

## **Testimony of Karen Brinson Bell**

### **Committee on House Administration Hearing “Make Elections Great Again: How to Restore Trust and Integrity in Federal Elections” February 10, 2026**

Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Karen Brinson Bell, and from June 1, 2019 until May 14, 2025, I had the honor of serving as North Carolina’s chief election official and the executive director of the State Board of Elections, overseeing the voting process for more than 7.5 million registered voters and leading the 100 county boards of elections through hurricanes, a global pandemic, and record-setting turnout. During my time there, the Board won multiple awards from the Election Assistance Commission including for emergency planning and innovation in election administration.

Since 2006, I have served in various roles at the county, state, and national levels within the elections profession. As principal and co-founder of the firm Advance Elections, I now consult with election officials across our country on improving resilience in emergency situations, securing our elections, and furthering the administration of elections through evidence-based research. Elections administration is my profession. Like my colleagues across the country, I’m nonpartisan in the work I do to ensure that the voters are served and able to cast their ballot fairly and accurately.

I was proud to testify last year before the Subcommittee on Elections to discuss the heroic work of election officials and emergency management professionals to maintain voting access in the midst of deadly Hurricane Helene.<sup>1</sup> I thank Chairwoman Lee and Ranking Member Sewell for the opportunity to bring to Congress the story of the people of Western North Carolina. These brave men and women joined together in the midst of so much destruction to save lives and keep our democracy running. Election officials are essential workers to our communities and our democracy. We don’t stop an election when an emergency strikes. Rather, we find a way, no matter the conditions, to get people to the polls and to maintain security and integrity in all of our operations.

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<sup>1</sup> Subcommittee on Elections, Committee on House Administration, “Maintaining Election Operations in the Face of Natural Disasters,” September 16, 2025 [\[LINK\]](#).

Yet, election officials at the state and local level historically have not, and currently do not, receive sufficient support from our federal partners. All of the members of this committee, all of you, were elected in elections administered by your local election official. You were elected by ballots that were prepared and paid for almost entirely by state and local governments. The voters who cast those ballots for you were checked into their polling places by poll workers hired and paid by their local government. And they were paid very little. In Onslow County in my state, for example, election chief judges receive just \$219 for grueling hours running a polling place on election day.<sup>2</sup> The tabulators that counted the ballots cast for you, the voter registration systems that ensured the voter rolls were accurate and up to date, the cybersecurity experts, security cameras, and bullet proof glass that secured those systems... Everything that ensured that your election was accessible to voters, that only eligible voters could vote and that their ballots would be counted as cast, all of it was run by county and municipal election officials in partnership with state election officials.<sup>3</sup>

And your election was paid for by them too.<sup>4</sup> 96% of election costs, let me say that again, 96% of election costs, are borne by state and local governments.<sup>5</sup> Congress sometimes has appropriated Election Security Grants through the Help America Vote Act process. These grants have been essential for states improving their election systems and hardening them against physical and cyber threats. Yet, the level of appropriation has not met the need. Just two weeks ago Congress appropriated \$45 million in election security funds for the entire country.<sup>6</sup> While welcome, and I do stress that these funds are welcome, it is in no way sufficient for election officials grappling with rising costs and increasing threats. During the first Trump Administration, Congress supported election security grants to the tune of around \$400 million. The need has grown, the support has not.<sup>7</sup>

I've searched through the bill being discussed by this committee and the bill up for debate before the House this week for implementation funding for the substantial new federal mandates they propose. I control-F'ed for the dollar sign and I did not see a

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<sup>2</sup> Onslow County Elections, "Poll Worker Resources," accessed February 8, 2026 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>3</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, "Helping America Vote: Election Administration in the United States," 2025 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>4</sup> Center for Election Innovation and Research, "Who Pays for Election Administration?," October 2025 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Stewart III, MIT Election Data and Science Lab, National Institute for Civil Discourse, "The Cost of Conducting Elections," May 16, 2022 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>6</sup> Steny Hoyer, "Hoyer Floor Remarks in Support of FY 2026 FSGG Appropriations Bill," January 14, 2026 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>7</sup> Bipartisan Policy Center and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, "Measuring the Impact of Recent Grants to Election Administrators Under the Help America Vote Act," December 2024 [\[LINK\]](#).

single dollar, much less the hundreds of million dollars needed to implement these changes.

I am especially concerned by some provisions of the bill under discussion today that would dramatically increase burdens on voters and on election officials.

As I have noted, the bill includes a series of unfunded mandates that, if enacted, would impose significant costs on states, local governments, and millions of American voters and taxpayers. To take a few of the major provisions in the MEGA Act:

The rigid photo ID mandates would sweep away current systems even in most states with a voter ID law in place. In addition to the bill's requirements being more burdensome than those of many states, the bill would require equipping election offices with the means to verify IDs for every mail-in ballot. This means an investment in new software and additional staff to handle the manual verification and secure storage of millions of images or numbers.

For context, the recent inclusion of photo ID documentation with the return of the ballot in North Carolina required a significant redesign of the mail ballot envelope in North Carolina, increased postage costs, necessitated development of administrative rules including a public comment period and submission to the Rules Review Commission, training, and voter outreach. The overall implementation of voter ID was a multi-million dollar endeavor with a considerable runway and years of litigation.

I want to pause on one particularly puzzling piece of the photo ID requirement - the fact that overseas military service members voters are exempt from this requirement, but their spouses and dependents are not. I can think of no policy reason to justify this unprecedented exception to the exception.

Back to the bill's main provisions. The nationwide documentary proof of citizenship mandates would require local election offices to act as document verifiers, an enormously expanded role for which they are not staffed or funded. In addition, while there is a backup procedure in the bill for voters to attest to citizenship when lacking one of the approved documents, the bill would require each state to determine what proof would be acceptable evidence in such an instance. This would create a confusing patchwork of documentation structures for voters and election officials, violation of which would be a federal crime.

But let's not forget the bigger picture - rigid documentary proof of citizenship laws, especially a nationwide mandate that does not allow states to tailor policies to their own

needs, would disenfranchise eligible voters. When Kansas attempted to implement a proof of citizenship system in 2014, 12% of applicants were denied registration for failing to provide documentary proof of citizenship. Yet, ultimately, more than 99% of those who were initially rejected were in fact eligible.<sup>8</sup> 12% may not sound like a large number, but at a national scale that would mean millions of eligible voters would be disenfranchised.

The Kansas law also provided for a year and a half of implementation lead time. The MEGA Act does provide implementation lead time, but less than one year. The SAVE America Act, being considered on the House floor this week, provides basically no implementation time.

The MEGA Act's list maintenance procedures are similarly unnecessarily burdensome, costly, and do not provide flexibility to account for the differences among the more than 10,000 elections jurisdictions in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Some states maintain control of voter rolls, but in other states that falls to the county or locality.<sup>10</sup> This bill would place yet another burden on these governments with no funding.

The bill would also overhaul the REAL ID system overnight, requiring citizenship to be indicated on the face of an ID when almost no state does that now. The bill would allow any private citizen to sue elections offices when they believe there is a violation of the bill's requirements, and local governments may choose to divert millions of dollars from public services into budget line-items for legal fees to fight lawsuits over technicalities in the Act's implementation. Fear of frivolous litigation or the bill's new criminal penalties could force many elections officials to quit, at a time when the field has lost many experienced professionals since 2020 amid lack of funding and physical threats to officials' safety.<sup>11</sup> I've witnessed this firsthand in North Carolina, with 70 changes in county election directors during my 6-year tenure. Such turnover puts higher demands on training, increases risk of error, and strips the profession of institutional knowledge.

Nearly every provision in this bill would sweep away current, effective systems of election administration across the country without support or funding.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Institute for Responsive Government, "The SAVE Act: How a Proof of Citizenship Requirement Would Impact Elections," January 30, 2025 [\[LINK\]](#); John Hanna, The Associated Press, "Kansas once required voters to prove citizenship. That didn't work out so well," December 29, 2024 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>9</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures, "Election Administration at State and Local Levels," January 13, 2026 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>10</sup> Karen L. Shanton, Congressional Research Service, "The State and Local Role in Election Administration: Duties and Structures," March 4, 2019 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>11</sup> Issue One, "Turning the Tide on Turnover," February 3, 2026 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>12</sup> Bipartisan Policy Center, Institute for Responsive Government, R Street Institute, "United in Security: How Every State Protects Your Vote in 2026," February 2, 2026 [\[LINK\]](#).

So when we begin conversations about restoring trust and integrity to American elections I begin here. Election officials have repeatedly come to Congress to ask the federal government to bear its share of the cost of administering elections.<sup>13</sup> Election funding is a rare area of bipartisan agreement in the election space. Congresses led by both parties have provided support for election security.<sup>14</sup>

Elections are run by people in and of the communities where they are taking place: civil servants and local volunteers who understand the geographic and logistical needs of their specific communities. The needs of communities in Wyoming differ from those in Michigan and in North Carolina. Decentralized election administration is a feature, not a bug, of our democratic system.

In this regard I agree with you Chairman Steil, when you stated at a hearing in this very room in March of 2023 that “Election administration looks different in every State, and that is our Federalist approach in action.”<sup>15</sup>

I could not agree more Mr. Chairman. I appreciate your longstanding opposition to un-American calls to nationalize our elections, I presume it continues. And I welcome this committee’s continued support for the dedicated public servants who administer elections at the state and local level.

Election officials have a simple request of Congress, that you help share their burdens, not add to them. The bill under discussion today does not meet that simple test.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.

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<sup>13</sup> Carrie Levine, Votebeat, “Congress hears pleas for more election funding. Will it respond?,” October 6, 2025 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>14</sup> Karen L. Shanton, Congressional Research Service, “Election Administration: Federal Grant Programs for States and Localities,” May 30, 2025 [\[LINK\]](#).

<sup>15</sup> Committee on House Administration, “American Confidence in Elections: State Tools to Promote Voter Confidence,” April 27, 2023 [\[LINK\]](#).