

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Cantwell, State and Local Leaders on Protecting Elections and Voters' Rights

February 19, 2026

Sen. Cantwell Remarks

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Well, Julie, thank you so much for hosting us here. Stuart, thank you for representing the Secretary of State, and I'm glad that he's spending his day in that remembrance – very important to us here in the state of Washington.

And Barbara, thank you for your very strong statement about why we fight so diligently for voting rights in the United States of America. It's been a long battle, and I just want to mention yesterday, we were joined by the head of the NAACP in southwest Washington, who also brought up how many lives have been lost fighting for voting rights, and so we're standing on their shoulders.

So please don't give all that hard work away. We are here today because our election system and the right to vote, the cornerstone of our democracy, is under attack. The changes that people are advocating in Washington, D.C. [and] voted out of the House of Representatives will make it more difficult for people in our communities – rural communities, working parents, seniors, disadvantaged [voters] – not only to register, but also to vote.

Yesterday, I released a snapshot report detailing how the SAVE [America] Act would make it harder for people in Washington state to vote – the amount of time, the amount of money and the amount of transportation just to get their vote counted.

The election system in the United States is unique. We have been the hallmark of free and fair elections for generations. We have been the hallmark of the transfer of power, but President Trump has been claiming massive voter fraud, particularly attacking vote by mail, and now he's even talking about nationalizing the elections. To be clear, he doesn't have the authority under the Constitution to do that.

Take it from the conservative Heritage Foundation, which tracks voter fraud and found just 15 cases of voter fraud in Washington state between 1982 and 2025. That's about one case every three years. In that same study, [over] a 43-year period, the Heritage Foundation only found 1,620 cases of fraud nationwide.

That's over more than four decades, and that's only about three dozen cases per year for the entire country. By comparison, about 154 million Americans voted in the 2024 election. In 2020, President Trump brought 62 [legal] cases across the country, all claiming election fraud. No court found that there was voter fraud in 2020.

The fact is, we don't have widespread election fraud. We don't. That is because election officials like these individuals here take the issue of voter fraud very seriously. Here in Washington, a voter fraud conviction is a felony punishable of up to five years in prison and \$10,000.

That is when you sign your voter signature right there. It says right above where you put your signature, that's five years in prison and \$10,000 fine if you [vote but] are not a citizen. So obviously, it's well known [that] you cannot register to vote if you are not a US citizen, and there are people that have long stopped that behavior from happening.

So here in Washington, we have worked on a bipartisan basis to make sure that our voting system is safe, secure and accessible. And I also want to note that we have a letter from Sam Reed, another election official who opposes the SAVE [America] Act and describes vote by mail as the best fit for today and worth fighting for.

And that's, Sam, exactly what we're doing. Yesterday, the Clark County Auditor [Greg Kimsey] – someone who knows a lot about trying to deliver elections in the threat of real antagonism of people blowing up a voter box in downtown Vancouver – basically made this point.

“Voting is a constitutional right, so a barrier to exercising that constitutional right should only be enacted if the compelling interest is greater than the citizens individual constitutional right and the government's interest in ensuring that only US citizens vote and would not be significantly enhanced by the SAVE [America] Act.”

I will make ~~that~~ Mr. Kimsey's statement available, but it was a great point. That is exactly what people are doing. They're taking away a constitutional right and creating a barrier that doesn't even, as Julie mentioned, solve or enhance voting participation [which] should constantly be our goal.

Why? Because when America makes tough decisions and moves forward and we have 80% of the people participating [in elections], and people think it's a free and fair election, we all feel better about moving forward.

But if you undermine our voting system, which is now trying to be done, and have less people voting – in some instances, people are saying maybe as much as 10 plus percent of people not voting – how are you strengthening our election laws?

We verify the votes here in Washington with rigorous signature matching and bar codes, and as Barbara was saying, with observers who come and observe the elections, so you're literally attacking the very citizenry and organizations of our state who bear witness to this process. You're literally saying our friends and neighbors really aren't getting the job done, when in reality, we know they are.

You have to be a US citizen to vote. You have to prove your residence. You have to swear and attest that you are a US citizen. And as I said, you can have a fine or jail time applied to you, and your signature is your unique identifier.

I can't emphasize this enough: you cannot create fraud. Your own signature creates your own unique identifier and can be attached to you, and that is why – if we were at the election site like we were yesterday – you would see row after row of tables and computers where people look at every signature by every voter.

They are trained by the Washington State Patrol in how to match those signatures, and that is how we prove who people are. So it is a foolproof way of catching people if something is amiss. So, the House of Representatives passing the SAVE [America] act by a very narrow margin is going to cost America.

It will cost Washingtonians time and money, and it may even cost them their vote. That is why we are trying to say the Senate should not pass the SAVE [America] Act.

This bill would hurt rural, elderly, and disadvantaged and working voters who benefit most by vote by mail, [as well as] women who have changed their name and maybe have gotten married and don't have a [birth certificate] document that is the same as [their] voting signature.

It would force every voter who needs to register or change their registration to go in person to an election office and show a birth certificate or a passport or proof of citizenship. Why are we putting these burdens on Washington voters?

About 40% of Washingtonians don't have a passport. Young voters, senior citizens, [and] disadvantaged [voters] are most likely not to have a birth certificate. Many people will have to wait. Many people will wait to the last minute to read the ballot and see the new rules too late to replace those missing documents.

The Brennan Center, which does reporting on voting, reports that 21 million American citizens of voting age don't have proof of citizenship readily available. At least 3.8 million don't have these documents at all, and replacing official documents takes time and will cost money.

If the Senate passes this bill and [it] goes to the President's desk, it will take effect immediately. It will affect the next election. That is why we felt so strongly about our snapshot report, which shows the cost of a passport can be \$165. A replacement of a birth certificate in Washington to cost anywhere from \$28 to \$51 depending on what county you live in.

And these are changes that just are going to make it more difficult for people who don't have time to get those documents. And just imagine, as Julie was saying [for] the vote by mail system. What is it that you're going to make a copy of and send into the local elections people? And how are they going to judge that?

And, oh, by the way, we're now allowing under this SAVE [America] Act, [for] them to be sued for mismanagement of that. So, this is abominable. The President, as was mentioned by Stuart, is also trying to change the US Postal Service postmarking rules that automatically postmark at a regional processing center rather than your local post office.

Depending on how far you live from a regional center, your ballot may not get postmarked until days after you drop it in. This is a huge problem for rural voters. Across Washington State [in 2024], 127,000 ballots – about 3% of all votes cast – were postmarked on time, but received after election day. So, 3% of voters would be at risk under this new [postmarking rule] of not having their vote [counted].

Again, we want to make sure that every vote is counted, but under the President's new rules, this postmark delay would certainly invalidate some voters here. President Trump, since he tends to act on his own and change the rules for elections whether Congress approves them or not.

Just this month, the Department of Justice shuttered the FBI's Foreign Influence Task Force. But here, Governor Ferguson [and] Attorney General Brown have been fighting the administration's aggressive, illegal demand for [the] state of Washington's unredacted voter rolls.

Handing over our detailed information is giving the administration the keys to a lot of information about the voting public. With these voter rolls, they can continue to mine very personal data about US citizens that they do not have the right to have.

The demand for our voter rolls is an abuse of power and a violation of our state privacy laws, and we need to stop them. The SAVE [America] Act would put all of this into a statute, because the President knows that he can't do this on his own, but he's going to continue to try.

That, again, is why we are here today. I am asking Secretary [of State] Hobbs to join me at next Tuesday's State of the Union address. I hope to bring attention in Washington DC to Washington's voter laws, our unbelievable participation in vote by mail, and why my colleagues have to stop the SAVE [America] Act.

The Senate should instead protect our voting rights [and] protect us from the bureaucracy that is not going to create free and fair elections. We have to fight back.

We don't want to disenfranchise voters. We don't need the paperwork requirements. We have the signature and the testament, and we have a free and fair elections that people trust in in the United States. Now is the time to stop this SAVE [America] Act.