

S.503 An Act Decoupling the Municipal Census from Voter Registration

While framed as reducing voting barriers, the bill would eliminate a simple, low-cost tool that local election officials use to maintain accurate voter rolls. Under current law (M.G.L. Chapter 51, §4), cities and towns conduct an annual street list (municipal census) of residents. If a voter fails to respond for two consecutive years, they are placed on the inactive voter list (M.G.L. Chapter 51, §37A). Inactive voters remain registered and can vote by confirming their address and identity at the polls.

S.503 would remove this link and rely instead on a fine (already possible under M.G.L. Chapter 56, §4). This creates serious problems:

- **Jury duty integrity:** The census/street list is the primary source for the Master Juror List (M.G.L. Chapter 234A, §§10-11; see also Office of Jury Commissioner requirements). A fine system could allow people to pay to avoid inclusion, shrinking the jury pool and harming fair trials.
- **Election accuracy:** Town clerks rely on responses to update rolls for movers, deaths, and non-residents, reducing outdated registrations, provisional ballots, and lines.
- **Broader impacts:** Accurate street lists support school planning, emergency services, property assessments, and state aid formulas. Lower response rates would harm local governance.

Massachusetts already has automatic voter registration through the RMV (and other agencies) plus easy reactivation for inactive voters. There is no evidence the current system blocks eligible citizens from voting.