

Unique, Complex, and Burdensome: Understanding Arizona's Voter Registration System and Proof of Citizenship Requirements

Arizona's unique bifurcated voter registration system has recently been in the news after Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes revealed that over 218,000 registered Arizona voters had been marked as citizens without providing proof of citizenship due to a coding error in the state's motor vehicle database.

Despite this twenty-year-old database glitch, state officials have been transparent in the steps they are taking to fix the issue, are following clear orders from the Arizona Supreme Court in dealing with the voters impacted, and have noted that all registered voters affected by this error are long-time Arizona residents who have attested to being U.S. citizens.

It is important to understand how Arizona's citizenship requirements for voter registration create unique and burdensome challenges for both voters and election officials.

In every state across the country, all voters in state and federal elections must attest to citizenship under penalty of perjury. Unlike every other state, however, Arizona requires voters to provide documentary proof of citizenship (DPOC) to vote a full ballot of federal, state, and local races. Voters who do not provide DPOC, but otherwise meet state and federal voter eligibility requirements, are placed on a federal-only voting list and allowed to vote in presidential and congressional races. This creates a bifurcated system: the vast majority of Arizona voters have provided DPOC and vote full ballots, but a small subset are federal-only voters.

Citizenship Requirements for Voter Registration

Arizona law requires voters to provide DPOC when registering to vote. Acceptable forms of DPOC include an Arizona driver's license or identification card number if issued after October 1, 1996; a copy of a birth certificate or naturalization documents; a copy of a U.S. passport; or an Indian Census Number, Bureau of Indian Affairs Card Number, or Tribal Treaty Card Number.

If a voter submits a registration form without DPOC, local election officials try to find that applicant's driver's license or Arizona state ID number using the state's motor vehicle system. That system maintains citizenship data because Arizona requires proof of citizenship to receive a regular driver's license. If the number is found and confirms the voter is a citizen, the registration is accepted. If the number reveals the voter is not a citizen, the registration is rejected. If the number is not found, the voter is contacted and given a chance to provide DPOC.

If the voter does not provide DPOC and used the federal voter registration form, they are moved to the federal-only list. The same process previously applied to voters using the state registration form. An August 2024 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, however, held that voters who do not provide DPOC when registering with the state form cannot become federal-only voters; instead, their registrations will now be rejected outright.

History of Arizona's Dual Registration System

In 2004, Arizona voters approved [Proposition 200](#), which required proof of citizenship to register to vote in any election. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Arizona's law did not comply with the federal National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993. The NVRA requires states to accept the federal voter registration form, which requires a voter to attest under penalty of perjury that they are a U.S. citizen, but does not require them to provide DPOC. To comply with federal law and Proposition 200, Arizona implemented a dual system that enables the state to require DPOC for state and local races but not for federal ones.

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