

A voter — in 2 states? It's not so unusual

Thousands of Oregonians are registered in at least one other state — and they might not know it

By Peter Sachs / *The Bulletin*

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Dallas Ramberg got her Oregon ballot in the mail in early May, just as she expected. It came right after a jury summons from Umatilla County.

The only problem is, she can see the Peace Arch on the U.S.-Canada border from the parking lot of her yacht brokerage in Blaine, Wash. Her business is 270 miles northwest of Hermiston, her old home. And she hasn't lived in Oregon for six years.

Bend resident Peter Wojda sent his Washington ballot back to the return address on the envelope with a note explaining he is now an Oregon voter. That was four years ago, and Washington ballots have kept coming ever since. He throws them out and has voted on an Oregon ballot since he moved here. He never gave the registrar in Spokane his new address, but they found him anyway.

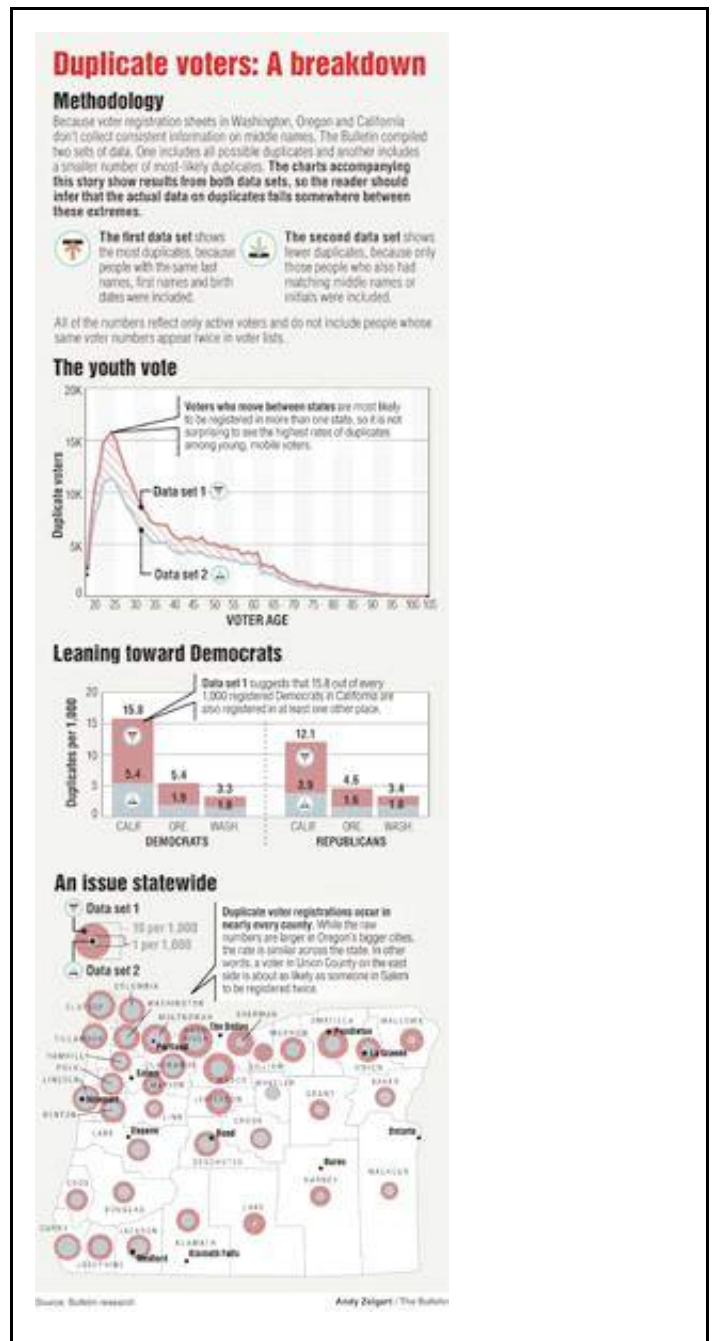
George Harris, of Klamath Falls, has also been getting Washington ballots for the past few years. He used to live in Lacey, near Olympia.

"I get the pamphlets and so forth, but I just recycle them or burn them up," said Harris, 66. "I don't know why they can't get things organized when you change states."

These three are among tens of thousands of people on the West Coast who, whether they know it or not, are registered to vote in more than one place.

A review of more than 20 million active voter records in California, Oregon and Washington by The Bulletin found that about 1 percent — as many as 245,000 — are duplicates.

Among Oregon's 2.5 million registered voters, as many as 13,000 are also registered in Washington or California.



The large number of people registered more than once could pose problems for Oregon's double-majority requirements on some ballot measures, and it raises the prospect of voter fraud.

'Too much' temptation

The Bulletin's list of duplicate voters includes 13,500 records of Oregon voters and more than 800 people like Wojda in Central Oregon.

If a person is registered twice, especially as an absentee voter, it could be possible to cast two ballots in an election.

"The temptation could be too much to resist to actually vote twice," said Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed.

And it's conceivable that could have enough of an effect to swing an election.

In 2004, Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire defeated her opponent, Dino Rossi, by just 133 votes out of 2.8 million. Closer to home, Arlington Mayor Carmen Kontur-Gronquist was recalled by a margin of three votes in February.

"You want to get rid of the duplicate registrations so you get rid of the potential of voting (more than once)," said John Lindback, the director of elections in the Oregon Secretary of State's office.

Not only is there a potential for voter fraud, but duplicate voters on the rolls could foul up Oregon's double-majority system. Said several organizations in the state, these types of small margins are another reason why rules requiring a double majority for tax measures - at least half of all registered voters must return ballots, and half of those must support a tax for it to be approved - should be reviewed. With a large number of duplicates on the rolls - people who may have moved elsewhere but who are still counted as active voters in Oregon - voter turnout may appear lower than it actually is, making it harder to pass new taxes.

"How it ties into our double-majority rule is important," said Ginny Ross, the secretary of the nonprofit Oregon Voter Rights Coalition. "That really needs to be looked at."

Some election officials also acknowledge the problem is one that needs to be addressed.

"Because each county has its own procedure for getting voters off the rolls, theoretically, that was supposed to be resolved," said Kelley Weigel, the associate director of the Western States Center in Portland, a progressive advocacy group. "But I think they're still working it out."

Duplicate voters on statewide lists is enough of a problem that a National Academy of Sciences committee is looking at ways to merge those lists into one nationwide system that would track people as they move, much like the Internal Revenue Service or motor vehicle departments do.

The issue of duplicate registrations was new to Marge Easley, the president of the Oregon League of Women Voters, but it

Are you an 'active' registered

voter?

Active voter — People who vote somewhat regularly.

Missing one election won't automatically make you lose your active status, although absentee voters in California must show up at their polling place in person if they don't mail back their ballots in the previous election.

Inactive voter — Different states wait differing periods of time before switching voters from "active" to "inactive."

It's five years in Oregon, but can happen sooner if the county clerk mails a ballot to you and it gets returned because you've moved. Oregon voters who end up on the inactive list must fill out a new voter registration form to start voting again. In states with polling places, voters generally must just show up to vote at an election to become "active" again.

piqued her interest.

“That multi-state issue is the interesting one and could be something that we need to get a lot more coordination between the states on,” Easley said.

Not everyone agrees the presence of duplicate voters is even a problem officials should lose much sleep over.

“It is to everyone’s advantage to have those rolls efficient, but it’s just not a big deal if there are two people who are the exact same person on voter rolls,” said Paula Hawthorn, an Oakland, Calif., statistician serving on a National Academy of Sciences committee reviewing voter databases. For most people registered twice, she said, it would be more trouble than it would be worth to cast two ballots.

Some voters have latched on to the prospect of voter fraud, or fears of trying to swing a close election by voting in two different counties or states, ever since the disputed results in Florida in the 2000 presidential election, Hawthorn said.

“The thing is, most people really are honest and really are not going to try voting twice,” she said.

How can it happen?

In a perfect world, election officials would get updates every time a voter moved away and registered somewhere else with the same ease the IRS can keep track of the location of nearly every American.

But weeding out duplicates is easier said than done, Reed said. A federal law requires election officials to wait up to eight years - two presidential election cycles - before they can delete someone who hasn’t voted. Being able to more quickly, and definitively figure out who moved and where, would be a boon.

“We really seriously spent all day talking about how we could do this,” Reed said.

Each state collects slightly different information when a person registers to vote. Names, addresses and birth dates are standard. Some states also ask for the last four digits of one’s Social Security number; California’s records note the state in which each voter was born.

Most forms include questions asking voters if they have been previously registered elsewhere. That information is supposed to be sent from one county to another to help filter out people who have moved. But that can become complicated if a voter omits a middle name on one registration, for example. Changed last names, as when someone gets married, can also make it hard to find the voter’s previous registration.

It’s not illegal to be registered to vote in more than one place at once, though it is a felony to cast two ballots in the same election.

Getting registered twice can happen relatively easily as people move from one side of a city to another, or from state to state. Every year, about 19 million people in the United States move, about 85 percent of the time within the same state, according to U.S. census data.

Most voters, like Harris in Klamath Falls, assume their previous registrations will be canceled when they move. But that doesn’t always happen.

There are no master lists to compare voters across state lines, though all states now have consolidated lists for their own voters, making it easier to track people who move from one county to another in the same state.

But even that doesn't always happen. California, for example, with more than 15 million active voters, generally does not compare lists across county lines because so many people share the same names.

"It's up to the new place to notify the old place that you've left, and very often they run into the same problems," Hawthorn said.

Election officials acknowledge that for someone who gets absentee ballots — or in a place like Oregon where all voting is done by mail — it could be easy to cast more than one vote.

While individual voters may be tempted to vote on two ballots, as Reed acknowledged, any kind of organized effort to take advantage of those voters would likely be quickly uncovered because counties would pick up on strange voting patterns, like higher than usual turnout numbers.

"The chances of it being exposed are huge, once you have more than one person involved and everything," Reed said.

Looking for fraud

Despite the potential for people to cast two ballots in an election, The Bulletin found little evidence to suggest that has happened.

Among duplicate voters, there appear to be more than 250 who have voted twice in recent elections in Washington, Oregon and California. But some of those ballots were cast by two different people sharing the exact same name and birth date, The Bulletin confirmed.

While voter fraud has been difficult to track, states are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to consolidate their voter lists, and at least one company is trying to pitch a product that would compare those lists with each other in an effort to ferret out people who appear more than once.

Hawthorn said the contested 2000 presidential election planted an element of fear and distrust in many voters that election systems in the United States could be easily rigged.

"Now, people are looking at every way of how someone could cheat, how they could make the system not work right," Hawthorn said, referring to high-profile investigations undertaken by conservative think tanks and newspapers to find evidence of voter fraud.

Whether fraud is an actual problem or a perceived threat, many election officials agree that cleaning up voter lists is in everyone's interest.

It costs money to prepare and mail voter pamphlets and ballots to people who have moved elsewhere.

But finding ways to effectively weed out duplicate entries in voter rolls without accidentally removing legitimate voters takes large databases, powerful computers and, ultimately, a human eye to see whether the computer's results make sense.

Election officials must prioritize: Spend more time and money narrowing down voter lists, or focus on issues that affect more voters. Things like printing ballots in more than one language or ensuring people know where their polling place is and how to get there are more serious concerns, Hawthorn said.

For Lindback, Oregon's elections director, the issue is worth pursuing, even if fraud isn't the biggest risk.

"It's a frustrating process," Lindback said. "Elections officials want to do interstate data matching in order to clean up the lists."

Easley, the League of Women Voters' president, said officials should review the issue more closely.

"It's something that the secretaries of state in those states should pay attention to, yes," she said.

But the technical challenges, at least without a unique nationwide identification number, are daunting.

"At what point do you say, 'Well, is this as good as we're going to get, and we're going to do that?'" Lindback wondered. "I don't know, and that's sort of one of the many issues we're exploring."

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