New ID System May Block Voters

A statewide database has rejected otherwise valid registrations because of computer glitches or slight discrepancies in the spelling of names.

By Jordan Rau, Times Staff Writer
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SACRAMENTO — Thousands of Californians who register to vote or update their records may not receive sample ballots or be able to vote as absentee because of the state's new method of verifying identities, election officials say.

A new statewide database designed by Secretary of State Bruce McPherson to authenticate voter registrations has blocked otherwise valid registrations because of computer glitches, slight discrepancies in spelling or incomplete applications.

The problems have required registrars to contact voters — a time-consuming process that is already taxing some counties facing elections next month.

San Diego County is racing to rectify rejected registrations in time for the April 11 special election to fill the seat vacated by convicted Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham.

"We're working overtime to get these voters cleared," said Tim McNamara, assistant registrar of voters in that county.

In Los Angeles County, the database rejected 14,629 people — 43% of those who registered from Jan. 1 to March 15. Officials are trying to resolve the problems in time for municipal elections April 11 in 14 cities in the county. They say the challenge will be far larger for the June 6 primary, which will involve many more voters.

In any election, voters whose registrations are in dispute have to cast provisional ballots, which are not counted until authorities determine that the voter is legitimate.

How the new system "is bogging down the process is now extremely significant and will become catastrophic as we approach the major election in June," said Conny McCormack, Los Angeles County registrar.

McCormack said that in busy election seasons, her office receives more than 20,000 registration forms a day. Two-thirds of those come from registered voters changing their names, party affiliations or addresses.

The deadline for registering to vote in the June 6 primary is May 22.

The new database system was installed to meet the requirements of the Help America Vote Act, the 2002 federal law designed to avoid the voting irregularities cited in the 2000 presidential race. Since the start of this year, voters in all states have been required to provide their driver's license number, other state-approved identification or the last four digits of their Social Security number when they register to vote or change their information.

Voter information is checked against records with the federal government and state motor vehicles department. Under an agreement negotiated by McPherson and the U.S. Justice Department, California is one of nine states that use the standard of an "exact match," in which the records must be the same to the letter, according to a national survey by the Brennan Center for Justice, a nonprofit group in New York City. Thus, "Robert Smith" and "Rob Smith" would not be considered a match.
Ashley Snee Giovannettone, spokeswoman for McPherson, who oversees elections, said a sampling of statewide registrations found that 74% were immediately verified. She said state election law requires county officials to resolve the discrepancies for the others, which might mean fixing a typo or contacting the voter to obtain missing information.

“We are working with all the 58 county registrars to ensure that all of the eligible voters are able to cast their ballots on election day,” she said.

McPherson’s office plans to launch a campaign in April to educate Californians about the new registration rules. But some county officials are urging him to ease the rules so that, barring suspicion of fraud, technicalities don’t remove a voter from election rolls.

“If we aren’t able to put them on a list with some sort of a pending status, they wouldn’t get a sample ballot or know where to vote,” said Deborah Seiler, Solano County’s elections manager.

State Sen. Debra Bowen (D-Marina del Rey), who chairs the Senate elections committee and is running in the Democratic primary to challenge McPherson, said: “We’re looking at the potential for thousands and thousands of people to lose the right to vote.”

McPherson’s office said that even after the election, counties have 28 days to check provisional ballots and fix flawed registrations.

McCormack said that of 34,064 registration forms Los Angeles County residents sent to the database in the first 2 1/2 months of the year, 4.7% were rejected because of a database system error, such as an interrupted transmission. She said that at least 7% more contained all the required information but were rejected because a name or birth date did not exactly match state records. Among other reasons for rejection was failure to provide the identification number.

Elaine Ginnold, Alameda County’s acting registrar of voters, said she doubts her county will be able to ratify all rejected registrations submitted near the deadline.

“These are errors that are not the fault of the voters and not related to voters’ eligibility,” said Wendy Weiser, a deputy director at the Brennan Center. “They should not prevent voters from being able to cast votes that count.”