

Practice-Oriented Research to Improve Voter Registration and List Maintenance

Request for Proposals

Proposals are due January 16, 2026

Summary

The MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL) seeks to award \$500,000 in grants to support research projects that aim to improve the security, accuracy, and accessibility of voter registration systems and list maintenance practices. The aim of this project is to improve policymaking, practice, and understanding in the area. Therefore, all projects chosen will have a strong partnership component that aligns the research goals with the needs of election practitioners, policymakers, and/or legislators.

This grant program will support projects that can complete their research before December 31, 2026, although the period of service can extend beyond that to accommodate reporting and dissemination. Priority will be given to projects that can complete the bulk of their research before September 30, 2026.

This program will consider proposals in the range of \$25,000 to \$100,000.

Underscoring the ultimate goals of this program, project proposals will be evaluated on their plans to engage election administrators or other practitioners in planning and executing research. Final research reports will be required to address policy or practice recommendations that would have bipartisan or nonpartisan appeal.

This grant program is supported by the Election Trust Initiative.

Introduction

Maintaining secure, accurate, and accessible voter registration rolls is an ongoing challenge that has come under increased political scrutiny in recent years. The challenges in maintaining voter rolls are rooted in a variety of factors that, to a large extent, distinguish the United States from peer democracies. Among these are high degrees of population mobility, decentralization of election administration, and deeply

held attitudes about privacy. Within this larger context, Americans hold divergent opinions and values on many issues that inform voter registration policy, and these divergent opinions often map onto partisan and ideological commitments. These divergent opinions interact with the broader context to create a policy landscape that varies across states and an administrative environment that can also vary within states. Policies and practices also vary across time.

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 is the primary law governing voter registration for federal elections. For the most part, registration for state and local elections follows the requirements of the NVRA, including the requirement that states implement a general program of list maintenance, follow procedural safeguards to ensure voters are not improperly removed, and receive registration applications from multiple sources, such as motor vehicle registration departments and by mail. The most significant extension of the NVRA occurred in 2002 with the passage of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which required states to establish a “single, uniform, official, centralized, and interactive computerized statewide voter registration list.” HAVA also required new applicants to supply their driver’s license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number.

While the NVRA and HAVA represented advances in access to voter registration and systematic attention to the accuracy of voter lists, pressure points have grown in number and intensity over the decades, to the point where there is widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, even if there is not widespread agreement about what to do about it. Among the concerns expressed widely by practitioners in the field are the following:

- + The NVRA constrains innovation and limits states’ ability to maintain updated lists in a uniform and nondiscriminatory manner.
- + Election officials face ongoing challenges in identifying voters who have moved or are deceased, or whose status has otherwise changed, leading to both outdated records and wrongful removals.
- + The requirement of mail notification is constraining and antiquated in a world where transacting official business online is becoming the norm.
- + Non-citizens may have inadvertently been added to the rolls, creating list maintenance problems for election officials; proof-of-citizenship requirements are growing in number without much empirical evidence of their consequences.

- + Interstate cooperation among states in sharing voter list information has been less than universal and hindered by political questions and the realities of securely sharing private information.
- + Many of the procedures used to maintain the accuracy of voter lists rely on the performance of the U.S. Postal Service, which has suffered under a general decline in service standards over time.
- + The complexities of the list maintenance process often foster public confusion and politicization, as election officials frequently lack the necessary tools and credibility to explain and defend the process effectively.

Many of these concerns reflect frustration over the inability to take advantage of new data science techniques and data sources. Some of these concerns also reflect a lack of dissemination of new techniques to the larger election administration community. Finally, administrators and policymakers alike who wish for practice and policy to be guided by evidence face a research literature that is incomplete and outdated.

In addition to the challenges outlined above, recent political and policymaking developments introduce crosswinds to pursuing an evidence-based path toward more accurate and secure voter rolls. Among these are the increased politicization of voter list maintenance, resistance to federal involvement in maintenance activities, and withdrawal of states from the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).

Cognizant of these challenges, this program seeks to enhance understanding of how the voter registration system currently operates, encourage innovation in adopting new approaches to list maintenance, and equip policymakers, administrators, and the public with reliable information about the system. Despite crosswinds challenging the ability to conduct research in this area, there is widespread agreement within the practitioner community that laying an evidence base is a necessary precondition for greater understanding and improvement of voter list maintenance. As with other research supported by MEDSL, this program proceeds on the assumption—or at least the maintained hypothesis—that there is an audience (and even a hunger) for fact-based analysis of election administration and the potential for those insights to inform the evolution of law and professional practice in the coming years.

This program aims to inform practitioners and policymakers about current issues and close practice gaps. It is also aimed at achieving immediate impact, meaning examining

practices that could be implemented widely in a short period of time, or elucidating issues that are currently before policymakers and/or the public.

This focus on immediate concerns necessitates the exclusion of certain topics and approaches that, while critical for a broader understanding of list maintenance and voter registration, or for delving deeply into scientific fundamentals, do not promise quick payoffs.

Additionally, because this program prioritizes the needs of election officials and policymakers, all funded projects will be required to engage the practitioner community throughout the design, implementation, and reporting phases. This involvement can take various forms. The most fruitful approach would be in the form of a research-practitioner partnership, where a team of researchers collaborates with practitioners to address a specific issue faced by those practitioners. Other models of researcher-practitioner engagement will also be considered.

About MEDSL

The MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL) was founded in 2017 to advance election science through the collection and dissemination of core data critical to the work of researchers, the conduct of its own research into the performance of American elections, the encouragement of election science research by academic and non-academic researchers throughout the country, and building relationships with election officials for the improvement of the practice of election administration. The Lab is committed to enhancing scholarship and practice in election science through high-quality data collection and analysis. It is committed to the highest standards of scientific integrity and non-partisanship.

The current program is supported by the [Election Trust Initiative](#), which is supporting MEDSL's role as an election science research hub, connecting practitioners and researchers, disseminating research-based best practices, and supporting practitioner-centered research through its convenings and regranting work.

MEDSL's website, electionlab.mit.edu, contains further information about the Lab's work. The website also contains information about its previous grant programs, including [New Initiatives in Election Science](#), [Learning from Elections](#), and [Results that Matter: Building Trust in Elections](#).

Statement of Work

MEDSL seeks to fund research through this initiative that addresses issues currently faced by policymakers and practitioners in the design and implementation of voter registration systems and list maintenance. The following list of research questions illustrates the types of topics this program seeks to address. This list is intended to suggest the types of topics that would be looked upon favorably, but is not exhaustive.

Reviews of existing national practices and challenges

- Cataloguing and summarizing procedures to ensure the accuracy of voter records and their use across the states, including procedures for list maintenance triggered by non-voting and standards for determining resident status.
- Cataloguing and summarizing which data sources states use to conduct list maintenance, how they get this data, and how frequently they get this data.
- Cataloguing and summarizing state voter registration database systems, including age, structure, and interoperability.
- Tracking litigation over list maintenance, including cataloguing and summarizing expert reports and other evidence.

Statistical summaries/estimates of the status quo

- Estimates of basic statistics describing the accuracy of voter rolls, including the number of registered and eligible-but-unregistered voters, registrants in multiple states, ineligible registrants (e.g., deceased, felons, incapacitated, noncitizens), and registrations at inaccurate addresses.
- Estimates of changes in the accuracy of voter rolls over time resulting from variation in whether states conduct list maintenance pre- or post-election.
- Estimates of the effects of same/election-day registration on the volume and the accuracy of voter registration.
- Estimates of the effects of all-mail balloting on the accuracy of voter registration.
- Estimates of the length of time registered voters go without voting.
- Estimates of the fraction of voters who were removed after a period of non-voting had moved or simply lost interest in voting.
- Estimates of the effects of using the National Change of Address (NCOA) Program to update voter addresses automatically.
- Analysis of the effects of different registration requirements on the administrative burdens of election officials.

- Comparative effects of top-down vs. bottom-up registration systems on the cost, accuracy, and administrative burden of voter registration.
- Analysis of voter registration metrics for states in and not in interstate data-sharing compacts.

Innovative solutions to practical problems

- Testing strategies to communicate with the public about how list maintenance works.
- Testing the effectiveness of alternative communication strategies to improve on NVRA mailers.
- Testing the accuracy of voter registration information as states move to automated voter registration.
- Measuring the cost-effectiveness and accuracy of using credit-bureau header data to improve the accuracy of voter rolls.
- Testing the efficacy of augmenting NCOA reports with other data to automatically update registrations.
- Testing methods to audit the correct placement of voters into electoral districts.
- Testing leveraging data science advances to improve registration anomaly detection.

Criteria for Selection

All research projects will be assessed on their relevance to the issues discussed in this RFP according to the following criteria:

1. Responsiveness to the goal of understanding issues faced by policymakers and election officials in maintaining accurate, accessible, and secure voter registration systems.
2. Rigor in methodological approach.
3. Prospect of providing practical guidance to practice and policymaking.

Proposals that are judged to meet the overall goals will be further assessed according to three specific evaluation criteria:

1. *Methodological approach.* Proposals will be evaluated in terms of the general approach to the question posed, the specific data to be gathered, and the methods to be employed in analyzing the data. Proposals will also be required to describe quality control approaches, including fact/data checks, as well as peer reviews where applicable.

2. *Work plan, time frame, and budget.* Proposals will be assessed based on whether the tasks outlined in the proposal are adequately described and can feasibly be carried out within the proposed timeframe. Because the project focuses on current challenges facing practitioners and policymakers, special attention will be paid to whether the research team can deploy research assets quickly enough to produce actionable findings by the end of 2026.
3. *Institutional capacity and personnel.* Proposals will be assessed on the qualifications of key personnel and whether plans for supporting research team members are appropriately scaled.
4. *Robustness of researcher-practitioner involvement.* Proposals will be assessed on the level of partnership with practitioners at every stage of the project, from early-stage planning to completion and dissemination. Practitioner involvement can be demonstrated through past experience or concrete commitments from practitioner partners.

Budgets will be assessed according to their appropriateness, given the research proposed. Specific allowable expenditures would include the following if clearly justified by the research proposal:

1. Release time and/or summer salary for principal researchers
2. Graduate research assistance
3. Travel to conduct interviews, gather data, and perform other related activities.
4. Travel to present research at scholarly conferences.

At least one member of each research team is expected to attend a research workshop for grantees, anticipated to take place in August or September 2026. All proposals are expected to include a budget for this item.

Overhead payments will be limited to 10% of direct costs.

Proposal Guidelines

In a narrative that is no more than 6 pages (single-spaced, 12-point type, 1-inch margins), plus a budget, proposals should contain the following:

- A brief abstract of no more than 150 words of the work being proposed on a separate page.
- An explanation of how this research could help inform and guide the practices of election officials or deliberations of policymakers around the

- country.
- A statement of research questions to be addressed, including a discussion of why these questions are important and a discussion of any previous research aimed at answering these questions.
 - A description of the approach.
 - A work plan outlining the tasks to be completed and the timeline for their execution.
 - A staffing plan indicating the key staff who will perform each task. The staffing plan should include a short bio of each principal staff member.
 - A statement of how the research team intends to engage with election officials and/or other practitioners, if not explicitly addressed in the description of the research.
 - A commitment to being part of the research structure described below.
 - A description of the deliverables that you anticipate producing and when they will be produced.
 - A note about whether you anticipate collaboration with states that have [restrictions on the private support of election administration](#) and, if so, a statement that you commit to working with MEDSL to ensure that the proposed research does not conflict with those restrictions.
 - A budget with separate line items for (1) labor costs, (2) fringe benefit costs, (3) travel, including to at least one academic conference to present findings, (4) other direct costs, and (5) indirect costs. (Overhead payments will be limited to 10% of direct costs.)

A cover page for the proposal should include the name and contact information for a single point of contact about the proposal. The cover page should also include the total amount of funding being requested. (The cover page is not included in the page limit.)

Proposals should clearly specify the proposed grant period. Proposed grant periods may begin as early as March 1, 2026; It is anticipated that grant periods will begin no later than June 1, 2026. Proposals should anticipate completing research by December 31, 2026. Grant periods must end by September 30, 2027. (The gap is intended to facilitate the dissemination of findings and engagement with practitioners and other researchers.)

Scholar-Practitioner Peer Review

To ensure these projects maintain strong rigor while addressing the needs of practitioners and policymakers, MEDSL will convene an advisory body of 4 – 6 people composed of both scholars and practitioners who have served as election officials or leaders of election associations. This advisory board will assist MEDSL in providing feedback and suggestions to ensure the academic rigor and practitioner relevance of the studies and suggesting ways to communicate results to the election community most effectively.

Work Product and Dissemination

This project aims to support research that enhances the practice of voter list maintenance and registration in the U.S. and promotes the dissemination of that research. The dissemination of research results will not only provide information useful for fostering data-driven improvements, but it will also contribute to the foundation of knowledge on which future research will be conducted. With these aims in mind, research projects chosen for support will be expected to participate in the collective research effort that this project supports and to contribute, at a minimum, publications aimed at both academic and general audiences. The following is a list of presentation/publication expectations for the selected research teams.

1. *April 2026 webinar.* Share research plans.
2. *September convening.* Share research results. Probably preceding the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Boston.
3. *Final technical report.* A final technical report will be due to MEDSL by September 30, 2027, describing the research conducted and conclusions reached.
4. *Open-source data.* Following the completion of the project, each research team will provide MEDSL with a copy of any datasets created during the research for publication on the Harvard Dataverse. Teams may request that datasets be embargoed for up to a year. Special consideration will be given to projects that use proprietary data subject to dissemination restrictions.
5. *MEDSL dissemination.* In collaboration with research teams, MEDSL will develop collateral materials to communicate research findings to a broad audience.

Submission Instructions

1. While not required, consideration of grants will be facilitated by submitting a brief letter of intent to medsl-grants@mit.edu by December 15, 2025. The letter of intent should contain the following information:
 - a) Principal investigator and affiliated institution
 - b) Anticipated other partners
 - c) Proposed research topic
 - d) Anticipated funding request
2. Proposals shall be uploaded to the project website at the following URL:
<https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/voter-registration-list-maintenance/submit-proposal>
3. Proposals must adhere to the parameters outlined in the "Proposal Guidelines" section above. Proposals should not include additional material beyond what is described in that section. Project teams will be contacted if further elaboration is required. Proposals that do not meet the form and length parameters will be returned for revision.

Questions about Process and Suitability of Proposed Topic

Any questions about the grant program may be directed to medsl-grants@mit.edu. With very few exceptions, answers will be posted for public inspection on the FAQ page of the grant program website: <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/voter-registration-list-maintenance>

Queries about Research Partners

Research groups interested in partnering with other research organizations on a specific topic or seeking practitioners as partners should contact MEDSL at medsl-grants@mit.edu.