

# 24-11-29 TheBuzz web

Tue, Nov 26, 2024 12:37PM 27:48

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

2024 election, Arizona results, ballot turnout, canvassing process, recounts, bomb threats, election security, voter access, election preparation, legislative collaboration, ballot length, voter registration, election funding, county resources, future elections

## SPEAKERS

Adrian Fontes, Nicole Cox, Christopher Conover, Michael Dauphinais, NPR promo

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Michael Dauphinais 00:00

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Christopher Conover 00:09

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week how the 2024 election went. On Monday morning, a group of Arizona's top elected and appointed officials gathered on the top floor of the Capitol building's executive tower. Among them were Governor Katie Hobbs, Attorney General, Kris Mayes, Arizona Supreme Court Chief Justice Ann Scott Timmer, State Elections Director Lisa Marra and Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes.



Adrian Fontes 00:41

It takes an enormous number of people across the entire state in a variety of different areas, to make our elections work. Turning to the results, as of Thursday, November the 21st all counties have reported. Ballots cast in Arizona totaled 3,428,011 for an overall turnout at 78.49% for the big race, the Republican candidate Donald J Trump won 1,770,242 votes. The Democratic candidate Kamala Harris won 1,582,860 votes. We will now canvas this election. The canvas is the official certification of the results, and it makes sure and finalizes the results for the 2024 general election. Once signed, I will hand the canvases, and there are four copies, just as a matter of housekeeping, I will hand it off to the governor. We will then pass those to the Attorney General and the Chief Justice for their signatures and affirmations. They will then be passed to the election director, who will affix the seal of the state for those documents. Once we're done with this. However, there's a bunch more stuff that the Governor and I have to sign. We'll talk about that momentarily. For the time being,



Christopher Conover 02:15

the group handed around a handful of legal documents for signing and stamping with the state seal, and once they were finished, Arizona's 2024 election results became final, save for a handful of races that were close enough to trigger automatic recounts,

A Adrian Fontes 02:32

my team has already conducted logic and accuracy tests where that is necessary, pertaining to state recounts. Now there are some county and local recounts around the state, but because those elections don't fall under the purview of state elections, specifically, any of those testings and preparations happen at the county level. Once those recounts are done, the results will be sealed and then given to the appropriate judicial officer. Those will be opened in open court and then read off. So at this stage of the game, we're all done except for the recounting.

C Christopher Conover 03:07

Among the most important duties of the Secretary of State is ensuring that elections are held safely, securely and that results are accurate. While this year saw some dramatic moments, such as bomb threats, equipment issues and others, it was a largely uneventful election that will come mostly to a close before the long Thanksgiving weekend. With this election almost in the books, we decided to examine how voting went this year with Secretary of State Fontes. Our conversation starts with him giving basic thoughts on how things went

A Adrian Fontes 03:42

well, I'll say it went really well, and frankly, including the outcome, my personal opinion notwithstanding, the voters voted and they got the result that they asked for. And that's really, what really matters here, right? It was easy to vote across the entire state. The process was very, very smooth. And clearly there were some hiccups here and there, but at the end of the day 2024, was about as good as election as we could hope for.

C Christopher Conover 04:10

One of the hiccups we had down in Pima County. They were in Apache, La Paz, Maricopa County, bomb threats on election day,

A Adrian Fontes 04:19

yeah,

C Christopher Conover 04:20

you held some some availabilities that day that we covered, and a lot of those looked to be coming from Russia, not necessarily the government. Do we know anything more about those?

A

Adrian Fontes 04:33

So first and foremost, what I want to do is say as to those bomb threats, they did not disrupt the election, and that has to do with the fact that we took a lot of time to train local election officials across the state, work on opening up lines of communication with law enforcement, both at the state, local and at the federal level, and our preparations put us in a place to be able to continue the operation without major disruptions, in spite of the numerous bomb threats we had all over the state and the counties you mentioned were just some of them. So all of that having been said, you know, we did about as well as you could. Whether or not they came from from Russia or anywhere else is kind of irrelevant, and that that ends up in the hands of the investigative folks up at the federal level, mostly because it was a federal election. But we weren't the only ones, right. There were bomb threats across the country, but as far as Arizona is concerned, it didn't disrupt our operations. Voters didn't see a lot of issues with them. I think there were one or two polling places that sort of suspended operations for a few minutes. But the response, I think, is really important for folks to focus on.

C

Christopher Conover 05:47

How do you prepare for that response? Because that's usually not in the handbook, phoned in bomb threats or emailed in bomb threats, or maybe it is in the handbook now

A

Adrian Fontes 05:57

it is now, well, look, you know, my background is, is in a lot of these safety issues. I was a classified materials controller when I was in the Marine Corps, and So paying attention to systems, preserving infrastructure, you know, fortifying the people around these systems, and preparing them for, like, the not good thing that might happen, that's really been the focus of what we've been looking at. And so if you use this specific example of the bomb threats, you can trace that back to some of the tabletop exercises we did. You can trace it back to some of the other trainings that we had with folks. You can trace it back to the fact that we deployed CISA inspectors across the entire state, and that's the critical infrastructure security agency, right? And they had conversations out there. So even though the those federal folks were doing inspections while they were doing them, they were having conversations with folks out there. So the notion of awareness, the notion of possibility, means that none of our people were taken by surprise. They saw it. They knew how to react. They knew who to call, and that's why our operations went so smoothly. And so that preparation, I think, was, was the reason why we did so well vis a vis those threats.

C

Christopher Conover 07:16

Without giving away anything security wise. Is there anything regarding those that needs to change for the '26 election, the '28 election and going out?

A

Adrian Fontes 07:28

Well, the threat landscape is dynamic, and we see different things all the time, but there are

well, the threat landscape is dynamic, and we see different things all the time, but there are certain things that we have to pay attention to, but taking it away from the threats specifically, look, you've always got to have generators around in case the power goes out, right? You've always got to have that fire extinguisher in case there's an electrical fire or something. You got to take care of it, right? You've always got to have your law enforcement guys ready to respond in case something of that that requires that response happens. This is just another sort of part of our response preparedness, right? And election administrators are perpetual preparers. We're already getting ready for '26 right now, and we just certified 2024. So we will be working diligently over the next couple of years to make sure that we can perform at least as well as we did this year.

**C** Christopher Conover 08:25

There's always national criticism of people who don't understand Arizona election law about why does it take so long for Arizona to count? It seems like this year it was a lot of the more rural counties that were struggling to get those ballots counted. Is there anything your office can do, or you need the legislature to do, or county board of supervisors to do going forward to help them out?

**A** Adrian Fontes 08:53

Yes to all of those. We need the legislature. We need the governor. We need the boards of supervisors. We need the county recorders. We need everybody to get together and first and foremost, decide if we're going to let the tail wag the dog, and that it becomes a necessity for us to have quicker results. If it becomes that necessity, and we determine that as a matter of policy, then we can make adjustments in the law, we can make adjustments in resources, and we can make adjustments in our processes, but there's two things that I'm not willing to sacrifice. Number one, I'm not willing to sacrifice accuracy for speed. And number two, I'm not willing to sacrifice access. Our voters have to have access, and they've got a ton of access right now. Some of the proposals on the table would narrow that a little bit. Those are non starters for me. So we've got conversations ongoing right now with a lot of the folks I just mentioned, and I hope we can come up to reasonable solutions if, in fact, we believe that we've got to do something about it, which I don't personally think we do, but a lot of people seem to want to. So let's see how we can work together to make it happen.

**C** Christopher Conover 10:01

I know my east coast family is always asking about why it takes so long to count, and I always explain them, that's the way the Arizona system is set up. It's the law. Is it frustrating for you to have to keep answering that question, be it on national news or social media or to your east coast friends and family who just don't understand?

**A** Adrian Fontes 10:22

No, it's not, I mean, I appreciate that. It's not frustrating at all. It's, it's I consider every time someone asks that question as a learning opportunity, right? These are, these are some folks who may not, for a variety of reasons, understand why our process is what it is. It gives us a

chance, however, to talk about the fact that, look, Utah and California, they're still not done counting right, and we are. And so are we the worst? Are we kind of in the middle? Here's the deal, Utah and California, nobody's going to really care, because we know what the outcomes are going to be generally. The only reason so many people care about Arizona is because we want to be able to project quicker, who the winners are going to be. That projection is not a final result. And so we got to really bring some maturity into this conversation and some understanding into this conversation. And again, if it is the general consensus that we need quicker results, then we can work with the system that we have to make improvements, but we're going to have to have more funding. We're going to have to have more resources at the county level, and we may even have to really change some of the systems in the different counties. And so this is going to take a whole team effort to get to that end.

**C** Christopher Conover 11:35

One of the proposals we've already heard from our friends downstairs in the legislature is no more early ballot drop offs on Election Day. Draw a line, maybe the Friday before elections. You said some of the ideas are non starters. That's a big one we've already heard. What's your thought on that?

**A** Adrian Fontes 11:51

I don't think that that's necessary, and that does take away some access. Okay, if we can figure out a way for voters who want to bring their ballot in at the last second to be able to get their ballot tabulated or something. Now, these are major technological issues involved there. There's printing issues, there's verification issues, you know, there's all kinds of things that might or might not happen there. We might be able to do something like that. But again, you know, these are conversations that we can have. We've just got to make sure that when we're having the conversations those policy makers have, the technical experts in the room, because the worst thing we can do is make a major policy change, turn it into law, and then the technicians have to scramble around to try to catch up to the law, and then, you know, then it's a mess, and we've seen that happen far too often. So my goal is to those folks that you mentioned downstairs in the legislature talk to us first. Right? We may not disagree on a whole bunch of other policy, but we can help you guys make better decisions. We've got the technical expertise. We know how these things work. We'd love to help you improve it, if that's what you want to do.

**C** Christopher Conover 13:05

The ballot, especially Maricopa, Pima County, very long this time around four pages in Pima County, I know I had a friend who was voting, and they said I didn't voting at home, and they said I didn't realize until the end of when I was voting, that that second page just wasn't the explanation of what, it was actually a ballot. Are ballots too long? Is Do we need a limit? Or is this just democracy at work?

**A** Adrian Fontes 13:35

Well, it's democracy at work and it's too long. You can it can be a couple of things at once. First

well, it's democracy at work and it's too long. You can't have a couple of things at once. First and foremost, I wish the legislature would work more closely with the governor and not send so many things to the ballot. That would have cut a page off, I think, just about everywhere where it was two pages or more. Number one. And so you know that that political petulance that we see, that they're just going to bypass the governor's veto pen instead of trying to work with her, that seems silly to me, and we saw the results. Most of what they proposed failed miserably and really badly. So, okay, so putting the politics aside, you know, do we perhaps move some of the state stuff off of the federal ballots? Right? You know, Virginia and a couple of other states, they have their statewide elections in odd numbered years. Now, some people would say that throws us into perpetual campaigning. But, you know, we've got campaigns that go on all the time anyway, so we're already there. You know, maybe we move judges and municipal stuff into a different ballot at different times. We've got four election days in Arizona every year, right? But what I don't want to see happening is people thinking that we've got too much democracy, because you could end up in a system like they have in France or in Taiwan, for example. I was in Taipei and they have three ballots, and each of them has one contest on them, and they get done really fast. I. But they don't have any absentee balloting at all. If you are not in your precinct in your prefecture on election day between 8am and 2pm, you do not vote. Even if you're in Foreign Service, if you're in the military, you do not vote. So they have very quick results and very, very simple ballots, right? One question on each of those three pages, but they don't get to elect everyone. They don't get to hold different parties to account for different offices. And so I think that's less democracy, less direct democracy, if you will. So there are trade offs in the different systems that we see across the world. I think there's always room for improvement, and Arizona just has to have an honest to goodness common sense conversation. What do we really want versus what are we all hyped up about today?

**C** Christopher Conover 15:50

You're listening to The Buzz. After the break, we continue our conversation about the 2024 election with Secretary of State, Adrian Fontes. Stay with us

**N** NPR promo 16:01

no matter what happens in Washington, the NPR politics podcast is here for you. For the latest news, insights and analysis the election and beyond, listen to the NPR politics podcast.

**C** Christopher Conover 16:15

Welcome back to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. We're looking back on how the 2024 election went this week with Arizona Secretary of State, Adrian Fontes, we now return to that interview. Before the election came out, there was the issue of voter registration, a group of people due to a we'll call it a loophole, a snafu on voter registration hadn't shown proof of citizenship. Where does that issue stand now?

**A** Adrian Fontes 16:49

Well, it was neither a loophole nor a quirk. The Motor Vehicle Division has not been following the law for 20 years, since Prop 200 passed. I mean, let's call it what it is. Number two, the

governor's office, I think, is pushing quite hard to make sure that that problem gets resolved, and here's why. It's not just voting that gets impacted. It's every state service that requires or obliges legal presence in the state, right? The MVD is the holder of that data, and if their data is wrong, then all of those other government systems are impacted. Now we just happened to bring it to the public's attention when it was identified for voter registration purposes, okay? And I'm happy to do that, even though, you know, I might be a sitting officer. And some people might think, Oh, well, do we really want to talk about it? It's embarrassing. Solving problems is never embarrassing. It might be a little rough, right? It might be a bumpy road to meet the criticism head on, but at the end of the day, that's what leadership is about, and that's why I wanted to make sure that we bring this out, that we talk about it, that folks understand we're trying to solve a problem that the voters wanted us to solve. They wanted us to be doing this thing, and where we have an agency that's been acting outside the law for a while, we need to bring them into compliance. And once we do, we can look back and say that should have been fixed a long time ago. But for now, it's going to be a little bit of a rough patch till we get there, but I think we'll get there.

**C** Christopher Conover 18:20

Do those folks need to re register before '25 municipal elections, '26 state elections?

**A** Adrian Fontes 18:27

That is a great question, because I think it's going to have a direct impact in the March elections. If we don't get this whole thing resolved before, then, there's going to be a lot of voters out there who have been used to getting a ballot in the mail for municipal elections, and have been used to being eligible for them, and they won't be for March. And that's that's going to not sit well with a lot of folks, because remember the Supreme Court said, for the general election in November, you're all good to go. But, you know, they left that dot, dot, dot out there. So unless we get another court order, which I doubt will happen, particularly given that these are state and local elections, you know, I think that we're going to have to get some stuff done really quickly. And I hope all of our partners across government are paying close attention to this.

**C** Christopher Conover 19:17

Four years ago, at this time, we were maybe beginning to talk about, yeah, by now we were talking about bamboo ballots and Sharpies bleeding through and all kinds of things. I don't remember if we were set up recounting yet down at the fairgrounds. Why didn't we have that this year? Was that election officials doing a better job communicating? Or what happened?

**A** Adrian Fontes 19:40

Yeah. Well, let me correct a little bit of the timeline there, the 2020 election. I think a lot of folks will take five or six months worth of nonsense and smash them up into November of 2020. That's not how it happened. The lot of a lot of the protests, for example, that we had down in Maricopa County at the elections center that I was running at the time, those didn't really start

until two or three days after the election, right? And that's when a lot of the planning for a lot of the legal stuff started popping up here and there, and the threats were out there, and the canvases started seeing people showing up and stuff. And the bamboo stuff and the Cyber Ninjas, that didn't happen till the spring. It didn't happen till like January, February timeline, they started talking about it, and it started pushing into 2021, after the insurrection. So it stretched its way out over a while four years ago. We didn't see it this year because, well, for two reasons. Number one, we had a really, really well run election across the state. And number two, the folks who would complain, they won. And which proves the point that the only complaint they had was that their candidate lost. There's no truth to election denialism. We know this. Every serious person who's looked at anything understands there's never been any evidence about this, and a guy like me who ran the 2020 election in Maricopa County and has now basically sat and oversaw the election statewide, me and my staff are vindicated. A lot of them are working here with me now, right? I feel great. Now, do I like the political outcome? That's an irrelevancy. I have my opinion, and I have my duty. My team executed its duty very, very well, both in 2024 and in 2020. And we still haven't seen any shred of evidence that there were any problems in 2020. Well, you know, the hurt feelings are still out there, folks are just going to have to get over it.

C

Christopher Conover 21:40

Going back to the legislature, which will start session in January, bills getting ready to drop now. Is there any priority you want when it comes to elections for the legislature to get taken care of this session, or is it more working with them on what they see as their priorities?

A

Adrian Fontes 22:04

We've got a couple of things that we're working with a variety of legislators to get sponsors for. As you know, I don't introduce legislation. We let those folks do that part of it, but we are already having conversations with a variety of people on, you know, what you asked me about earlier, getting faster results for example. That's an active conversation. We're happy to lend support if that's what people want to do, right? If you're motivated to have an impact on the way we administer our elections, please come talk to the experts. We're happy to help. And that's what the Secretary of State's office, I think, stands for. We want to be a resource. We do have some other programs that definitely are on our priority list, I will say that the address confidentiality program right that protects victims of violence and stalking from their predators doesn't have full funding from the state. We want to protect these crime victims, and we don't pay for this mailbox system that we have here in this office. Like, that is crazy to me that this office has to scrimp and run around and try to put these monies together, particularly since we just lost federal funding for that. So that's a big priority for me, along with a couple other things. But I'll leave it at that for now, and just say we want the legislature to have those good, solid, mature, reasonable conversations with us so that we can get work done and have common sense solutions for the things that Arizonans care about.

C

Christopher Conover 23:29

Have you heard anything from the counties now that the recorders and the election directors can start to take a breath, now that certification is wrapped up things. Maybe they're even minor things from a county standpoint, that Maricopa County didn't see, Pima County didn't



see, but maybe Santa Cruz or Cochise County saw, because they look at things through a different lens. Is there anything the county recorders are talking to you about?

A

Adrian Fontes 23:58

We are looking very carefully at sort of the post mortems, if you will, from across the state. The variety of things that are popping up are the same thing that we've been talking about since I took office here, resources, resources, resources, right? We need people to be paid what they deserve to be paid, to be running the elections the way they should be, right? And that's a big problem across the whole state, right? Some of these publicly elected officials, they don't make what they need to make. We have a whole host of other issues of resources, human resources, technological resources, logistical resources, and some counties are figuring it out. You know, Pinal County just opened up a brand new warehouse, absolutely magnificent facility. And kudos to those folks who spent the money and did that and did it in a really, really quick way, right to actually make it happen. I think Pima County's got a lot of conversations about improving their their spaces. Maricopa County's got a big project in the books right now. Cochise is moving along. So, you know, folks are realizing, hey, we've got to put some resources into this stuff at the most local level. But the big bottleneck is the state, because the State of Arizona, in its infinite wisdom, will put all these roadblocks up for those of us who want to administer things. And they'll say, Well, you got to come to us and ask for permission on how to spend these federal grants. Well, the you know, so we've got to go. We've got these federal grants that exist out there, but we can't spend the money where we need it, because some legislative proclivities against rights, and usually it's political, against spending the money. And it's like, this is Arizonan's taxpayer money that we want to spend improving the systems they want improved. They may have filtered through the federal tax system, but it's back here now. We need to improve these things. So there's a variety of different conversations that have to be had in that regard, but we're focusing on helping the counties do the best they can for their voters.

C

Christopher Conover 25:52

The political chatter group, if you will, has been talking about you, maybe you run for governor in two years. So since we're sitting with you, let's cut out the political chatter group. Do you have a thought on that?

A

Adrian Fontes 26:08

Well, I've got a lot of thoughts on that. I actually thought about running for mayor of Nogales, because my grandfather was Mayor down there a lot of years ago. But, you know, maybe I'll run for judge in Cochise County. Do they still vote for judges up there? I don't know. Look, I love being the Secretary of State, okay? And, and we've got a we've got a governor that works hard for the state of Arizona. Right now, this is going to be the very predictable non answer, but the chatter has existed. People have approached me with this. I've never denied that fact, because it's true. But the reality is, you know, we're doing a really, really good job right now, and I'll serve at the pleasure of the citizens of Arizona wherever they want me to go.

**C** Christopher Conover 26:49  
All right. Well, thanks for sitting down with us.

**A** Adrian Fontes 26:52  
Very happy to do it. Thanks for coming up here.

**C** Christopher Conover 26:54  
That was Arizona Secretary of State, Adrian Fontes, and that's The Buzz for this week, you can find all our episodes online at [azpm.org](http://azpm.org) and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcasts, just search for the buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer, with production help from Maggie Farmer, Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover. Thanks for listening.

**N** Nicole Cox 27:38  
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