

**U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell**  
**Floor Speech on Protecting the Right to Vote**

**June 23, 2026**

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

**Sen. Cantwell:** Mr. President, the attack on vote by mail and other efforts to disenfranchise Americans, whether it's the SAVE Act or redistricting to take away representation from minority-majority districts as the result of the Supreme Court decision in Louisiana versus Callais – all of these are actions to take away the right to vote.

Voting in America is a right. It is your right to vote. And for too long that precious right has been denied to too many. Americans have been beaten, they've been bloodied, and some have given their lives just to secure this right to vote. Women had to fight for it in 1920. It's amazing that I stand here today, just a little over 100 years later, but 100 years ago, I would not even [have] been allowed to vote.

Wars have been fought to preserve it. My father and uncle both fought in World War II, and I guarantee you they were fighting for our right to vote. And even in this chamber, we had to fight to preserve and certify the 2020 election. So when we are talking about voting rights, we are not talking about an abstract idea.

In Pennsylvania, in 1871, a man named Octavius Catto walked towards a polling place in the city of Philadelphia. He was a black educator, a Civil War militia officer, and a respected civic leader.

He believed that the promise written into our Constitution after the Civil War, the promise that Black Americans would be citizens and voters ought to mean something – [that] in the streets of his own city he could cast a vote. On election day, he thought that is what citizens were supposed to do.

So he went to vote. He never came home. He was gunned down in broad daylight by a white assailant amid a storm of racially charged violence designed to drive Black voters away from the polling place.

His killing was not random. It was part of a campaign of terror, a message that to every Black citizen: if you dare to exercise your political power, if you dare to walk to that ballot box, you will pay with your life.

Nearly a century later, in Mississippi, in 1966 the tactics had changed, but the target was the same: Black Americans who insisted on their right to vote. Vernon Dahmer Sr. was a Black farmer and businessman. If he dared to exercise his rights, what would happen?

Black Americans insisted on their vote, and Dahmer was a Black farmer who led his local NAACP branch and understood that a poll tax, a fee that poor people could not afford, was being used as a weapon to keep Black people off the voting rolls.

So he made a simple, courageous pledge: no one would be denied the chance to register because they could not afford to pay the tax. He went on radio and told [the] people of Mississippi that he would personally help pay their poll tax at his store.

The response was not a policy debate; it was terror. In January of that year, the Ku Klux Klan firebombed his home while his family slept inside. Vernon Dahmer fought back long enough to get his wife and children to safety, but he did not survive.

He died from the burns and smoke inhalation because he had taken a public stand that poor Black citizens should be allowed to be registered and vote. And while bombs and bullets are no longer used today, the intent to silence certain voters has not disappeared; it has just changed form.

Disenfranchisement today is more bureaucratic, it's more technical, but the results for ordinary citizens can be the same. Their voices are shunned out of a democracy. In Texas in 2021, a new law, SB 1, rewrote the rules for voting by mail. It required voters to provide specific ID numbers on applications and ballot envelopes.

The rules were confusing, the process was unforgiving, and in the next primary, thousands of longtime voters, many of them elderly, disabled, or from communities of color, found that their ballot request[s] or their ballots themselves were rejected, not because they were ineligible, but really because a form and the number on the form did not match.

Researchers working [at] the Brennan Center describe one such voter, a Texan in her 70s. She had done exactly what was asked: she had voted by mail reliably in 2016 and 2018 and in the 2020 general election. She had played by the rules as they were explained to her. Then, under the new law, her 2022 ballot was rejected.

No one threatened her at the polls with a gun. No one burned her home, but instead a letter, a notice informed her that her ballot did not count. Her voice had been quietly erased. And now we know that voters in her situation are far less likely to turn out in the next election.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was necessary because a century after the 15th Amendment, voters of color were still systematically blocked from ballots or [facing] literacy tests, poll tax[es], or just plain intimidation.

Before 1965, southern states in particular used these tactics to ensure that Black citizens would not register to vote everywhere where [they were] the majority of the population. The Voting Rights Act was needed because early civil rights laws had proven too weak.

Congress needed to say explicitly, in those laws, what the courts [and] what we needed to affirm. Congress said the federal government should oversee elections as it relates to preclearance of voting changes in those [states with discriminatory] histories, places of discrimination.

Why was this important? Just like all civil liberties that aren't implemented by the states, yes, the federal government should step in and make sure your civil rights and civil liberties are upheld, but some people here in this body don't believe in implementing those. And even though the Senate – this body – reauthorized the Voting Rights Act [by a vote of] 98 to 0 in 2006, the Supreme Court has eroded the gains of the Voting Rights Act over the last decade.

So, why are we here fighting today? Because today, Democrats are opposed to an unconstitutional Executive Order, a US Postal Service rulemaking [on mail-in and absentee ballots], and other efforts by the administration to enable the federal government to seize control over voter rolls and the vote by mail system.

The administration's actions are unconstitutional. Article One, Section Four of the Constitution gives the states the primary responsibility of administering the elections. Congress has the secondary role. The president has no role. The Framers of the Constitution were deliberate about this. The Constitution entrusts the elections to the states, so that they can't be manipulated by a self-interested executive branch.

In the state of Washington, on a bipartisan basis, vote by mail was implemented more than 40 years ago. By 2011, the state legislature made vote by mail the statewide standard of all elections, and yes, we're talking about a lot of western states that are in the same boat. Washington was second only to Oregon, which adopted [universal] vote by mail in 1998.

Today, there are 36 states that use no-excuse vote by mail. That means 36 states say you can get a ballot to cast your vote, and you don't have to make up an excuse, like you're working or in the hospital [or] are going to be out of the country. You can just request a mail-in ballot.

In 2024, [among people] voting for president in South Dakota, 35.6% voted by mail. In Indiana, the number was 53% [voting by mail,] and in Utah, over 91% of people voted by mail in 2024. I don't remember President Trump questioning the results of those elections.

The fact is, many election officials in these states are calling on other states to adopt this very secure, very traceable voting system. Voting by mail is not only convenient; it actually encourages civic participation.

Research by the University of Southern California found that universal vote by mail increased turnouts among registered voters by 5.6% in the 2020 election. Other research shows that these numbers could be somewhere between 4 and 10% for seniors and the disabled.

So, giving people the right to vote is actually helping, and it's no surprise that 40% of seniors are voting by mail – but somehow we want to disenfranchise them? In the 2024 president election, 47 million people, about one in three US citizens, cast their ballots by mail, and 40% of the Americans 65 and older did so, the highest rate of any group.

So we've already said it's safe, it's secure, it's reliable, and among the 89,991,893 ballots cast in my state from 2008 to 2025 – so really a 16-year period of time – the Heritage Foundation only found five cases of voter fraud, five cases in 16 years. In the state of Washington, we verify every voter every election with 100% signature matching bar codes, a paper trail, and an ID number if you want to track it yourself.

But last December, the US Postal Service changed the location where your mail is postmarked. Instead of postmarking your mail where you drop it off at the post office, your mail isn't postmarked until it's processed at a regional distribution center. This can delay postmarking up to several days.

For example, following the changes in the postmark practices, the Secretary of the State of Washington is seeing increased numbers of return ballots being rejected for late postmarks. For example, during the 2026 February special election, 75% of the total rejected ballots were due to late postmarks.

Snohomish County, Washington recently conducted a test to assess the postal delivery times in their area. This was a small test: four dates in January and February during a special election, a tiny sample of voters in one county, but of the sample ballots mailed, only about 20% were postmarked on the day they were actually mailed. 20 percent!

Are we saying we are going to allow voters who vote by mail to be disenfranchised because this administration is trying to force the postal service to say they are not going to stamp your ballot on the date that you mail it at the post office?

What about your social security check? What about other things that you would like to see postmarked the day they are mailed. What about legal documents? What about other issues? No. We are promulgating here a story of mischief that doesn't need to be here to suppress voters on election day.

Only about half of the 15 test mailings were postmarked that [election] day. The postal service issued a proposed rule to take control of who can receive a ballot and whose vote will be counted if you vote by mail. This is preposterous.

They want to use a Department of Homeland Security database notorious for erroneously finding eligible voters to be ineligible. That's right. That's what can happen to you: all of a sudden, now your name is on a database and you're ineligible, even though you're really eligible.

On election day [in Snohomish], about half of the postmarks were postmarked that day. Let me say this again: the post office is reasserting it can decide who gets a ballot, and they would decide who can cast a ballot by mail.

Fortunately, yesterday a federal court blocked the use of the DHS database, at least for now, as a violation of every American's privacy, but that litigation is continuing, and yesterday the Postal Service declined to provide a witness to testify in the state of Washington at our state legislative committee about this issue.

Why? If you're so proud of these tactics, if you think they're so great, why don't you show up at the Washington State Legislature and testify about what is happening? With the administration's plan, if you are among 1/3 of Americans that vote by mail, you can never know whether your vote was counted. There is no recourse.

I ask my colleagues: this is an assault on your right to vote. This is an assault on having your voice heard, whether it is a new rule delaying when [mail is] postmarked [or] prohibit[ing] counting ballots received later [than election day], whether it's demanding the DHS continue to purge names, they just want to take your rights away.

Last week, over 100 FBI agents raided the Ohio voting rights group the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, searching their offices, taking computers, knocking on the doors of volunteers without subpoena[s].

A few days later, the FBI went after one of the nation's leading nonprofit voter outreach coordination hubs, America Votes, a DC-based organization that works to turn out voters nationwide. They went after America Votes because it is among the voter organization that funds the Ohio Organizing Collaborative.

America Votes works with 400 organizations, including the AFL-CIO, Human Rights Campaign, Planned Parenthood, Emily's List, and the American Federation of Teachers to educate voters and get out the votes.

It is an outrage that Kash Patel is sending FBI agents to intimidate advocacy groups that work hard to turn out voters, particularly those of color.

My family has always fought to get out the vote. My parents lived and worked alongside people like Robert F. Kennedy and knew of Martin Luther King's voice. Martin Luther King Jr., on a trip to Seattle, said [are] we going to be "an echo rather than a voice, a taillight instead of a headlight?"

When I think about what we are seeing today, I see the same thing for my colleagues over here. Are you going to be an echo for the Trump administration about this ludicrous idea of the SAVE Act.

Are you going to be an echo for this ludicrous idea that our states that have vote by mail may all of a sudden now be subject to what the president, Homeland Security, and their enforcement of the Post Office is going to do to our ballots?

Or are you going to be a headlight for the future of our country and the future of our democracy? I ask my colleagues to stand up for your vote, your constituents' votes, and for our rights, because if we don't stop this, I guarantee you, millions of Americans will be disenfranchised.

Our future is much brighter with a system that allows millions of people in my state – 80%, sometimes, of voters – to vote and do so with certainty, and to follow their ballot. Let's not let this 2026 election be stolen by people who want to get rid of the rules that we have lived by.

Too many of those people that I mentioned died to get this [right to vote], or the women who fought [to get the right] in 1920 [and] to preserve it, or the people who have fought in wars to make sure that we have this privilege and right. Let's hold on to it. I thank the President, and I yield the floor.