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## Nearly 84,000 duplicate voter records found in audit of California's 'motor voter' system



A new independent audit found multiple errors and flaws in the rollout of California's automated "motor voter" system. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

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**SACRAMENTO** — California's ambitious effort to automate voter registration at Department of Motor Vehicle offices produced almost 84,000 duplicate records and more than twice that number with political party mistakes, according to an audit released Friday by state officials.

The analysis covered just the first five months of the new “motor voter” program, which was launched in April 2018. It found a wide array of problems with the rollout of the DMV system, including a limited amount of testing as well as inconsistent and confusing lines of communication between the state agencies involved in its creation. Many of the findings align with [documents discovered by the Los Angeles Times in an investigation earlier this year of the motor voter program](#).

Auditors reviewed more than 3 million voter registration files, comparing records from both DMV and California’s secretary of state. They found 83,684 duplicate voter registrations, a mistake attributed to inconsistencies in what was listed for voters’ political party preferences.

“This action resulted in no impact to voter eligibility,” Keely Martin Bosler, director of the state Department of Finance, wrote in a letter on Friday to Gov. Gavin Newsom’s Cabinet secretary.

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Separately, the audit found additional errors in voter registration related to party preference. Investigators wrote that 171,145 DMV records contained entries indicating a person’s political party but no such “associated designation” within the data received by state elections officials.

“These errors added additional workload to state and local elections officials, as registration records impacted by these errors had to be researched, corrected, and in some cases canceled,” Secretary of State Alex Padilla said in a letter to Bosler on Friday. He said the mistakes “threatened to undermine public confidence in the program.”

Amy Tong, the director of the California Department of Technology and a key leader of the project, insisted the audit found no actual errors. In a written statement, she called the problems “expected differences resulting from architectural differences” between the database systems used by Padilla’s office and the DMV.

An independent accounting firm, Ernst & Young, conducted the audit. Although released to the public on Friday, the report was submitted to state officials in stages between February and July, documents show. Department of Finance officials said the delayed release was necessary for them to review the findings and determine the extent of the problems.

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California's motor voter system was created through a 2015 state law designed to make it easier for more citizens to register. While the DMV has provided voter registration services for some two decades, that program was voluntary. The new state system, which uses a touch-screen system in DMV offices, is intended to register any eligible Californian unless the person opts out of the process.

Duplicate voter registration documents [were first reported by The Times](#) within a month of the DMV system's launch. Local elections officials have said that the errors were caught and corrected, and that those voters were not allowed to cast more than one ballot. But Padilla's office did find half a dozen voters — registered through the new system — who cast ballots even though there was incomplete information about their actual eligibility. A spokeswoman for Padilla said that none of those voters are people with a driver's license but in the U.S. illegally.

The 113-page audit offers a glimpse into the troubled launch of the motor voter system and points out that many of the problems remained uncorrected well into 2019. Auditors found that key officials were not informed about alterations to the DMV touch-screen system. The report also details a complaint shared with The Times by some of the project's key employees in interviews earlier this year: The decision to launch the voter registration system three months ahead of schedule — done so that it would be operational for the June 2018 statewide primary — left little time to work out the kinks.

“The master test plan describes a project decision to intentionally ‘limit’ the testing time for the application and to simultaneously perform all types of testing, rather than in successive phases,” auditors wrote. “Testing duration was limited to meet the imposed [April 2018] project deadline.”

The audit urges state officials to retest the entire system though it has been upgraded since its creation last year.

“This assessment has identified risks that, if not addressed, will adversely impact the realization of the intended benefits of the program,” auditors wrote in the report. They recommended that the secretary of State, as California's chief elections officer, be given greater control over future

upgrades to the system.

A number of current and former state employees who helped design and launch the program were interviewed by the auditors, though their names were redacted from the report before it was made public. They described a confusing web of cross-department conversations between the DMV, the secretary of state and the California Department of Technology.

“Multiple people were thought to be responsible” for certain tasks, the employees told auditors, according to the report. “There is inconsistency in lines of reporting and ownership of decision-making authority.”

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The auditors found that significant documentation of processes used to build and test the software was missing. State employees also failed to create a “baseline” of typical voter records produced by the program, one that could be used as a comparison to spot systemic failures. “Without an evaluation of expected data against a baseline, there is risk of incomplete or inaccurate data,” the audit said.

The report’s authors interviewed DMV customers about the experience of using the motor voter system, and found widespread dissatisfaction. One key complaint was that the choices presented on touch screens were confusing for DMV customers who were already registered to vote.

“The language used in the options does not provide a clear choice to maintain voter registration,” the auditors wrote. In addition, DMV employees “were not provided with training to answer voter registration questions and concerns.”

The audit did not address all of the errors attributed to the system since its launch — most notably, an admission by state officials last October that [some 1,500 non-citizens, people legally allowed to live and work in the U.S, had been mistakenly registered to vote](#) . But it did point out that DMV has been manually reviewing records pertaining to customers’ answers on the citizenship question, a task that “potentially delays” the registration of those who are eligible.

Both Padilla and Steve Gordon, who was [recently appointed DMV director by the governor](#) , said

they have already implemented changes proposed by the audit.

“We continue to collaborate with the Secretary of State to efficiently and accurately provide voter registration information,” Gordon said in a written statement.

Republican legislators said the audit is proof the system was rushed into place. State Sen. Patricia Bates (R-Laguna Niguel), the author of legislation that would have returned DMV voter registration to an opt-in system, said Democratic legislative leaders should allow her blocked proposal to move forward before the Legislature adjourns next month. And she urged the DMV, a department trying to reduce [long wait times as it implements the federal Real ID law](#), to take the motor voter system offline.

“Suspending the program will allow the problems to be fixed and, just as importantly, allow DMV to focus on its other problems affecting customers,” Bates said.

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