



U.S. SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL

WASHINGTON

AN UNFUNDED MANDATE: SAVE AMERICA ACT WOULD COST WA TAXPAYERS AT LEAST \$35M JUST THIS YEAR

The U.S. House of Representatives narrowly passed the SAVE America Act on February 11, 2026. If passed by the Senate and signed by the President, the law will impose new requirements on voters and election officials in the State of Washington. These are two of the most significant:

1. A requirement that all mail-in ballots include a printed copy of the voter's picture ID.
2. A requirement that anyone registering to vote, or changing their registration details, present a birth certificate, passport, or other proof of citizenship documents in person to a state official. **A driver's license, even a standard REAL ID one, is not proof of citizenship.**

We covered some of the substantial challenges this legislation would impose on Washington's voters – including financial costs and bureaucratic burdens – in a previous [report](#).

This report shows how these requirements would also burden the state and its counties with significant new costs and add an unprecedented threat of jail time for their elections office staff, the nonpartisan public servants who play a crucial role in administering Washington's safe and secure elections:

- The State of Washington and its 39 counties together will spend a combined cost of at least **\$35.7 million** before November to comply with the new rules, according to a new analysis from the Washington Secretary of State's Office and the Washington Association of County Auditors.
- The Act will impose an additional annual cost to running elections of at least \$9.5 million -- going as high as \$14.6 million or more for presidential election years
- Election officials who make an honest mistake about a voter's paperwork could be fined as much as \$250,000 -- and face up to 5 years in jail.

Proponents of the SAVE America Act claim this is all necessary to end voter fraud. In fact, data from the conservative Heritage Foundation -- the group behind Project 2025 -- shows how vanishingly small voter fraud convictions are.

- Among the 89,991,893 ballots cast in WA elections from 2008-2025, The Heritage Foundation's Voter Fraud Tracker has identified just 5 proven cases of voter fraud.
- That amounts to an error rate of **0.000006%** -- **fewer than one in 10 million** -- a functionally nonexistent rate of fraud.

Unfunded Mandate: The Multi-Million Dollar Cost of the SAVE America Act

A new [analysis](#) of the costs to implement the SAVE America Act, prepared jointly by the Washington Secretary of State's Office and the Washington Association of County Auditors, states that **"the operational and financial impacts would be substantial and ongoing."** Yet the SAVE America Act provides no federal funding to cover them.

Should the Senate pass the SAVE America Act as it passed the House, it will become law the moment the President signs it. States and counties will need to scramble to meet the requirements by the next election, even if it is only days away. **"These changes would require significant operational adjustments, rapid upgrades to state systems and voter registration infrastructure, and expanded voter education efforts,"** the new, nonpartisan analysis states.

Their analysis assessed the initial implementation costs at \$26.2 million to \$28.2 million for one-time implementation and \$9.5 million to \$11.1 million of additional ongoing operational costs -- **a total 2026 cost of \$35.7 million to \$39.3 million statewide.**

The ongoing operational costs will grow even larger during presidential election years, expanding to range from \$12.25 million to \$14.65 million. This will amount to a 60% increase in federal election administration operating costs and an additional \$4,000,000 in annual federal voter registration administration costs.

State Costs Associated with the SAVE America Act

The State of Washington has invested millions in technology to make voting easier. The SAVE America Act will require costly, rushed changes to those systems, and a huge voter education campaign.

- State agencies like the Department of Licensing that currently register voters will need to change their systems to comply with the new "show-your-papers" requirements. Estimated cost: **\$20 million.**

- Voters will need to be told about the new requirements to appear in-person to present proof of citizenship documents to avoid massive numbers of voters ineligible to vote in federal elections and in-person voting surges on Election Day. Until new voters provide proof of citizenship documents, they would be eligible for state elections but not federal elections, creating significant confusion and complicated communication. The state estimates that a last-minute statewide public education campaign will cost **\$3.6 million**.
- The state's voter database and online registration system will both need modifications, a total expected cost of **\$474,000**.
- Under the law, state voter rolls must be compared to the federal Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements Program (SAVE), an online system operated by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). To accomplish this, a new interface for the state to securely exchange and store SAVE information will need to be developed at an estimated cost of **\$118,500**.

Initial SAVE America Act Implementation Costs for WA State	
Activity	Cost
State agency voter registration system upgrades	\$3.6M-\$6M
Statewide public education campaign	\$3.6M
VoteWA database modifications for citizenship documentation	\$237,000
Online voter registration system updates	\$237,000
Integration with federal SAVE system	\$118,500
TOTAL	\$8.25M-\$10.65M

Source: [WA Secretary of State Election Results Archive](#), [Heritage Foundation Election Fraud Map](#). See Appendix A for election-by-election data

County Costs Associated with the SAVE America Act (\$24.2 Million)

Combining the estimated costs to Washington's 39 counties of the SAVE America Act's unprecedented paperwork requirements indicates a taxpayer burden of **millions of dollars in new costs every year**. The highest costs will come during federal elections, when the SAVE America Act's Voter ID requirement would be in force.

- A one-time cost of coordinating additional voter center locations and buying new voter center equipment computers, printers, copiers, and image scanners and setup to accommodate voters presenting proof of citizenship and identification will **cost WA's counties a total of \$2 million to \$4 million**.

Initial SAVE America Act Implementation Costs for WA's Counties (Combined Cost for All Counties)	
Activity	Cost
Vote center equipment and setup	\$2M-\$4M

Source: [WA Secretary of State Election Results Archive](#), [Heritage Foundation Election Fraud Map](#). See Appendix A for election-by-election data

Under the SAVE America Act, the baseline costs of running elections will **rise to \$4 million**. Most would go toward paying new staff to assist voters who will now need to show citizenship papers for new or modified registrations, estimated at \$3.9 million every year.

For congressional mid-term and presidential elections, counties will need to:

- Expand voting center capacity to accommodate voters presenting proof of citizenship and identification, which will cost an estimated total across all counties of \$2.4 million to \$4 million for congressional elections and \$3.6 million to \$6 million for presidential elections
- Provide additional ballot materials to preserve voter privacy when identification is submitted with mailed ballots, which will cost an estimated total across all counties of \$2 million for congressional elections and \$3 million for presidential elections
- Spend more on ballot processing due to the new verification steps, which will cost an estimated total across all counties of \$1.1 million for congressional elections and \$1.65 million for presidential elections.

Annual SAVE America Act Costs for WA Counties (Combined Cost for All Counties)			
Activity	Costs for off-year elections	Costs for midterm elections	Costs for presidential election
County election staff	\$3.9M	\$3.9M	\$3.9M
Voter registration notice mailings	\$16.5K – \$101K	\$16.5K – \$101K	\$16.5K – \$101K
Vote center operations	N/A	\$2.4M-\$4M	\$3.6M-\$6M
Ballot processing, ID verification	N/A	\$2M	\$3M
Ballot envelope requirement	N/A	\$1.1M	\$1.65M
TOTAL	\$4M	\$5.5M-\$7.1M	\$8.25M-\$10.65M

Source: [WA Secretary of State Election Results Archive](#), [Heritage Foundation Election Fraud Map](#). See Appendix A for election-by-election data

Unanticipated Costs of the SAVE America Act

The analysis cited above covers costs anticipated by the text of the SAVE America Act as it narrowly passed the House on its face. However, as with any law, some anticipated costs may be difficult to forecast and unintended consequences may lie ahead. For example, election officials anticipate that the harsh legal penalties for election workers will hamper recruitment and retention of qualified staff. These new laws also could lead to costly litigation related to voter eligibility, disenfranchisement of eligible citizens, challenges to returned ballots, or contests of election results – or all of those scenarios. Moreover, election litigation can lead to long delays in voters knowing the final outcome of an election and certification of results.

The SAVE America Act Is Punitive to Local Election Officials

Federal voting laws already recognize the crucial role election officials play in preserving democracy. Current law also provides for criminal penalties of up to five years in federal prison and significant fines to election officials who "knowingly and willfully" register ineligible voters.

The SAVE America Act applies the same significant penalty to any election official who "register[s] an applicant to vote in an election for federal office who fails to present documentary proof of United States citizenship." But unlike current law, there is no requirement to prove that the official illegally registered the person on purpose ("knowingly and willfully"). Any simple or

inadvertent mistake would subject them to prosecution, **even if it turns out the person they registered is actually a U.S. citizen.**

Plus, the SAVE America Act also creates a private right of action for this new requirement. That means anyone could sue a Washington election official for failing to check someone's citizenship papers. The decision about whether to pursue this penalty would not be left solely to prosecutors.

***For example:** A retired Eastern Washington woman drives to the county election office because she's moving in with her kids and wants to change the delivery address of her ballots. The woman has her driver's license, which isn't proof of citizenship -- but the election official knows she's a U.S. citizen -- heck, they grew up together. So she verifies the address change.*

Under the SAVE America Act, in this scenario the election official could be guilty of a felony punishable by up to 5 years in prison and/or a significant fine.

In addition to the criminal charge, the SAVE America Act permits civil action. **Anyone** -- a bystander, someone who heard the story second-hand, a partisan election observer -- could sue the election official, upending her life, subjecting her to hefty legal fees, and potentially ruining her career.

Washington State Has Already Eliminated Voter Fraud

If voter fraud were rampant, these costs and burdens might make sense to remedy the problem. But, Washington state's existing system has already proven to be a highly effective deterrent to voter fraud.

Votes Cast in WA General, Primary, Presidential Primary, and Special Elections, 2008-2025	Voter Fraud Convictions For These Elections	Incidence of Voter Fraud
89,991,893	5	0.000006%

Source: [WA Secretary of State Election Results Archive](#), [Heritage Foundation Election Fraud Map](#). See Appendix A for election-by-election data

That's a rate of less than one per ten million votes cast.

Conclusion

The SAVE America Act will impose tens of millions of dollars in new costs to secure elections that are already practically error-free. If enacted, it will – for the first time -- allow the federal government to throw an election worker in jail for making an honest mistake. Long lines at polling places are practically guaranteed as voters and election workers alike navigate unprecedented paperwork requirements. Higher costs, frightened election workers, and chaotic polling places are not the ingredients of a secure voting system.

Appendix A

Note on methodology: The years 2008-2025 were chosen because these are the years for which [data](#) is available for all elections held in that year.

Note on sources: The Heritage Foundation Voter Fraud Map [lists](#) six instances of fraud in WA from 2008-2025, but one of these was related to the 2007 election and therefore was not included in this analysis. In addition, counting that incident in the 2007 election, the Heritage Foundation found only 10 instances of voter fraud in the state between 1982 and 2007 – a rate of just one case of fraud every two-and-a-half years. For the entire period between 1982 and 2025, the Heritage Foundation found only one case of voter fraud for about every three years.

Voter Fraud Convictions in WA Elections, 2008-2025					
Year	Election	Date	Votes Cast	Voter Fraud Convictions (Via Heritage Foundation Database)	Fraud Rate
2025	General	11/4/2025	2,001,425	0	0.000000%
2025	Primary	8/5/2025	1,265,106	0	0.000000%
2025	Special	4/22/2025	579,680	0	0.000000%
2025	Special	2/10/2025	536,578	0	0.000000%
2024	General	11/5/2024	3,961,569	0	0.000000%
2024	Primary	8/6/2024	1,994,096	0	0.000000%
2024	Special	4/23/2024	216,197	0	0.000000%
2024	Presidential Primary	3/12/2024	1,708,308	0	0.000000%
2024	Special	2/13/2024	734,132	0	0.000000%
2023	General	11/7/2023	1,758,084	0	0.000000%
2023	Primary	8/1/2023	1,116,963	0	0.000000%
2023	Special	4/25/2023	530,405	0	0.000000%
2023	Special	2/14/2023	451,969	0	0.000000%
2022	General	11/8/2022	3,067,686	0	0.000000%
2022	Primary	8/2/2022	1,941,933	0	0.000000%
2022	Special	4/26/2022	240,236	0	0.000000%
2022	Special	2/8/2022	966,966	0	0.000000%

2021	General	11/2/2021	1,896,481	0	0.000000%
2021	Primary	8/3/2021	1,294,522	0	0.000000%
2021	Special	4/27/2021	111,739	0	0.000000%
2021	Special	2/9/2021	300,340	0	0.000000%
2020	General	11/3/2020	4,116,894	1	0.000024%
2020	Primary	8/4/2020	2,510,881	0	0.000000%
2020	Special Election	4/28/2020	25,031	0	0.000000%
2020	Presidential Primary	3/10/2020	2,255,928	0	0.000000%
2020	Special	2/11/2020	754,603	0	0.000000%
2019	General	11/5/2019	2,035,401	0	0.000000%
2019	Primary	8/6/2019	1,173,009	0	0.000000%
2019	Special	4/23/2019	164,099	0	0.000000%
2019	Special	2/12/2019	531,768	0	0.000000%
2018	General	11/6/2018	3,133,462	0	0.000000%
2018	Primary	8/7/2018	1,753,545	0	0.000000%
2018	Special	4/24/2018	263,045	0	0.000000%
2018	Special	2/13/2018	896,507	0	0.000000%
2017	General	11/7/2017	1,582,481	0	0.000000%
2017	Primary	8/15/2017	1,017,946	0	0.000000%
2017	Special	4/25/2017	125,027	0	0.000000%
2017	Special	2/14/2017	314,039	0	0.000000%
2016	General	11/8/2016	3,363,440	1	0.000030%
2016	Primary	8/2/2016	1,431,058	0	0.000000%
2016	Presidential Primary	5/24/2016	1,421,841	0	0.000000%
2016	Special	4/26/2016	323,691	0	0.000000%
2016	Special	2/9/2016	741,857	0	0.000000%
2015	General	11/3/2015	1,528,272	0	0.000000%
2015	Primary	8/4/2015	817,876	0	0.000000%
2015	Special	4/28/2015	480,586	0	0.000000%
2015	Special	2/10/2015	314,606	0	0.000000%
2014	General	11/4/2014	2,124,330	0	0.000000%
2014	Primary	8/5/2014	1,222,710	0	0.000000%
2014	Special	4/22/2014	586,032	0	0.000000%
2014	Special	2/11/2014	744,899	0	0.000000%
2013	General	11/5/2013	1,772,290	0	0.000000%

2013	Primary	8/6/2013	837,098	0	0.000000%
2013	Special	4/23/2013	107,132	0	0.000000%
2013	Special	2/12/2013	305,806	0	0.000000%
2012	General	11/6/2012	3,172,939	0	0.000000%
2012	Primary	8/7/2012	1,435,928	0	0.000000%
2012	Special	4/17/2012	189,110	0	0.000000%
2012	Special	2/14/2012	586,487	0	0.000000%
2011	General	12/6/2011	1,936,950	0	0.000000%
2011	Primary	8/16/2011	819,991	0	0.000000%
2011	Special	5/17/2011	32,616	0	0.000000%
2011	Special	4/26/2011	59,936	0	0.000000%
2011	Special	2/8/2011	290,286	0	0.000000%
2010	General	11/2/2010	2,565,589	0	0.000000%
2010	Primary	8/17/2010	1,471,791	0	0.000000%
2010	Special	6/2/2010	6,605	0	0.000000%
2010	Special	4/27/2010	213,163	0	0.000000%
2010	Special	2/9/2010	646,608	0	0.000000%
2009	General	11/3/2009	1,823,364	0	0.000000%
2009	Primary	8/18/2009	724,598	0	0.000000%
2009	Special	6/3/2009	47,472	0	0.000000%
2009	Special	4/28/2009	2,284	0	0.000000%
2009	Special	3/10/2009	163,045	0	0.000000%
2009	Special	2/3/2009	161,131	0	0.000000%
2008	General	11/4/2008	3,071,587	2	0.000065%
2008	Primary	8/19/2008	1,455,756	1	0.000069%
2008	Special	5/20/2008	154,001	0	0.000000%
2008	Special	4/22/2008	12,413	0	0.000000%
2008	Special	3/11/2008	109,937	0	0.000000%
2008	Special and Presidential Primary	2/19/2008	1,386,701	0	0.000000%
TOTAL			89,991,893	5	0.000006%