U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Floor Speech on Voting Rights

November 18, 2026

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. President. I come to follow my colleague from California, Senator Padilla, and to thank him for organizing this discussion this afternoon. But really, to thank him for organizing last year's importance of voting rights and protecting our voting rights in the United States of America.

His strong leadership has been a key to helping us defend our voting rights as a former election officer in our nation's largest state, he had deep experience. He knew a lot about election administration and he knew a lot about voting rights.

So, our efforts, led by him, by Senator Padilla, I think, brought a lot of very smart communication to the American people. And for that, I thank him. Together, we worked hard to try to respond to what was very disruptive actionby President Trump and his administration.

We wanted to protect, secure, free, and fair elections. But it seemed like every other day, the White House was saying something else. Article I, Section 4 of the Constitution gives the states the primary responsibility for administrating elections, and Congress a secondary role. The president has no role. That's the key thing here: the president has no role.

And yet the president and his administration undertook a number of efforts to try to control aspects of the election, and he also sought to undermine public confidence in our state's administration of those elections. So here we are now at the end, almost, of that election season.

We have one more Senate election to be [certified] by the state of Alaska, but we've made it through that process again with a lot of confidence in the system, a lot of confidence by the American people, a lot of confidence by organizations like the League of Women Voters.

Not to say that there aren't issues or problems that that arose, but in general, the notion that states run elections and we continue to fight for those rights and protect them is critically important. And so I join the senator from California.

Again, thank him for his leadership, but join him in bringing attention to the fact that a lot of work went into that. Now, in the state of Washington, I joined my secretary of state, the NAACP, as I said, the League of Women Voters.

We had a lot of press conferences because people started to say that they weren't going to be able to have their votes cast and counted appropriately if they voted by mail. In fact, there was a huge example of people just pounding every day in the administration about the vote by mail system.

Now, vote by mail, I think, has increased voter participation in the state of Washington. It has brought a lot of opportunities for voters to understand the issues, a lot of opportunities for them to get their voter pamphlet maybe two and a half, three weeks before the election, sit with that voter pamphlet, and then cast their ballot.

But what they didn't want to see is the U.S. postal system changing the postmark practices and requirements, as was done, and literally, making sure that people's ballots did not count in the primary in our state.

So we, with the secretary of state and others, went on a major drive to educate people that they had to vote early, that reaching a regional processing center might delay their votes and not get cast.

In September, Secretary of State Hobbs and I released a snapshot report showing that late postmark rejection rates more than doubled in 19 Washington counties compared to 2024 primaries following adoption of this new policy, which delayed post-marking of mail-in ballots for several days.

And rural counties saw the most negative impacts during our state's February 2026 special election, 75% of the total rejected ballots were due to late postmarks. The people in the United States of America who vote by mail should have their ballots counted.

They should not be sent to some regional center without a postmark and then held and never delivered to the auditors in individual counties.

And so that is why, in this election, you saw many Washingtonians putting their ballot in a ballot box instead, close to their homes, making sure that a postmark or some process by the U.S. postal system wouldn't delay them. We also showed the perspective of members of Congress by filing an amicus brief in litigation defending our elections.

In one case, the Republican National Committee threatened election administration practices of states like Washington that permit mail ballots that were postmarked by Election Day to be counted when they are received within a certain number of days of the election.

I joined with members of our Senate colleagues in filing an amicus brief with the Supreme Court, and in June, the court agreed with our position and ruled that states have the right to set those rules for counting ballots and when they are received.

The Supreme Court ruling affirmed both a key element of by-mail voting and constitutional authority of states to administer those elections. I can't tell you how important it is for people to have faith in the decisions we make, and once the votes are counted, that we move forward.

That is what people want to see, and so they want to know that there was a high level of participation, and they want to know that America has spoken, and that is why we move forward. And again, that is why there is no role for the executive branch in the administration of elections.

Fortunately, in spite of President Trump and the administration[‘s efforts] to disrupt the elections with lawsuits or false narratives or changes to the Postal Service, we did have a free and fair and secure election. For this, I am grateful for the efforts of bipartisan and nonpartisan state election officials across the country who once again assured this outcome.

I want to say to the to the people here tonight, this wasn't a light subject for the state of Washington because two years before that, somebody blew up ballot boxes with [a] very sophisticated chemical, destroying ballots in a closely-monitored congressional election.

So for us, that local auditor took that threat very seriously, called out the county sheriff and others to guard and make sure that ballot boxes were safe, and in this election we saw none of that. So I am

especially grateful for the many poll workers, the volunteers, who give of their time and their effort in making sure that election days go smoothly.

And it is also important to remember all of the people who can't, as I said, in my state, get to a polling place and yet have this great opportunity to cast a ballot through the mail and through a ballot [drop] box. So I want to continue, Mr. President, to work on these important issues, those that give people the confidence that their vote does matter, to show that the higher the turnout and participation, the better.

It says that our voting system is working well, and I'm glad to co-sponsor bipartisan legislation with Senator Scott, Lisa Blunt Rochester, and reauthorizing the African American Civil Rights Network National Park Service program, that connects 130 historical sites related to the Civil Rights Movement, a longtime effort in sites central to fighting for the right to vote, and I hope that we will pass this legislation soon here in the United States Senate.

So, Mr. President, again, I think that as we look ahead to our work in the next Congress, the fight may not be over. We need to restore and strengthen our laws to make sure that we are protecting voter rights of all Americans.

But the goal remains the same: to ensure that Americans can freely exercise their precious, precious right to vote. We did get through this election cycle, and we have to learn the lessons of trying to undermine it and instead fight hard to strengthen it. I thank the president. I yield the floor.