



Judge Blocks Trump Administration's Data System Over Privacy and Voting-rights Violations

A federal judge in Washington, D.C., has struck down a Trump administration voter-verification system, ruling that federal agencies unlawfully built a centralized database containing sensitive information about American citizens.

The decision lands in the middle of a larger fight over who controls voter data. The Trump administration's Department of Justice (DOJ) has been [aggressively suing states](#) to obtain voter files. At the same time, the administration expanded a federal system that could run voter information through immigration and Social Security records.



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Together, those efforts point to the core issue in the case. Election integrity matters, and so does legal immigration. But voter-roll maintenance is a state and local responsibility. It is not an excuse for Washington to compile detailed profiles on Americans.

Judge Sparkle L. Sooknanan saw the threat clearly.

"This case implicates two fundamental rights that protect Americans from government overreach: the right to privacy and the right to vote," she wrote.

A Federal System

[The ruling](#), issued on Monday, centers on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements system, known as [SAVE](#).

Before 2025, SAVE mainly helped government agencies confirm citizenship or immigration status for government benefits, licenses, and other purposes. It relied on limited federal records and did not function as a broad voter-screening tool for millions of Americans.

That changed after President Trump signed a March 25, 2025, [executive order](#) on election administration. The order directed DHS, the Social Security Administration (SSA), and other agencies to give state and local officials access to systems that could verify the citizenship or immigration status of registered voters and people registering to vote.

The administration then overhauled SAVE in three major ways.

Firstly, it added records of natural-born citizens.

Secondly, it connected SAVE to SSA records, including Social Security numbers (SSNs). Other records included "names, dates and places of birth, citizenship indicators, death records, and information obtained while processing requests for SSNs."

And, thirdly, it allowed bulk searches, letting users upload lists of people rather than check one person



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at a time.

That transformed the system.

The judge wrote,

In the past year, several federal agencies have joined forces to create a centralized federal database that contains the private information of United States citizens, including Social Security numbers, citizenship status, and other sensitive data. But decades ago, Congress put protections in place to prevent precisely this type of centralized data bank. And the record in this case shows that the federal agencies that created this database knew that the database violates those statutory protections. Congress had already built legal protections to prevent that kind of system.

The court found that the administration ignored them.

Unreliable Data

The court's concern was not only that the government collected sensitive data. It was also that the data could be wrong.

SSA records are not a clean citizenship database. Many naturalized citizens first received SSNs when they were not yet citizens. They may never have updated that status with SSA, because they had no reason to know it would later affect voter registration.

The court noted that people generally have no duty to update SSA about a change in citizenship unless they request a replacement card or file for Social Security benefits.

That means a lawful U.S. citizen can appear in SSA records as a non-citizen.

The administration knew this risk. Internal DHS documents warned that "shortfalls in data accuracy" could produce "incomplete or false results." Other internal documents showed that DHS knew the modified system was "not in compliance" with the Privacy Act.

Still, the system moved forward.

Judge Sooknanan described the process bluntly. Agencies were "scrambling to comply" with Trump's executive order and "haphazardly combined and repurposed the private information of millions of Americans, including citizenship data that they knew to be unreliable."

Citizens Were Flagged

The harm was not hypothetical.

States used the modified SAVE system to check voter rolls. Some U.S. citizens were wrongly identified as possible non-citizens; some were told to prove citizenship within 30 days. Some even had their voter registrations canceled.

That is what turned the case from an abstract privacy dispute into a voting-rights case.

The court rejected the idea that mislabeling a citizen as a non-citizen is a minor mistake. In the voting context, the label carries serious consequences. It can threaten a person's registration. It can imply possible criminal conduct. Finally, it can force a citizen to prove a status the government should not have wrongly questioned.



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The judge also rejected the government's argument that the injury was too small to support the lawsuit.

"The Defendants' arguments to the contrary border on the absurd," she wrote.

She then made the point at the center of the case: "even the mere suggestion of non-citizenship can cause grievous consequences."

The Law Still Applies

The court found the modified SAVE system unlawful on several grounds.

First, it violated the [Social Security Act of 1935](#), which protects Social Security numbers and related records from unauthorized disclosure.

Second, it violated the [Privacy Act of 1974](#), a law passed to stop the federal government from building secret or centralized personal-data systems without safeguards.

Third, it violated the Administrative Procedure Act ([APA](#)). The court found that the modified SAVE system and related DHS and SSA notices were contrary to law, arbitrary and capricious, beyond statutory authority, and adopted without required procedure.

The judge therefore vacated the 2025 SAVE modifications and the related federal notices.

Her conclusion was direct:

All in all, the federal government has knowingly trampled on the privacy rights of American citizens in a manner that threatens the sacred right to vote. This Court cannot stand idly by while that happens.

The Larger Warning

This ruling does not say states must ignore voter eligibility. It does not weaken citizenship requirements. And it does not treat election integrity as an unworthy concern.

It says something more precise: The federal government cannot use that concern to build a national data machine on American citizens.

That distinction matters.

A state voter list is already sensitive. It contains the raw material of civic life. When Washington runs that information through federal systems tied to immigration records, Social Security files, death indicators, citizenship markers, and bulk-search tools, it becomes something else: the beginning of a federally managed profile of Americans, built around the most basic act of citizenship, the right to vote.

That danger does not disappear because officials describe the project as an urgent safeguard against voter fraud. Indeed, urgency is often the language by which government power escapes its limits.

Once such a system exists, the threat is no longer theoretical. It can be reused; it can be expanded; it can be leaked. And it certainly can be aimed at political opponents, disfavored groups, naturalized citizens, or anyone who falls on the wrong side of a flawed database.

That is why privacy law exists, serving as a vital part of the legal architecture of limited government, a set of restraints meant to prevent the state from turning scattered records into instruments of surveillance and control.

Judge Sooknanan's ruling restores that line. States may police their voter rolls. The federal government



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may enforce immigration law. But neither task gives Washington a blank check to assemble sensitive records on American citizens and place that machinery next to the ballot box.

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