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SPEAKERS

Jen Fifield, Zac Ziegler, Nicole Cox, Katie Hobbs, Gabriella CÃ¡zares-Kelly, Christopher Conover, Patty Hansen

Christopher Conover 00:04

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week changes to how Arizona handles elections. Last week, we saw a rare occurrence in the Arizona legislature, members of both parties came together and negotiated a bill that changed how Arizona will handle elections for a few years. The bill was spurred on by concerns that the state's new law that requires a recount for margins of one half of 1% or less could cause the state to miss federal deadlines. And last Friday, Governor Katie Hobbs signed that legislation into law during a visit to Sierra Vista this week. She said the bill was pushed forward by election conspiracy theories

Katie Hobbs 00:53

It was not necessary, but certainly has triggered additional recounts that consume the time of election administrators. And after a primary will make it harder to get ballots out in time to those overseas and military voters. And after the general could jeopardize our electoral votes in the presidential if there's a recount there. So we needed to address that the legislature was unwilling to revisit the recount threshold. And so the deadlines was the other issue we could work with

Christopher Conover 01:22

the changes are meant to either speed up or give election workers more time to count ballots. To help us break down the changes. We spoke with Jen Fifield, an Arizona based reporter for Votebeat.

Jen Fifield 01:35

Well, first, thanks for having me do this. I'm glad to be talking to you about it, because it's important. Voters need to know that the primary election will be held in July this year. And

that's July 30th. It's usually the first Tuesday in August. And there's going to be other changes to how counties process their mail-in ballots. And what's most important for them to know is that they need to pay more attention to the signature. And also be sure to provide your phone number.

C Christopher Conover 02:05

Right, now the counties have fewer days to fix those signatures off mail-in ballots. That's one of the provisions of this new law, correct?

J Jen Fifield 02:13

Right. And that's why I said it's so important to pay attention in the way you're signing also provide that number because the date for how long you have to correct any issues they spot with that signature is shortened from five business days to five calendar days, which means it cuts off that weekend after the election and doesn't give you those two extra business days on the back end.

C Christopher Conover 02:37

It seems like every election I've covered here in nearly the last 20 years in Arizona, somebody complains about how long it takes to get results. If you understand Arizona election law, it makes perfect sense. But does this speed up as a result, how quickly we may have some final answers?

J Jen Fifield 02:56

It might. So one of the things it does is starting 2026. So maybe not this time around. But starting in 2026 allows you to bring your ID to the polls if you're dropping off your early ballot on election day, which will mean it doesn't have to go through that signature verification process. And means that you basically are just able to verify your identity on the spot, which means the counties will not be processing those ballots for as long after if they get fewer of those late earlys is what they are referred to. But the thing about it is there's been some changes on the back end like in Maricopa to speed up counting a little bit more workers more space. And that might actually cause a little bit of a change. I know that Pima County and many other counties in Arizona usually get done within a day or two. So I'm thinking it might speed up just a little bit. And it definitely will speed up when we see those final certified results.

C Christopher Conover 03:49

So for the voter with the primary being a week earlier, does that mean registration is now closing a week earlier? Or they leaving that at the data it already was?

J Jen Fifield 04:02

J Jen Fifield 04:03

It will be ending for the primary election a week earlier. So people need to know that and every other deadline for candidates to we'll move up by a week.

C Christopher Conover 04:12

You mentioned the primary and that's what this aim is that is the primary before the primary. We have the presidential Preference Election just around the corner. Does any of this affect the Presidential Preference?

J Jen Fifield 04:26

That's a great question. Yeah, we have the Presidential Preference Election on March 19. And this will not change those deadlines for that election. Because this was meant mainly to fix the primary election calendar, which is separate from that.

C Christopher Conover 04:40

Some of the changes in this bill or law. I guess since the governor signed it. It's now a lot are temporary, why not make them permanent?

J Jen Fifield 04:48

Well, they couldn't get there. This was a lot of compromising. I was at the legislature for all week last week and they really tried hard to get to a place where they could make it that permanent change. But Republicans wanted to switch the primary date permanently to May. And the governor's office was not willing to do that the governor's office or at least Democrats wanted to make it permanently that last week in July. So that along with this change that how signatures are verified the timeline, those are both temporary measures, just so they couldn't get the bill across the finish line.

C Christopher Conover 05:20

I would think if they changed the primary to May, for those of us who keep an eye on the legislature, it could have been positive because they can't fundraise while they're in session. So they would have to get out more quickly since they're usually in during May.

J Jen Fifield 05:35

You know, I was surprised by that, too. I did see a few quotes. In a recent Howie Fisher story with the Capitol mMedia Services, where he quoted a few Republican leaders, he at least surmise that this might allow Republicans more time in between that contentious primary and the general election to get unified behind a candidate now that it's so split in our state.

C Christopher Conover 05:57

As you mentioned, this bill was in negotiation. The dates were something that not everybody wanted. Were there some other major things that either side had to give up in order to get this bill on to the governor's desk in time and a really got there at the last minute?

J Jen Fifield 06:14

There were some things. I know Governor Hobbs said she didn't get really anything she wanted in there. Republicans wanted to close high schools for Election Day, so that they could use those as polling places, as we face a polling place shortage. There were a few other things that were kind of unrelated to the timeline issue that they tried to place in there that did not make it to the final version of the bill. What we did get was very much a compromise where we got changes to the signature verification that I can talk about. That's kind of like the main Republican talking point for what they were able to do.

C Christopher Conover 06:48

Let's talk about that. What were those changes other than the five calendar days as opposed to the five workdays for signature verification?

J Jen Fifield 06:56

So the main thing is how people will be looking at the signature on your mail in ballot. Law just said that they had to compare that signature with prior years. Now they have set standards in law that say, look at the typeface, look at the spacing, look at these very specific characteristics, and go down this list and make sure that it's all consistent.

C Christopher Conover 07:16

In Pima County, the folks who check those signatures, they get forensic handwriting training every couple of years. Is that pretty standard around the state? Do you know or is Pima County out in front?

J Jen Fifield 07:29

That's very standard. In fact, they were being trained on these standards already. So it's not that they weren't using them. They were but now it's in law that they have to use them.

C Christopher Conover 07:37

The legislature very closely split on the partisan sides, Republicans have a one seat majority in each chamber. This bill was a rarity. It was nearly unanimously passed. Well, we shouldn't say it

was a rarity. There are lots of bills that don't do anything that people are even aware of that unanimously pass. But this was a big bill. What was it that got this bill, with so many people behind it?

J Jen Fifield 08:07

So that goes back to the main issue here, which was election officials said that they did not have time to finish the election if we stuck with our calendar. That's because of this new recount law that was enacted in 2022. That is going to probably require a recount of every election in Maricopa County at least and very commonly across the state. We're recounting our elections. Now we need a week to three weeks to do that. And then at that tail end to the general election during the holiday season was too much to actually meet specific deadlines.

C Christopher Conover 08:40

Right, which included getting those general ballots in the mail to military and overseas voters. And that's all federally set. We can't play with those deadlines.

J Jen Fifield 08:49

You're right. Yeah, for the primary election, they were really concerned about that first deadline for when to send out ballots. And then for the presidential election, they were worried about this deadline in federal law where we have to send our presidential electors to Congress. In a swing state, everyone knows how important that is. And I think that's all you had to say to both sides of the aisle here.

C Christopher Conover 09:08

Because it passed with such bipartisan support. Any members out there or members of the public or the election community, if you will, who are raising concerns about these changes that are coming?

J Jen Fifield 09:22

Well, yes, a few of the recorders, all the election directors were pretty much on board because of this tight timeline, and they're looking at their counting and proofing of ballots, and they're not seeing how it'll work. But the recorders were pretty split on this specifically in Pima County. Your recorder said that this change to the amount of time voters had to get back to the county on their mail-in ballot signature was very concerning to her because of tribal and rural voters who may live far away. If all you have is someone's address to tell them that there's a problem with their ballot. They might not even get that within the five days that they're talking about. Or you know if there's no wifi on the weekends no public transportation on the weekends. And that's when this period ends. Now, that was concerning to her that this would hurt voters.

C Christopher Conover 10:06

You brought up exactly my next question, what does this do for rural and tribal areas? Because outside really of Tucson, Phoenix and we'll say Flagstaff, we have a lot of rural areas. how does this change things for them?

J Jen Fifield 10:22

Hopefully it won't, you know, we're really going to look, and that's why it's a temporary measure. I'll just point that out. Again, it's only for 2024, 2025, 2026. But the recorder was concerned about this, you know how it would affect the signature rejection rate, which rejects an entire ballot if you don't fix your signature. So that's why I started this out by voters really just need to know, sign your ballot in the right way. Provide your phone number is really key because if you're able to sign up for the text message service, where you can give their phone number and sign up for the tech service, if there's a problem with your ballot like this, that's really important too.

C Christopher Conover 10:57

All right. Well, thanks for spending some time with us and trying to explain in simple terms, some major changes.

J Jen Fifield 11:05

Absolutely. Thank you guys so much.

C Christopher Conover 11:07

That was Votebeat's Arizona reporter Jen Fifield. In our first interview, we heard mentioned that the Pima County Recorder expressed concerns about some of the tweaks, Gabriella Cárizares-Kelly is in her first term as recorder in Pima County and as a member of the Tohono O'odham tribe. That link to rural and tribal voters in forms many of her concerns about the law.

G Gabriella Cárizares-Kelly 11:33

So, it's a 41 page document. And there were so many things that were thrown in at the last minute that now that I'm looking at it, and I'm just like, What is this or I have questions. And there was a number of things that I supported and a number of things that I adamantly opposed. And I think this is the cleanest version, without all of the bad stuff. But I think that it still has the opportunity to present some bad stuff.


C Christopher Conover 12:05

Before we get into the good and the bad. We have heard out of the Capitol that the county recorders and other election officials had the opportunity to give a lot of approval before it went

recorders and other election officials had the opportunity to give a lot of approval before it went through. Is this just what we're hearing or is that reality?

 Gabriella Cãzires-Kelly 12:22


Yes and no. So when we originally heard about this from the elections directors, they were talking about a menu of options. And so everything was kind of vague. And there was this general, we'll see what the legislature has the appetite for. And so we really didn't get to have a really strong sense of which provisions they would choose or bypass. And so we really didn't know that until things started getting serious in this session. We had been aware of of certain things like moving the election day back, everybody kind of had like a general consensus of like, well, you know, we don't really want to do that that's disruptive. But are they going to choose that? We didn't know. I was really adamant about the changing of the cure period. That went from five business days to five calendar days. And in fact, literally right before this, I was working with my staff to edit documents, because we need to push that information out. We're in the middle of an election right now. And so us having to make changes to our current election is really disruptive.

 Christopher Conover 13:36

Fair enough. When it comes to that change on curing of signatures, if you do a mail-in ballot and your signature doesn't match for whatever reason it used to be you had five work days to do it. Now. It's five calendar days to get that fixed. Pima County is unique, we have the big Tucson metro area, but we have a lot of rural and tribal areas also, does that change make things more difficult for the rural and tribal areas?

 14:09

Absolutely, I think and that's why I've been so vocally opposed to that legislation. I grew up in the rural tribal community. And up until I took this position. I worked every day for 14 years in that rural tribal community and the amount of internet connectivity issues, transportation, the amount of people who own home computers or have access to you know, the email on any given day is decreased in those locations during the weekend. And then also when you have locations like libraries, schools, offices that are closed on the weekends and people aren't in front of computer In that way, then you have a reduced amount of time that you're actually able to connect with people.

 Christopher Conover 15:06

It sounds like you're going to have to have staff in the recorders office on that Saturday and Sunday. So if I come in and say, 'I got the text message, the email, whatever that says, there's a problem with my signature.' So I can come in and fix it, are you going to, if you're doing that, then make some temporary satellite offices in areas like Ajo or other rural areas?

 15:33

So we typically don't need to see a person in person for just normal questions about their their signature, we're really just going to call that person we're going to ask them a few security questions. And then they're going to explain why their signature looks a little different. But where we really run into issues is with conditional provisional ballots. So a lot of Arizonans don't know that even if you show up at seven o'clock on Election Day, and you're like, 'oh my gosh, I forgot it was voting, and I don't have my driver's license,' there is an option for you. It's called a conditional provisional ballot, that we can give to you, we hold on to it until you go to one of our identification resolution stations, which normally we have 30 of them. 27 of them are Pima County Libraries, and one tribal government office have those only a handful are open on a Saturday, all of them are closed on a Sunday. In order for me to host what I need to in order to have my staff be able to answer phones on all day, Saturday and all day Sunday, and be able to meet somebody at the door to take a look at their driver's license and fill out the appropriate paperwork to resolve that conditional provisional ballot, I need to have a full staff.

C Christopher Conover 17:01

So, I always hate to end on a negative. So you said also, there were some things you really liked. So let's talk about that.

G Gabriella CÃ¡zares-Kelly 17:09

So one of the dangers of not having passed legislation to fix this timeline issue was that by law, if we didn't have the results of an election, finished in time, we would have had to send our best guess, which means we likely would have had to send knowingly send a wrong ballot to a military and overseas voter, and then send a whole other wave of those once we had it corrected. That we would have to do that with any voter but our military and overseas receiving the wrong ballots knowingly, I think is shameful. And so what this bill did was it gave the elections directors sufficient time to be able to meet their deadlines so that won't happen. And so I'm very happy for that. I'm very happy that the canvases are going to be sent digitally as opposed to on paper, which is like, oh, that should have been updated a long time ago. That's kind of a cleanup thing. And now, that saves time. But overall, this is still a piece of legislation that was passed that creates some disruption. But it was meant to solve a problem that again, was created by the legislature to begin with. Good and bad. This is going to have a minimal impact on voters. We're going to be able to communicate that with them and even doing this piece is going to highlight when those states are so thank you so much for allowing me to talk about this with you.

C Christopher Conover 18:44

That was Pima County Recorder Gabriella CÃ¡zares-Kelly. Another county that is largely rural and has a great deal of tribal land is in the state's north. Coconino County is the second largest county in the nation, and includes a portion of five tribal reservations. Patty Hansen has been the recorder there for 12 years and has decades of election experience. She spoke with our show producer, Zac Ziegler.

Z Zac Ziegler 19:13

Let's start with that press release you sent earlier this week that explained to voters that they see a different date for the primary in the county's current voter guide and they'll be receiving another mailer come April with the corrected information. Is there any concern that people will be kind of confused by getting these two different voter guides with some different information?

P Patty Hansen 19:35

I am concerned that's going to cause confusion. I was one of a couple of recorders that opposed moving the primary date this late. I wish the legislature could have done it a lot earlier, maybe a special session before they ended the year in 2023 but we held out as long as we could because we have that March 19th Presidential Preference Election. And that's why we decided we'll send out the information on the primary election being moved up a week after that election.

Z Zac Ziegler 20:14

So I can't imagine your office has too big of a budget. This is a county of a little over 100,000 people, how much is having to do a second mailer like this going to end up costing?

P Patty Hansen 20:25

We're estimating about \$50 to \$60,000. And we're hoping to be able to get some funds from the state to help offset that. We think it's important, we've put out that voter guide. This is our fifth one, we have found it very well received by the voters. And people have told me, they cut that important date section out and put it on the refrigerator.

Z Zac Ziegler 20:52

Keep those scissors handy for April.

P Patty Hansen 20:54

Yes.

Z Zac Ziegler 20:55

Earlier in this episode, we heard from the Pima County Recorder about issues that this change will have and how long people have to fix any issues with their ballot and how that could affect rural and tribal areas. Coconino County also has a lot of rural and tribal voters. Do you have any concerns about that change?

P Patty Hansen 21:15

Yes, I do. It's gonna be a problem for us because we have worked with the Navajo Nation when the provisional conditional ballots were introduced. So we used all the chapter houses on the Navajo Nation. Well, essentially, the chapter houses are not open on the weekends. And we don't have any way to force them to be open. So we're looking at possibly having to hire quite a few temporary employees. Also, because we're so big geographically, to get those early ballots and those provisional conditional ballots back to Flagstaff to be audited, checked out and then given to our office from the elections department. That takes all day Wednesday. So we won't even know there is a problem for some of these voters possibly until Friday or Saturday morning, and then the voters only have a couple of days, and we have to try to reach them by phone and say, 'definitely call us back.' We're gonna be really stressing to put your phone number on your early ballot affidavit envelope.

Z Zac Ziegler 22:35

You and I spoke on the phone shortly after the original Republican bill to fix the election issues was introduced. You express some concerns about signature verification in that bill. What do you think of how everything turned out in the final version, besides that during matter that we already talked about?

P Patty Hansen 22:55

Well, I personally don't think you should put procedures at state statute that are so detailed. But the language that was in the original bill essentially was saying you had to have almost an exact match of the signature or we needed to verify it with the voter. And that language did get changed to I think, reasonably explained. It makes sense because our driver's license are issued and last for many years. So people don't come in every four years and update that signature on file. And I remember an instance where I had to verify a signature for an early ballot voter whose signature had really changed. It was nice and neat in the driver's license, but now it was kind of sloppy and fast. So I called the gentleman and he said, 'Oh yeah, my signature has changed. I'm going to medical school.' [laughs] And I said, I understand. I've never seen a doctor with a really neat signature. But things like that happen. And so we wanted to be able to explain it and update the signature. What we do in that case is we'll scan this signature on the envelope, so we don't have to keep bothering people when their signature changes.


Z Zac Ziegler 24:25

Now, one thing you're not going to have to deal with any of these issues from is on the candidate side. You're not running again. Tell me a little bit about your decision to call it good as a recorder.

P Patty Hansen 24:38

When I started in elections. It was a lot simpler. You had paper rosters we call them, which was a computer printout that had the list of voters names. They signed in, they were issued at a

ballot and they were able to vote that ballot. Now it was not so far back that it was hand-counted ballots, but they were read through the tabulator procedures and things have gotten much more technical. And it's just a lot of technology. There's a lot of procedures put in place now. So it's gotten a lot more complicated. Now, I've been lucky in that those of us in Coconino County, we have not had to deal with the harassment or threats. But I know our neighboring county Yavapai County, both their recorder and election director left because of threats and harassment. And we've lost so many good, dedicated people because of this. It really has me concerned, because we're losing that institutional knowledge. And what people say is fraud is not fraud. It's usually human error. You make mistakes, and we ask so much of our poll workers. And the important thing is that we can explain what happened and ensure there's no fraud. But yeah, that's a lot more complicated. And for some of us old fogies [laughs], it's time to let the younger people take over with all the technology and things.

 Christopher Conover 26:25

That was Coconino County Recorder Patty Hanson speaking with Zac Ziegler, and that's The Buzz for this week. You can find all our episodes online at azpm.org and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast just search for The Buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer with production help this week from Summer Hom. Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover thanks for listening.

 Nicole Cox 27:06

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