

'It's the honor system': New Jersey's noncitizen voter registration brings private worries into the open

Democrats and Republicans agree the registration system is a mess.



A voter and her child enter a voting booth at a polling site in a public library in Englewood, New Jersey, Nov. 8, 2022. | Seth Wenig/AP

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In May, a bipartisan duo of New Jersey state senators introduced a simple piece of legislation that got little public attention.

It would add one sentence to the state's automatic voter registration law to make sure

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The bill turned out to be extremely prescient.

That's because Democratic Gov. Mikie Sherrill disclosed last week that a "software error" at the Motor Vehicles Commission led to roughly 6,600 noncitizens getting added to the state's voter rolls. About 400 of them voted, she said.

Her disclosure set off a political uproar that's resonated well beyond New Jersey, feeding into the Trump administration's push for voter restrictions and setting up a legal battle with the Department of Justice.

But it also exposed an open secret about New Jersey's so-called motor voter law that officials and political operatives have known for years: There's little to stop noncitizens from registering to vote if they want to, or even by mistake. And election officials and campaign consultants from both parties believe that the number of noncitizens being added to the voter rolls is significantly higher than the 6,600 Sherrill cited — because the state has been automatically registering drivers since 2018, and her figure covers only June 2023 to June 2024.

"It's the honor system," said Hunterdon County Board of Elections Administrator Beth Thompson, who also leads the New Jersey Association of Election Officials.

It's unclear how many noncitizens have registered to vote in New Jersey beyond the one-year period Sherrill cited. The Trump administration gave a preliminary estimate of around 35,000. While New Jersey political insiders don't know if that's true, they're almost certain it's more than 6,600. Some speculated it could be slightly more. Others said it could be even above the Trump administration's estimates.

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But Democrats and Republicans alike agreed that the statewide voter database is a mess, and that noncitizen registrants are just one category of people who shouldn't be on it, like people who left New Jersey without notifying election officials and whose names linger until periodic clean ups of the voter rolls.

"The presumption is that people slipped through the cracks," said one Democratic political operative who works closely with voter rolls, granted anonymity to speak candidly on the subject.

Another Democratic operative, granted anonymity for the same reason, said they spoke to three county superintendents who all told them the same thing: "When they see [registrations] come from the MVC, they assume it's correct."

Sherrill on Tuesday refused a Trump administration demand to turn over the list of

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The other 2,100, she said, had been referred back to county election officials for further examination because some may have been misidentified as noncitizens.

“The request had no legal basis, and I will always protect New Jerseyans’ personally identifiable information,” she said.



New Jersey Gov. Mikie Sherrill speaks at the Courage Can Save Us discussion at The 92nd Street Y, June 9, 2026, in New York. | Andy Kropa/Invision/AP

Sherrill’s disclosure also played into a lawsuit by the Trump administration that sought access to New Jersey’s unredacted voter registration list, with the Trump administration arguing it strengthened its case. But District Court Judge Zahid Quraishi [dismissed the lawsuit Wednesday](#), saying that “whether the DOJ is acting in good faith is not relevant to this Court’s analysis and has no bearing on whether Plaintiff is entitled to the information it seeks.”

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Thompson, the elections administrator, said county elections officials check each registration against a state database using Social Security numbers or driver's license numbers to confirm their identity, and that the information doesn't belong to people who have died. But noncitizens can obtain both forms of identification. "It does not validate any kind of citizenship," Thompson said.

On paper voter registrations, Thompson said, if a voter indicates they're not a citizen, the application is discarded.

Even before Sherrill's announcement, county elections officials reported noncitizens who were mistakenly registered to vote reaching out to them, concerned that their registration could get them in trouble or imperil their immigration or pending citizenship status. The Republican State Committee conducted a review that found hundreds of noncitizens had requested removal of their names from the voter rolls after finding out they had been registered to vote.

Thompson suspects that in many of those cases, a language barrier may have been responsible. While the written driver's license test is offered in 13 languages, she said the pin pad that prompts those people to register to vote only offers English and Spanish.

"That very well could have led to people unfortunately saying yes when they didn't understand what yes meant, what no meant," Thompson said. "I'm just speculating at this point."

A spokesperson for the Division of Elections, which receives voter registrations from the Motor Vehicle Commission, declined to comment.

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Neither of the voter registration clean up bill's Senate sponsors — Democrat Jim Beach and Republican Kristin Corrado, both former county clerks intimately familiar with how elections work — responded to POLITICO's inquiries about what spurred the legislation, NJ S4132 (26R). A Senate committee approved the bill unanimously in May with no debate.

"I would just say that this is kind of a clean up with the motor vehicle bill and leave it at that," Beach said at the time.

But the existence of the bill, which has yet to advance in the full Senate or Assembly, suggests lawmakers were at least somewhat aware of the system's flaws. (A new law passed during the lame duck legislative session did something similar to Beach and Corrado's bill, but only for those applying for REAL IDs).

"As a former county clerk, I understand the pressure our local election officials face to maintain accurate voter rolls while ensuring every eligible voter has easy access to the ballot box," Corrado said in a May 21 statement. "This legislation provides important clarity so the Motor Vehicle Commission is not prompting non-citizens to register to vote, which protects the integrity of our elections while preserving the easy and accessible voter registration process that eligible New Jersey voters currently enjoy."

While the sloppiness of New Jersey's voter rolls was fairly widely known, even critics of Sherrill and former Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy — under whose watch the error occurred — said they had no idea how widespread the problems were.

"I'm going to be very honest. I suspected there may be problems with the system. I didn't know it would be 6,600," said Republican state Sen. Michael Testa, who's often floated as a potential candidate for governor in 2029. "And that's only for the period of June 2023 to June 2024."

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Even before Sherrill's announcement, conspiracy theories circulated among far-right activists in New Jersey that hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants cast votes in New Jersey's gubernatorial election, accounting for Sherrill's win over Republican Jack Ciattarelli by roughly 479,000 votes. The voter registration debacle and system's vulnerabilities are likely to exacerbate that.

Chris Russell, a top political consultant on Ciattarelli's campaign, said having sloppy voter rolls "opens the door to fraud" and that he blames Murphy's administration and the Democratic-led Legislature for passing laws that made it easier to register to vote without putting more safeguards in place.

Russell said his guess is the true number of noncitizen residents is closer to the number the Trump administration put forth. But even so, it wouldn't be enough to sway the 2025 election for governor.

"I think there's some fraud, where people are intentionally trying to game or cheat the system," Russell said. "Do I think it exists on a level of millions or hundreds of thousands of people? Probably not. But the problem is that the system is so laissez faire when it comes to registration and checking this stuff."

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