



STATE OF MICHIGAN
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LANSING

Testimony of Jocelyn Benson, Michigan Secretary of State

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Chairperson Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee, thank you for hosting today's hearing.

As Michigan's chief election officer my responsibility is to ensure our elections are accessible, safe, secure, and that the results are an accurate reflection of the will of the people. It is not a partisan role and despite being an elected position, it is not a political role. But it is a role that increasingly forces us – whether we consider ourselves Republicans, Democrats, or independents – to endure threats, harassment, false and malicious attacks on our character and integrity.

Why? Because of lies – about our work, about the security of our elections and our own integrity.

In today's hearing we will talk about all the work we are doing to ensure it is easy to vote and hard to cheat in our respective states. Indeed, election security is top of mind for every professional election administrator in this country.

But I want to begin my remarks emphasizing we cannot have a secure democracy if we do not protect the security of the people who administer our elections. And right now, we are enduring unrelenting harassment and threats. People have come to my home or threatened me, my staff, and many of the hundreds of clerks and local election officials in our state. As a result, there is an omnipresent feeling of anxiety and hypervigilance that permeates our daily lives, and our families' lives.

I want you to know these threats are a direct result of the spread of false information about the security and accuracy of our elections. I need you to be on notice that unsubstantiated allegations and rhetoric without evidence makes our elections less secure because they erode the public's confidence in our elections and harm those charged with protecting our election systems.

The second thing I want to emphasize is that, now more than ever, the federal government's role as a trusted partner in securing our elections is crucial. As you know recent years have brought unprecedented threats to our election system, including some from highly sophisticated, foreign-government aligned entities. It is essential that from the very highest level of government there is acknowledgement of the past, present, and future active threats posed by foreign state actors, and that we marshal bipartisan support and cooperative actions in response. Only through a unified approach, long-term commitment and regular investment can we adequately support our election infrastructure. This upholds and sustains and provide a voting system in which

Americans will rightly place their trust.

Part of that unified approach must be a commitment to providing a predictable, sustainable, and reliable stream of funding and additional resources for election security. Election officials know what they need to do to ensure our elections are secure but often must scrape together funding from multiple sources to meet their needs. The federal government has taken positive steps – such as significantly improving federal, state, and local coordination and making more funding and tools available – but you need to do much more.

Federal resources are essential for election infrastructure today, whether it's allocated towards supporting personnel, purchasing or upgrading new voting machines or maintaining statewide voter registration databases.

For example, after 2018 Michigan upgraded voting machines across the state. We were able to do so because we still had federal HAVA funds available from prior years; only with those resources was our state able to make necessary improvements in voting technology. In Michigan and elsewhere, however, we need additional and reliable support to make necessary improvements at the state and local level in the years ahead.

Secure Elections in Michigan in 2024

Michigan's election system is unique to the extent that our election administration is highly decentralized, run primarily by more than 1,520 city and township clerks, with 83 county clerks also carrying significant responsibilities. From a statewide standpoint, with so many links in our chain, it is important to recognize that local election officials are the front line in the defense against threats.

At the statewide level in Michigan, as in 2020 and in 2022, we have a proactive plan to ensure our elections continue to be secure, accessible, fair, and that the results are an accurate reflection of the will of the people.

First, we are working with our 1,520 local clerks and 83 county clerks to support a secure and transparent election infrastructure. This includes providing funding, trainings, and other resources as these professional local officials meet the needs of their constituents in every community. As recent amendments to the Michigan Constitution and statutory enactments resulted in many new election-related rights and requirements, including the creation of a nine-day early voting period, we also have a responsibility to assist clerks as they work to meet these mandates.

Secondly, we are building robust partnerships with a broad and diverse coalition, including faith leaders, business leaders, veteran's organizations, colleges and universities, senior centers, and community leaders in every part of Michigan to ensure every eligible Michigan citizen is registered and able to cast a ballot in every election. This includes working with sports teams, including the Detroit Lions, the Detroit Pistons, and NASCAR, where our collaborations help us meet people where they are and bring voter registration opportunities and nonpartisan election information to citizens throughout our state.

This spring, together with the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, we launched the Michigan Business United for Elections initiative. This nonpartisan, pro-democracy coalition

commits to supporting and educating employees about their voting options and empowering them to serve as election workers in their communities. Diverse companies across the state including Delta Airlines and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, companies from retail, healthcare, advertising and finance industries have joined to make sure all Michigan voters know their options to vote, where to go with questions about the process, and how to serve as an election worker.

Finally, we are also working to ensure the accuracy and security of our voter registration database and provide for the secure tabulation of paper ballots and post-election audits in our state.

Voter Registration Database Accuracy and Security

Michigan's list of registered voters is maintained on the Qualified Voter File, a database developed by the state of Michigan and maintained by municipal and county clerks and the Bureau of Elections. The Qualified Voter File contains the names of all individuals registered to vote in Michigan. It also contains the names of individuals with cancelled registrations, who are no longer eligible to vote in Michigan, and 16- and 17-year-olds who have "pre-registered" and will be able to vote when they turn 18. The Qualified Voter File is constantly updated whenever a new voter registers, a voter updates his or her registration information (such as an address), or a voter's registration is cancelled.

As part of Michigan's automatic voter registration law, when a registered voter updates his or her driver's license or state ID address, the voter's registration is also updated. If a voter moves within his or her city or township, the registration moves to the voter's new address. If a voter moves to a different city or township in Michigan, the voter's previous registration is cancelled, and the voter is automatically re-registered at his or her new address.

When a voter surrenders his or her Michigan Driver's license in a different state, the Michigan Department of State receives this information, typically through our membership in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). The Michigan Bureau of Elections uses this as initial information that the voter may have moved. The Bureau sends a notice of cancellation to the voter's address in Michigan. If the voter does not respond and does not have any voting activity by the second even-year November federal election following the notice, the voter's registration is cancelled. After the notice is sent, the voter is marked inactive and can still vote until the cancellation occurs.

State and local election officials were able to identify a significant number of registered voters who appeared to have changed address through the statewide mailing of absent voter ballot applications in 2020, the first statewide election mailing in at least a decade. State and local officials used applications that were returned as undeliverable to mark voters as inactive and send notices of cancellation in 2021. If these voters do not vote or otherwise verify their eligibility, their registrations will be cancelled after the two-federal-election waiting period expires in 2024. [Because of this, many more voter registrations were identified and will be cancelled after 2024 than after 2022.](#)

According to federal data, Michigan is one of the most active states in identifying and cancelling the registrations of deceased voters. The Election Assistance Commission reported that

Michigan, which is the tenth largest state in the nation, removed the fifth most in the [2020 cycle](#); and the fifth most in the [2022 cycle](#).

When someone dies and their death record is processed, this information is sent to the Social Security Administration and added to the Master Death Index. The Michigan Department of State receives this information from the Social Security Administration. On a weekly basis, the Bureau of Elections cancels the voter registrations of all registered voters who appear on the Master Death Index report.

County clerks also inform a city or township clerks when they process death records for an individual registered to vote in that city or township. Although the vast majority of these deceased individuals are also identified through the Master Death Index, county clerks may be able to provide this information to municipal clerks most quickly. This is useful in the days leading up to elections, to allow the registrations of voters who become deceased to be cancelled more quickly. City or Township clerks can also cancel registrations when they have personal knowledge that a registered voter has become deceased. For example, the city or township clerk may have an obituary, local death notice, or a written notification from next of kin.

As of March 2024, the Bureau of Elections and clerks across the state have canceled more than 800,000 voter registrations since 2019. This includes 532,513 voter registrations of people who have died, 273,609 registrations belonging to those who have received a cancellation notice based on a change of residency and did not respond to the notice or engage in voter activity in the two-federal-cycle period, and 16,716 registrations for people who requested to have their own records cancelled.

Voting Technology and Post Election Audits

In Michigan our localities all use one of three types of voting machine vendor systems, selected at the county level. All are version of optical scan machines that use paper ballots which are scanned through electronic tabulators (with the paper ballot retained and stored). There is no evidence that voting machines in Michigan have been compromised or that votes can be changed, but in the event that a bad actor were able to alter an electronic tabulator program, using and retaining paper ballots (which can be reviewed and recounted) is an important safeguard. It is encouraging that a significant majority of voters nationwide cast votes on paper ballots, with the number approaching 98 percent in 2024 (the only remaining jurisdictions are in Louisiana and some parts of Texas).

While our voting machines are relatively new and function well, we need to ensure they remain secure and effective with continued use over multiple elections and through the lifecycle of each machine. With the pace of technology, ensuring we have adequate voting technology is an ongoing process, rather than a one-time task to be completed. Voting technology can quickly and unexpectedly become obsolete as circumstances change, and it is not possible to ensure that all jurisdictions have the most recent and state of the art equipment with the limited funding we have available. We need to stay ahead of this curve and continue the focus on security and potential vulnerabilities of these systems.

Paper ballots assist with another key element of election security infrastructure: auditing of election results. In Michigan, reviewing the accuracy of vote counts is mandated in our state constitution. Risk-limiting audits are a useful tool for verifying the accuracy of election results

across an entire election (as opposed to a single precinct), because they allow us to utilize statistically proven methods to sample and scale the number of ballots we count and confirm election results overall, which in turn will tell us the probability that errors, manipulation, or problems have occurred with vote tabulation. This is a particularly helpful feature in a state like Michigan, with our decentralized structure and where voting equipment varies across counties.

Post election audits of the 2020 general election were the most extensive in Michigan's history. You can obtain more details about those audits and their results – all of which affirmed the security and accuracy of our elections – in our department's [2020 Post Election audit report](#).

Conclusion

Despite the politically charged environment, I am encouraged by the bipartisanship and spirit of cooperation that exists among election officials in our state, particularly when it comes to election security. That cooperation across partisan lines, which involves making data-driven decisions not subject to the whims of politicians and wishes of Presidential candidates, is essential when it comes to preserving the integrity of our voting systems. I and my colleagues in Michigan will continue to lead on this but we hope that you and your colleagues will join us in this regard.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I hope in sharing information about Michigan's election infrastructure I can help this Committee build a strong record as it examines our nation's election preparedness for 2024.