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State may use federal immigration data in checking voters' eligibility

Washington is among a growing list of states being granted access to a federal immigration database that election officials hope could help them remove noncitizens from their voter rolls.

By [Lornet Turnbull](#)

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Washington has joined a growing list of states being granted access to a federal immigration database that election officials hope could help them scrub noncitizens from the state's voter rolls.

Secretary of State Sam Reed had requested permission from the Department of Homeland Security to access the system, which includes records of more than 100 million legal U.S. immigrants — citizens and noncitizens.

In this pivotal election year, the fight over accessing this database, led mostly by Republicans in several states — many of them key battlegrounds — has created a firestorm in recent weeks.

It's still unclear how Reed's Elections Division will access information from the Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements database, called SAVE, or whether it will result in any changes before the November election.

Government agencies use the Web-based service to determine the immigration status of applicants for benefits, so that only those entitled can receive them.

SAVE does not include the names of illegal immigrants but rather lists those who are naturalized citizens and therefore eligible to vote, as well as green-card holders, foreign students or people here on work visas, who may not vote.

And it links those names not to Social Security numbers but to so-called alien ID numbers, which the state also would likely need — but doesn't have — in order to compare the two databases.

"We consider it a step forward," Shane Hamlin, co-director of elections, said of gaining access. "We'll work through the details. We need to look at the data before we can act on it."

Officials say the information won't be used to make wholesale purges of the state's elections database, as has been done in other states.

After elections officials compare the lists, anyone they suspect might be ineligible to vote would be notified and given a chance to correct errors, if it gets to that.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Washington (ACLU) and other advocacy groups, worried about disenfranchisement of immigrant and minority voters, say they plan to meet with elections officials next week.

Shankar Narayan, ACLU's legislative director, said there's no indication voting by noncitizens is a sizable problem in Washington and he said the state is obligated to ensure eligible citizens have full access to the ballot.

"That's why the use of SAVE is of concern to us," Narayan said. "It's not intended to be a tool to verify citizenship."

In most states — including Washington — registering to vote is relatively easy since it does not require proof of citizenship.

Washington maintains a voter database of some 3.7 million registered voters that is regularly scrubbed to remove those who die, move to other states or become incarcerated.

The state first inquired about accessing SAVE in 2005 after a contested gubernatorial vote, but Homeland Security balked at the time, saying use of the system for that purpose was inappropriate.

Last week, after a yearlong battle, it granted Florida access to SAVE and pledged access to other states that requested it.

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