrease may be attributable to the fact that Puerto Rico did not respond to the 2006 survey.

<sup>3</sup>Reported registration refers to a tabulation of registration data collected from the States independent of the survey responses.

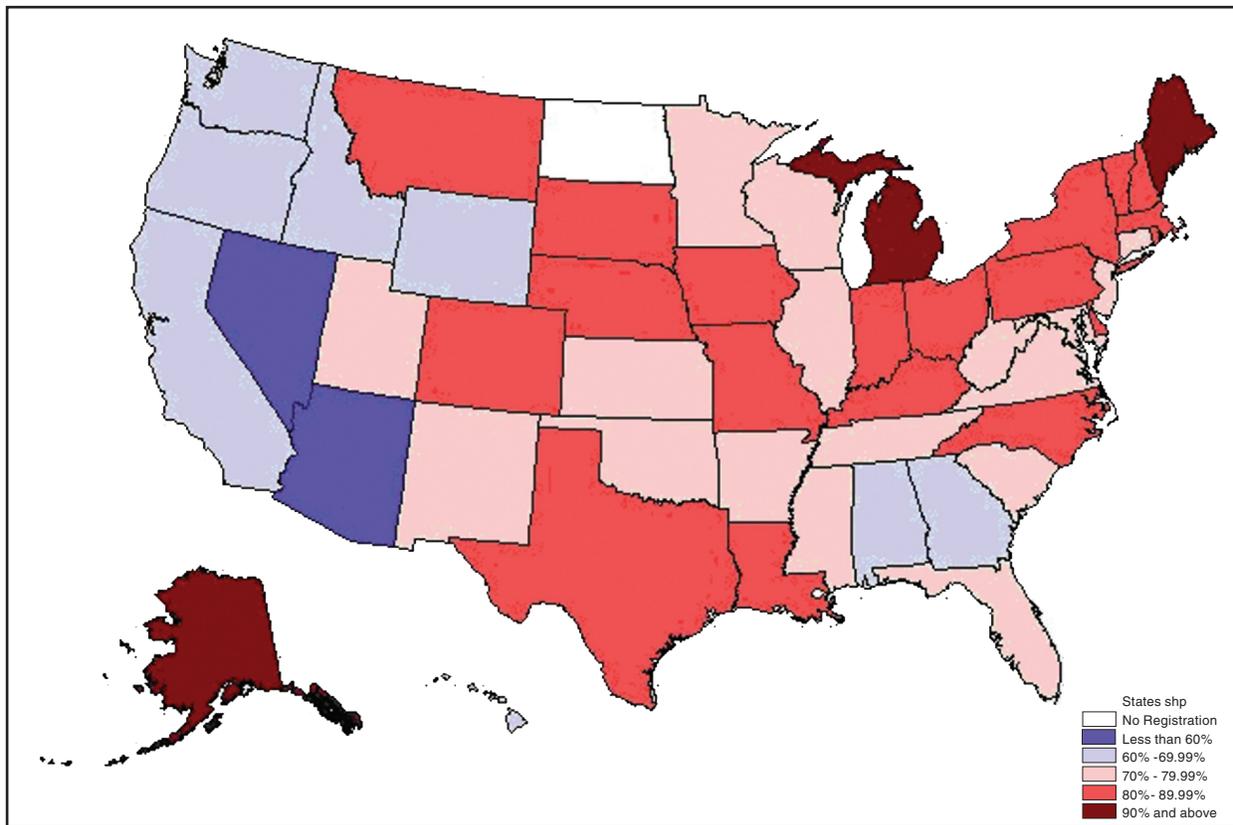
<sup>4</sup>More information on voter registration numbers can be found in "The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 on the Administration of Elections for Federal Office, 2005-2006." This report was delivered to Congress on June 30, 2007, and can be downloaded at [http://www.eac.gov/clearinghouse/docs/the-impact-of-the-national-voter-registration-act-on-federal-elections-2005-2006/attachment\\_download/file](http://www.eac.gov/clearinghouse/docs/the-impact-of-the-national-voter-registration-act-on-federal-elections-2005-2006/attachment_download/file).

<sup>5</sup>See the EAC Web site at [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov).

Between 2004 and 2006, 32 States and territories reported actual decreases in registration numbers, while 17 States and territories showed actual increases. Illinois reported the largest increase of any State, adding more than 1.2 million voters to its rolls from 2004 to 2006.

Wisconsin reported the largest decline in the percentage of VAP that is registered, going from (an estimate of) 99.8 percent in 2004 to (a more concrete) 81.3 percent in 2006. Wisconsin implemented voter registration in all jurisdictions for the first time in 2006. Nationwide, the registration rate decreased from 79.9 percent of the VAP in 2004 to 76.6 percent in 2006.

Figure 2. Percent Registered of Citizen Voting Age Population  
November 2006 General Election



When citizen voting age population is used (see CVAP), the percentage that was registered in 2006 increased to 83.8 percent. As shown in Figure 2, large variations in registration patterns exist across the States.

The South and West tend to have the lowest registration rates, while the East and Midwest tend to have the highest registration rates.