

Before 2024 election, 14,500 Ohio voters' registrations disappeared with no clear explanation, research finds

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COLUMBUS, Ohio – More than 14,500 Ohioans' voter registrations were canceled within 90 days of the 2024 election without any clear explanation, according to research from a Harvard University computer science professor.

Federal law prohibits states removing citizens from the voter rolls in that window of time, with limited exceptions like death or incarceration. But the study couldn't find one for the subset of the 109,000 voter registrations removed during the "quiet period."

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose's office dismissed the research and its conclusions, but a spokesman offered no explanation for the 14,500 apparent cancellations.

Most of the 109,000 removals were for legally justifiable reasons under the National Voter Registration Act, according to the research. Those included voter-initiated changes, duplicate registrations, death and incarceration. Together, those amount to 87% of the voter registration cancellations in Ohio, per the [research published in the Journal of Technology Science](#).

But for 14,539 people (13%), the explanation is unclear, said Latanya Sweeney, a researcher with a computer science background at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who authored the study.

"With that one, I'm dying to know more," said Sweeney. "It begs the question, who are these 14,000 people? What's going on there? Is this from (third-party voter registration) challenges? Is it from something else? Were there more systematic updates, which would not be allowed?"

Sweeney, who is not a lawyer, declined to comment on whether the removals violated federal law. But after aggregating online obituaries and comparing those

numbers with all-cause mortality data, plus factoring in state voter registration data and incarceration records, she said she's confident as a computer scientist that the number of "unexplained" voter registrations cancellations is about 14,539.

Ben Kindel, a spokesman for GOP Secretary of State Frank LaRose, called the research "far off the mark" and "shoddy." He said the "unexplained" removals are simply those that the researchers couldn't find. And the research relies on web searches of obituaries as opposed to official death data.

"As for your specific questions, there isn't enough information published here to identify which 14,539 records the author could not match against public datasets using unspecified matching criteria," he said. "We'd encourage this author to provide us with the specific data in question and offer the same transparency she falsely claims we lack."

Sweeney said she provided LaRose's office with the study before it published and never heard back. She provided a spreadsheet of the "unexplained" removals to a reporter following Kindel's comments.

"I'm happy to collaborate with them to uncover additional explanations for the 14,539 dropped registrations," she said. "The public deserves clarity — and if further investigation reveals valid reasons behind these unexplained removals, that's a positive outcome."

Cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer previously reported that conservative activists around the state and nation [initiated mass voter registration challenges on a county-by-county basis](#) during the run-up to the 2024 election.

Traditionally, such voter challenges amount to one voter disputing the accuracy of another's registration based on personal knowledge, in a courtroom-like procedure heard by bipartisan elections boards. But in these cases, using data from third parties like EagleAI, the challengers asked elections officials to purge thousands of strangers' voter registrations on the grounds the registrants had supposedly moved or otherwise lost eligibility.

In some instances, like Wood County, about 17,000 voters registrations were challenged while only one single voter was removed, according to Aaron Ockerman of the Ohio Association of Election Officials. Several county election workers said at the time they had never seen anything like the spate of challenges in 2024.

Sweeney's research doesn't directly connect the 14,500 dropped voters and the challenges but floats it as a possibility. Part of the difficulty there is what critics have decried as a lack of transparency around voter challenges, and the decentralized nature of elections. Ohio has 88 county boards of elections that individually process the challenges.

"The paper itself is just saying, tell me about these 14,000," she said. "We can't explain what's going on with these 14,000. And we can speculate about the role of challenges, but it's not conclusive at all."

Both Kindel and Ockerman said the voter challenges were processed in a transparent manner at public meetings that are, in some counties, livestreamed. Ockerman said in an email he finds it hard to believe the challenges could account for the "unexplained" dropped voters. However, neither could say how many voters' registrations were challenged statewide, and how many were removed as a result of those challenges.

Kindel said the challenges were decided locally, and a statewide estimate would require phone calls to Ohio's 88 county boards of elections. That's not transparent, according to Kelly Dufour, the voting and elections manager for Common Cause Ohio.

"No, I don't believe the voter challenges were handled in a transparent or consistent manner across the state," she said.

Common Cause recruited volunteers to sit in on county boards of election meetings and filed records requests trying to determine the scope and the success. County boards of election staff are overworked before elections, adapting to new and restrictive election laws, change meeting times on the fly, don't always broadcast or answer calls. And Ohio has 88 counties -- too many to keep tabs on. If the challenges are so transparent, she said, LaRose should prove it.

"The buck stops at the secretary of state's office," she said. "We would welcome any information on the outcomes of these voter registration challenges."

There's a need for meaningful investigation, the research warns. As voter eligibility challenges get more sophisticated, data-driven and widespread, it says, election officials must balance a need for accurate voter rolls with safeguards to ensure no eligible voters are ejected from the system.