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Your Inside Source for Arizona Government, Politics and Business

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Divided government brings more legislative scrutiny
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2024 brought some success on housing
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Departing lawmakers offer advice to newcomers
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State Representative Steve Montenegro speaks at a press conference hosted by Border 911 at the Arizona State Capitol building in Phoenix on Jan. 26, 2023. Hard-right Republicans were unhappy with Montenegro's election as House Speaker after the party gained seats in both chambers of the Arizona Legislature. (Photo by Gage Skidmore)

REPUBLICANS END 2024 WITH

EXPANDED MAJORITY

IN BOTH LEGISLATIVE CHAMBERS

BY JAKOB THORINGTON
jthorington@stateaffairs.com

For the first time since 2020, one party in the Arizona legislature has expanded its stronghold.

Republicans gained one seat in the Senate for a 17-13 majority and two seats in the House for a 33-27 majority.

"We are stronger than ever before right now," said Speaker-elect Steve Montenegro, R-Goodyear, after he was elected as the incoming speaker by the House GOP caucus. "The last election cycle has shown it where the Democrats

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2024
Arizona Capitol Times
YEAR IN REVIEW

Even with passage of Prop. 139, more legal battles are expected

BY KIERA RILEY
kriley@stateaffairs.com

Arizona's abortion law ricocheted between the Legislature, judiciary and voters in 2024, transforming from a 15-week limit, to a near-total ban and to a right enshrined in the state Constitution.

Voters passed the Arizona Abortion Access Act, or Proposition 139, by 61.61% and provided some final say on abortion law in the process, but another round of legal battles await as Prop. 139's provisions start to interact with the state's existing statutory scheme.

ACLU attorney Lauren Beall said, "We live in a state where legislators have tried to block abortion access for decades. While *Roe v Wade* was good law, we had members of the Arizona legislature that tried to winnow down the right to an abortion as much as possible. We have a framework in

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Ethics complaints, resignations add to a contentious legislative session in 2024

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CAPITOL QUOTES



"The Freedom Caucus is still as relevant as they always have been because of who the President of the United States is."

– Political consultant Doug Cole, of Highground Public Affairs Consultants.



"My bigger concern is the lack of vigor when there's not divided government."

– Will Humble, executive director for the Arizona Public Health Association, on Arizona senators scrutinizing state agency directors and agencies for confirmation and continuation.



"This year, the margins just weren't close."

– Republican election attorney Andrew Gould, on the absence of a swell of election litigation challenging results.



"Always give them early warning into whether or not you can or cannot support something."

– Rep. Travis Grantham, R-Gilbert, advising new lawmakers on the importance of communicating with committee chairmen.

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AGENCIES



DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

brings more legislative scrutiny of state agencies, their directors

State Senate President Warren Petersen, R-Gilbert, sits on the stage at the 2023 Legislative Forecast Luncheon hosted by the Arizona Chamber of Commerce & Industry at Chase Field in Phoenixj on Jan. 6, 2023. Petersen and Gov. Katie Hobbs settled a lawsuit after a judge found the governor broke the law by withholding agency director nominees from Senate confirmation. (Photo by Gage Skidmore)

BY REAGAN PRIEST *rpriest@stateaffairs.com*

For the second year in a row, Republicans flexed all of their legislative muscles to thwart Gov. Katie Hobbs' agenda by continuing the fight against her director nominees and grilling state agencies during sunset reviews.

Hobbs and Senate Republicans spent much of this year locked in a court battle over whether her move to pull her director nominations and appoint them "executive deputy directors" was legal. Some of her agency heads — confirmed and unconfirmed — spent the session getting heat from Republicans who wanted their agencies dismantled or put on short leashes.

After Hobbs installed her executive deputy directors in 2023, it took her and Senate President Warren Petersen, R-Gilbert, nearly nine months to come to an agreement to send those nominees back for confirmation. During that time, a Maricopa County Superior Court judge agreed with Petersen that the move was illegal and Hobbs asked the Court of Appeals to weigh in.

Eventually, Hobbs and Petersen agreed that the governor would find new nominees to replace three of her most contested picks: David Lujan at the Department of Child Services, Karen Peters at the Department of Environmental Quality and Dana Allmond at the Department of Veterans' Services.

All three remain at their respective departments as deputy directors, while 16 of their peers were renominated to the Senate. One of those directors, Lisa Urias, resigned from her position after reports of a conflict of interest that she indicated would have made it difficult for her to be confirmed.

After Republicans expanded their majorities in both chambers during the election, newly-reelected Senate President Petersen renominated Sen. Jake Hoffman as chairman of the Committee on Director Nominations. Hoffman and Petersen have indicated in press releases and social media posts that the 15 nominees Hobbs sent back will go through a process similar to the one that led Hobbs to pull them from consideration in 2023.

"The committee invites Katie Hobbs to come to the table with sane, nonpartisan, qualified nominees, and we will approve them," Hoffman said in a statement after being reappointed to head the committee. "What we won't do is rubberstamp unqualified radicals."

Will Humble, a former director of the Department of Health Services, said the Senate is in a unique position to evaluate the nominees since they have been serving as agency heads for nearly two years.

"I hope that these [hearings] are more substantive because an important part of effective state government is making sure that these directors who have enormous authority are talented, qualified and good decision makers," Humble said. "So we'll see whether they go after the important stuff, or if it's more trivial BS like it was the first time around."

While Hobbs battled Senate Republicans in court over director nominations, some state agency heads battled legislative Republicans in hearings over how long their statutory lives should be extended.

Typically, agencies that agree to implement recommendations from the Auditor General's Office following a sunset review audit are continued for eight to 10 years. This past session, Republican lawmakers debated whether that was too long a period for agencies to be left alone without legislative oversight.

Members of the Republican Freedom Caucus like Sens. Anthony Kern and Hoffman, recommended that all agencies receive two-year continuations. Democrats accused them of weaponizing the sunset review process, while the Auditor General's Office said two-year continuations would make audits difficult to complete with its current resources.

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REPUBLICANS END 2024 WITH EXPANDED MAJORITY IN BOTH LEGISLATIVE CHAMBERS

have spent tens of millions of dollars to try to flip the chambers but they've done so unsuccessfully. The people of Arizona have spoken."

The GOP completely flipped three legislative districts that have been considered highly competitive swing districts in recent years.

Legislative Districts 4, 13 and 16 turned red after the November election. Rep. Keith Seaman, D-Casa Grande; and Sen. Christine Marsh, D-Phoenix, lost to Republicans Chris Lopez and Carine Werner, respectively.

Rep. Jennifer Pawlik, D-Chandler, didn't seek re-election in LD13. Representative-elect Jeff Weninger, R-Chandler, was elected with Rep. Julie Willoughby, R-Chandler, defeating their Democratic opponents Nicholas Gonzales and Brandy Reese.

The only seat Republicans lost was in Legislative District 17. Democrat Kevin Volk defeated incumbent Rep. Cory McGarr, R-Tucson, in the district's House race.

For Democrats, the results were disappointing for a party that chipped away at Republican legislative supermajorities in earlier decades. Democrats haven't held a majority in both chambers at the same time since the 1960s.

Flipping the legislature was a major goal for the Arizona Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, which spent millions backing candidates in swing districts who outraised many of their Republican opponents.

"Arizona's legislative chambers will remain in Republican control. Across the country, down-ballot Democrats worked tirelessly to combat top-of-the-ticket trends. It is now clear that those trends proved to be insurmountable," said ADLCC Executive Director Elsa O'Callaghan in a prepared statement.

The additional two seats in the House and one seat in the Senate don't bring the GOP to supermajority representation that the party once held in the state, but HighGround Public Affairs consultant Doug Cole said every seat matters for the Legislature's negotiations with Gov. Katie Hobbs.

"The last four years, it's been one vote," Cole said. "Sometimes, people will need to break away (from party leadership). This will allow them to."

Cole said it can be easier for party leaders at times when they have a smaller majority because supermajorities can create subgroups within a party.



Arizona Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs delivers the State of the State address at the state Capitol, Monday, Jan. 8, 2024, in Phoenix. At Hobbs will speak to more Republicans and fewer Democrats at her 2025 speech. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)

But there is one major subgroup at the Legislature, the Arizona Freedom Caucus. Several members of the Freedom Caucus have already been critical of Montenegro and his leadership team, despite Montenegro not being elected speaker officially yet.

After Montenegro was named incoming speaker, Rep. Jacqueline Parker, R-Mesa, wrote in a Nov. 13 post on X: "In the case of the House, openly turning chairmanship appointments over to the worst of the worst lobbyists is a dereliction of duty the likes of which the AZ leg has not seen for quite a while (if ever). So far the secret vote was just a caucus agreement. It can be changed."

Cole said he expects the influence of the Freedom Caucus at the Legislature to be just as strong as it's been in recent years.

"The Freedom Caucus is still as relevant as they always have been because of who the president of the United States is," Cole said. "That does filter down to local politics."

The next two years are pivotal for both parties as they navigate the early stages of President-elect Donald Trump's new administration. A Dec. 10 poll from Noble Predictive Insights determined 45% of voters believe Republicans are better equipped to run the state while 41% said Democrats would be better in charge.

The Noble poll also noted independent voters in August viewed Democrats as being better to run the state by a small 2-point lead, but that swung toward Republicans by 8 points after the election.

"Republicans have a decent – but not unbeatable – edge on who is thought to run the government more effectively. Republicans effectively appealed to independents this election, and voters now trust them to govern," said David Byler, Noble's chief of research. "If the GOP governs well, they could grow this edge – and if they fail, they could easily give it up."

Democratic consultant Gaelle Esposito said she believes Arizona shifted left relative to the rest of the country, where Republicans saw major wins. She pointed to Democrat Ruben Gallego's win over Kari Lake in the U.S. Senate race and said an ambitious strategy from Democrats for legislative elections led to Republicans gaining ground in the House

In previous elections, Democrats have often used the single-shot strategy of only running one candidate against two Republican opponents. That trend was slightly bucked this year with Democrats running two candidates in LD4 and LD13.

"This is the best partisan environment they could have asked for and this is all they got," Esposito said. "We'll see if they're just continuing to live on borrowed time … I would assume Hobbs would have a very good chance at re-election having both the foil of the Trump administration and a continued Republican Legislature to work against."

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EVEN WITH PASSAGE OF PROP. 139, MORE LEGAL BATTLES ARE EXPECTED



Rep. Stephanie Stahl-Hamilton, D-Tucson, in foreground, snaps a selfie with House Minority Leader Lupe Contreras, D-Phoenix, and Gov. Katie Hobbs, and other Democratic legislators to celebrate Hobbs signing legislation to end the state's ban on abortion. (Photo courtesy Stephanie Stahl-Hamilton)

"Moving forward, there will be lawsuits to fight, to limit the scope of 139."

Cathi Herrod, president of anti-abortion group Center for Arizona Policy

Arizona of about more than 40 laws that are the result of that effort. We don't expect those people to disappear."

At the start of the year, the state's abortion law was up in the air. The Arizona Supreme Court heard arguments over whether the 15-week law passed by the legislature in 2022 or an 1864 law banning near-all abortions takes precedent.

In April, the state high court handed down a ruling finding the 1864 ban to override the more recent statute passed by lawmakers as the fall of *Roe v Wade* rendered any implied right to an abortion written in the 15-week law void.

Weeks later, the Democrats, with two Republicans in the Senate and three Republicans in the House crossing the line, passed a repeal of the 1864 ban, leaving the 15-week limit in place.

All the while, organizers had started to gather signatures for Proposition 139, eventually eclipsing the required number and seeing a somewhat smooth road to the ballot, aside from two legal challenges.

An unsuccessful lawsuit from Arizona Right to Life sought to keep the measure off the ballot amid claims it was misleading. Advocates for Prop. 139 filed an unsuccessful suit of their own against the Legislative Council after the promulgated summary used the term "unborn human being."

Despite some legal hiccups, the measure went to voters and passed with 61.61%.

Following the statewide certification of the 2024 election, the ACLU, Center for Reproductive Rights and Planned Parenthood Arizona filed a lawsuit and set their sights on seeing the 15-week ban struck from the books.

Attorneys for the plaintiffs argue the 15-week law directly conflicts with the provisions set out in Prop. 139 requiring the state "shall not enact, adopt or enforce any law, regulation, policy or practice that … denies, restricts or interferes with" the fundamental right to an abortion "before fetal viability unless justified by a compelling state interest that is achieved by the least restrictive means."

Attorney General Kris Mayes sided with the plaintiffs, leaving the 15-week law undefended for now.

Beall said beyond the 15-week ban, a host of Arizona's abortion laws could see legal challenges in the coming year. Dr. Paul Isaacson, plaintiff in the suit, said the list is likely to include the reason ban, a law banning abortions performed solely on the basis of genetic abnormalities, the biased consent requirement, a law requiring physicians to inform patients of a long list of risks and alternatives to receiving an abortion, as well as a 24-hour waiting period.

Cathi Herrod, president of anti-abortion group Center for Arizona Policy, said she believed Prop. 139 will "overturn reasonable measures like informed consent laws and parental consent laws," and included "vague and undefined" terms. She promised legal action.

"Moving forward, there will be lawsuits to fight, to limit the scope of 139," Herrod said.

GUEST COMMENTARIES

Why combat veterans are needed in the political process



By Matt Kenney

This past Election Day, I stepped into a polling station — not just as a voter, but as a volunteer. After years of military service, it felt natural to channel my dedication to service into a new mission – helping ensure a smooth, accessible, and transparent voting process for everyone in my community.

My experience on Election Day was nothing short of inspiring. Voters of all backgrounds arrived with purpose, casting their ballots in a process that ran smoothly, efficiently, and with respect for every individual's voice. It was a reminder of what makes our country strong — ordinary citizens coming together to make their voices heard. It's a right that has been protected and preserved through the sacrifice made by many service members. For me, Election Day was smooth, efficient, and dignified — everything we hope for in the election process. The experience underscored an important truth: the same principles I upheld in the military — integrity, service, and accountability — are the backbone of a healthy democratic process.

For veterans like me, service didn't end when we hung up the uniform. Our training instills values like discipline, leadership, and a sense of responsibility to something greater than ourselves. These values are needed now more than ever—not just on Election Day, but in every corner of the American political landscape. These qualities are invaluable in a time when trust in our institutions often feels fractured.

Whether it's volunteering at polling locations, joining local boards, becoming advocates, or running for office — veterans are uniquely equipped to step up and contribute. The skills we've learned through our military experience — problem-solving, teamwork, and leading under pressure — are assets that can strengthen our communities. And they are assets that are largely missing in the current American political climate. Transitioning from combat duty to civic duty is not just a continuation of service, it's an opportunity to lead at home in the same way we led in the service.

The impact of veterans' civic leadership is evident in the renewed confidence Americans have in our elections. According to a recent Pew Research poll, the percentage of Republican voters who believe elections are well-run surged from just 21% in 2020 to an impressive 93% in 2024. This remarkable shift is no coincidence. It reflects the trust that comes when those who have already served their country step forward to ensure transparency, fairness, and integrity in our democratic process. By bringing the same values we upheld in the military to our local communities, we're helping to bridge divides and restore faith in the very foundations of our democratic system.

The time is now for veterans to embrace this call to action. Volunteer for a cause that matters to you. Attend a town hall meeting. Get involved in local governance. The same commitment we showed in uniform can transform our neighborhoods, schools, and cities into stronger, more united communities.

Volunteering on Election Day, I saw

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Prioritize senior issues, including Medicare Advantage



By Mechelle Morgan-Flowers

By 2050, an estimated 26% of Arizonans will be aged 65 and older — a sharp rise from just 18% of our population today. Our growing older community signals that senior issues are not just a concern of the future but rather the priorities of today.

Following this election, our leaders must be prepared to address their challenges and pass policies that enhance their quality of life. Older residents are already grappling with how to make their savings last, maintain their health, and live comfortably after years of hard work. And many of these pressures are even higher for seniors in rural communities.

As a nurse on the Navajo Reservation, I frequently work with patients residing in rural, remote areas where health care can be sparse. Such inaccessibility is particularly dangerous for older residents, many of whom require consistent and reliable health services. Fortunately, programs like Medicare Advantage improve health care utilization and access for seniors.

Over the years, I've witnessed how Medicare Advantage plans act as a life-saving program for my patients. These plans offer telehealth services, prescription delivery, and transportation options, ensuring that beneficiaries who reside in even the most rural pockets of our state can access care.

The program also addresses the rising cost of living by capping out-of-pocket expenses and maintaining low monthly premiums. This crucial health program and its affordable premiums allow our seniors to access the care they need to maintain independence in ways that fit their individual needs.

Despite its importance for rural communities, Medicare Advantage has seen declining investment from Washington. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) have continued to scale back financial support for the program, cultivating uncertainty for seniors who rely on it. Many older adults are left wondering if the services they depend on will be available throughout their retirement.

As CMS rolls back funding, rural communities could be disproportionately affected – many rely on transportation, telehealth lines, and delivery options. And other affordable plans just don't provide these valuable benefits.

With so much uncertainty around their care, seniors were looking for political candidates to take a stand. And since older residents constitute a significant voter bloc, newly-elected officials at all levels of government should recognize that protecting the population that sent them to office is critical. In the 2022 midterms, voters over the age of 50 accounted for 55% of all Arizona voters, and it appears that even more Arizonians over 50 turned out this year.

As Arizona's senior population continues to grow, their concerns should be front and center in policy decisions. A practical place for candidates to start is by showing their support for Medicare Advantage and providing tangible plans to address the needs of senior care.

Seniors have built the foundation of our communities, and it's only right that we ensure they have the resources they need to thrive in their later years.

The path forward must include robust support for Medicare Advantage, ensuring that Arizona's seniors can retire with peace of mind. As we all move on from the election, now is the moment for officials to commit to protecting and expanding the programs that matter most to our aging population.

Mechelle Morgan-Flowers is a utilization review nurse on the Navajo Reservation.

GUEST COMMENTARIES

This bill will give ROTC cadets financial breathing room



By Mark Habelt

Plenty of ink has been spilled by pundits lamenting the decline of opportunity for young Americans and the seeming lack of social mobility afflicting those inhabiting the lowest rungs of the income spectrum. A university education has long been viewed as a remedy to this problem, as a Bachelor's Degree can signify to an employer a student's strong character, intellectual capabilities, and multidisciplinary skill set. While it seems a no-brainer to pursue an undergraduate degree, the question facing countless high school seniors often becomes: how can I afford it?

For more than a century, America's defense establishment, ever in need of qualified individuals willing to serve the country, has sought to answer this question for millions of America's young adults through the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). In short, the various branches of America's Armed Forces offer degree-seekers a bargain – we can help pay for your education if you commit to rigorous officer candidate training during school and pledge a commitment to service for a period of time after graduating.

However, there is a limit to the benefits offered to cadets across the nation. While each ROTC program can allocate a certain number of four-year scholarships to high-performing cadets, most cadets subsist on two or three-year scholarships, having to finance their freshman and sophomore year tuition and living expenses on their own. While in theory this arrangement would not seem to pose any problems, many ROTC programs discourage cadets from pursuing work outside of school so they can focus on maintaining high grade point averages and fulfilling various extracurricular ROTC requirements.

This presents a significant conundrum for non-resident cadets in Arizona's public universities, many of whom are forced to pay north of $28,000 per year in out-of-state tuition fees and more than $10,000 in annual living expenses prior to their ROTC scholarships kicking in during their sophomore or junior years.

To address these challenges, State Sen. Wendy Rogers , R-Flagstaff, recently introduced a bill that would grant in-state student status to contracted ROTC cadets. If passed into law, SB1021 would make Arizona the second state in the union (after Tennessee) to guarantee in-state residency to contracted ROTC cadets. Once implemented, the measure could save non-scholarship cadets and those with less than four-year scholarships thousands of dollars in tuition expenses, thereby helping to stave off the accruement of debilitating student debt.

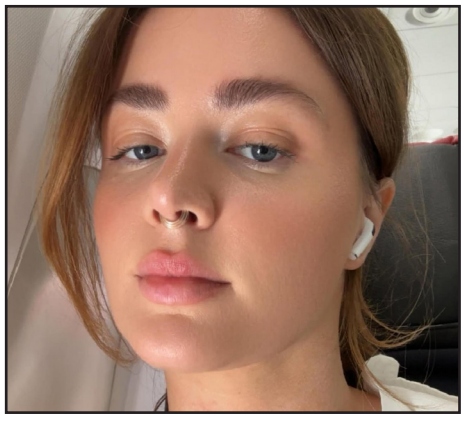
Detractors of this legislation might point to the fact that a cadet could simply enlist in the Arizona National Guard or a Reserve component of the Armed Forces to receive in-state student status. While true, signing such an enlistment contract for a National Guard/Reserve component generally precludes a cadet from being able to pursue a career in an active duty component after graduation.

It seems if AmeriCorps volunteers, the dependents of service members, and certain immigrant students can qualify for in-state residency, principles of fairness might suggest that contracted ROTC cadets ought to gain some financial breathing room in the form of in-state student status. Moreover, should SB1021 pass into law, Arizona's public university ROTC programs may well have an easier time meeting retention goals.

Given Arizona's status as the home state of revered military heroes and veterans like Barry Goldwater, John McCain, and Pat Tillman, Arizona lawmakers would be well-placed to support the state's young officer candidates and provide a reasonable measure of financial flexibility to our country's future military leaders.

Mark Habelt is a recent graduate of ASU's Army ROTC program and a second lieutenant in the Arizona Army National Guard.

Keep the Affordable Care Act affordable for Arizonans



By Meredith Blake

We are yet again standing at the edge of a health care cliff. If Republicans get their way, millions of Americans are in danger of losing their coverage.

As a small-business owner, marketplace health insurance has been an absolute lifeline for me. I honestly don't know where I'd be without it. Running a business is full of uncertainties, but having access to affordable, quality health care gives me one less thing to worry about. It means I can take care of my health and focus on growing my business without the constant fear of an unexpected medical bill wiping everything out. The flexibility and affordability of the marketplace have made it possible for me to pursue my dreams while still protecting myself and my family. It's not just insurance – it's peace of mind, and for that I'm deeply grateful.

Families like mine have been saving on our health care premiums thanks to the Biden administration. The Inflation Reduction Act made premium tax credits more generous and available to more middle-class families, lowering costs for people who purchase insurance on their own.

For me, lower premium costs have helped take the pressure off my family and gave us more room to pay for other necessities like food, rent, and gas. And I know I'm not alone – this year, a record number of Americans have enrolled in a health plan through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) Marketplace. In fact, ACA coverage in Arizona has more than doubled thanks to the efforts of the health care allies in Washington who have worked to protect and expand the ACA.

However, all of this progress is under threat. The tax credits are set to expire at the end of 2025 unless Republicans in Congress come to the table and work with Democrats to make the savings permanent. From day one, Republicans like David Schweikert have been fighting to raise health care costs, from voting against these savings in the first place to now being on track to let them expire. Republicans are more focused on delivering tax breaks to big corporations and the wealthiest Americans while leaving people like me struggling to get by. Losing these savings would be devastating to millions who may otherwise not be able to access health care. In Arizona alone, hundreds of thousands of people would see their premiums go up, and many stand to lose their health care completely. As a result, thousands of families will once again have to choose between being able to see a doctor or keeping a roof over their heads.

The good news is these price hikes are preventable. It is essential that Congress protect access to affordable coverage and they must act fast. If Republicans are serious about keeping costs low, this is the first step to prove it to the American people. Arizonans need Congress to extend these tax credits. It is time for Republicans to get on board and protect the health care of millions of Americans.

Meredith Blake is a resident of Phoenix, where she owns Myth Salon.

HOUSING



2024 brought some legislative success on housing, but left more to do

BY REAGAN PRIEST
repriest@stateaffairs.com

Both parties set their sights on easing Arizona's housing problems in 2024, but even with bipartisan efforts, came up short.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle were hoping to address high housing costs and shortages in the state's housing stock. While Gov. Katie Hobbs signed several bills, she vetoed others and some died in the Legislature.

Of the bills enacted by Hobbs and the Legislature, most addressed accessory dwelling units, multifamily housing and city zoning ordinances.

In August, Hobbs held a bill signing ceremony for four major housing bills that were aimed at lowering housing costs, saying affordable housing was a priority for her administration.

"It's not just the dream of homeownership that's out of reach for so many today, it's even the goal of stable, affordable rental housing," Hobbs said.

Those four bills required certain municipalities to allow accessory dwelling units, duplexes, triplexes and townhomes to be built on single-family lots, while also amending zoning ordinances to expand multifamily housing and speed up approvals for home construction projects.

While those bills received support from both parties, Hobbs had vetoed a bipartisan measuret, sparking criticism from Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature.

House Bill 2570, known as the Starter Homes Act, would have prevented municipalities with 70,000 residents or more from regulating lot sizes for single-family housing. It also would have prevented municipalities from requiring homeowners to join a home owners association that would dictate the design of a home.

The bill was sponsored by House Majority Leader Leo Biasiucci, R-Lake Havasu City, and was cosponsored by several Republicans and Democrats. The Starter Homes Act made it through both the House and Senate with bipartisan support.

In a March 18 veto letter, Hobbs said over 90% of people who reached out to her office regarding the bill asked her to veto it due to concerns related to infrastructure, water supply and even legal consequences.

"This is unprecedented legislation that would put Arizonans at the center of a housing reform experiment with unclear outcomes," Hobbs wrote in the letter. "It lacks the nuance necessary for statewide reform, and I do not believe it is in the best interest of the people in this state."

Hobbs encouraged lawmakers to work alongside stakeholder groups like the League of Arizona Cities and Towns to come up with legislation that would address the state's housing challenges without overruling city ordinances.

Republicans and Democrats alike criticised Hobbs for the veto, with Democratic Sen. Anna Hernandez, D-Phoenix, and Rep. Analise Ortiz, D-Phoenix, accusing Hobbs of capitulating to lobbyists.

"I hope the Governor takes this moment to reaffirm her commitment to solving the housing crisis rather than stand as another obstacle in the way of solutions," Hernandez said after the March veto.

Several other housing bills, from both Democrats and Republicans, did not make it out of the Legislature in 2024. Those were aimed at establishing programs for veterans experiencing homelessness, allowing school boards to lease their property for affordable housing and allowing proceeds from the sale of unclaimed property to be deposited in the state's housing trust fund, among other things.

Lawmakers pledged to bring the Starter Homes Act and other bills back in some form next session, but so far no bills related to housing have been pre-filed ahead of the session starting in January. Republicans have given some indication of bills they might propose, specifically related to certificates of assured water supply for housing developments.

Hobbs and lawmakers in both parties acknowledged that while 2024 brought significant legislation that will combat the state's housing crisis, more will need to be done in 2025 to ensure Arizonans have access to housing.

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DIVIDED GOVERNMENT BRINGS MORE LEGISLATIVE SCRUTINY OF STATE AGENCIES, THEIR DIRECTORS

Republicans even attempted to dismantle the Commerce Authority after a 2023 report from *The Arizona Republic* showed it used state funds to woo CEOs of companies looking to invest in Arizona by hosting forums at events like the Super Bowl and the Waste Management Phoenix Open.

However, only one agency received a two year continuation. Most agencies up for sunset review this year were continued for eight years, but a few received continuations for four or five years.

Humble said he doesn't think the process is being weaponized, and instead calls the recent tension a byproduct of divided government.

"My bigger concern is the lack of vigor when there's not divided government," Humble said. "It becomes a back slapping … that's what it was for the whole eight years of [former Gov. Doug] Ducey."

Humble said he also agrees with putting agencies on "shorter leashes" but said that can only be accomplished if the auditor general is given enough funding to complete more-frequent audits.

"The thing is, the shorter the leash for the agencies, the more frequently they'll be going to the auditor general, which I think is fine, as long as you're resourcing the Auditor General's Office," Humble said. "So it would be interesting to see if the Freedom Caucus puts their money where their mouth is … if they're going to ask them to put these agencies on two-year cycles, then they need to give them the resources to be able to do that work effectively."

With Democrats' losses at the ballot box in November, divided government will be here to stay for the last two years of Hobbs' term, signalling more fights over director nominations and sunset reviews in the coming years.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

WHY COMBAT VETERANS ARE NEEDED IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

firsthand how vital community engagement and participation is in the democratic process we take for granted. It's not just about voting, it's about engaging and being proactive. It's about creating a process everyone can trust. And veterans, with our shared commitment to service, are uniquely positioned to answer this call.

America thrives when its citizens take ownership of its future. Veterans have already proven their dedication to this country, and our service doesn't have to stop after combat or deployment. Together, let's lead in this next chapter of service, one civic act at a time.

Matt Kenney is a founding partner of Echo Canyon Consulting and a U.S. Army combat veteran.

LEGISLATURE

DEPARTING LAWMAKERS OFFER ADVICE TO NEWCOMERS



Arizona House Speaker pro tempore Travis Grantham, R-Gilbert, calls for order on the House floor, Wednesday, April 17, 2024, at the Capitol. Grantham, who chose not to run for election again, said newly elected lawmakers should follow the lead of the chairman of committees and communicate whether they will support a bill. (AP Photo/Matt York)

Sen. Ken Bennett



Rep. Judy Schwiebert



Sen. Christine Marsh



Rep. David Cook

BY JAMAR YOUNGER
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When the 2025 legislative session convenes on Jan. 13, almost two dozen new lawmakers will take office in the Arizona House and Senate chambers.

While several of those lawmakers are familiar faces who are making their return to the state Capitol after having served in previous years, many are about to introduce bills, navigate committee assignments and debate pressing policy issues for the first time at the state Legislature.

Some soon-to-be former lawmakers recently offered advice to the incoming legislators on a number of topics ranging from working across the aisle to pass a bill to the challenges of working in committees.

"Make sure that you're ready to work with anybody to make sure that the people of Arizona have a chance to thrive," said Rep. Judy Schwiebert, D-Phoenix. "The people that we work for are the people of our community and the people of Arizona, and that's what we need to keep at the forefront of our minds."

Schwiebert, who lost the Legislative District 2 Senate race to Sen. Shawnna Bolick, R-Phoenix, said most Arizonans agree on a vast majority of issues regardless of their party affiliation.

"I think it's important to listen to people from whatever their party, whatever their perspective – especially constituents – and do your best to address the very real issues that we're facing," she said.

Sen. Ken Bennett, R-Prescott, advised new lawmakers to remember that there are constituents from different political parties within each legislative district and as lawmakers they are representing all of those citizens.

"I believe, if you're doing what's right for the people of Arizona and your district, you have to work across the aisle (to) get things done, especially in a situation where Republicans have narrow control of the legislative bodies and a Democrat governor," said Bennett, who lost in the Legislative District 1 primary to former state Rep. Mark Finchem, R-Prescott.

Bennett also served as a state senator from 1999 to 2007 and was appointed secretary of state in 2009. He reflected on his experience working with former Democrat Gov. Janet Napolitano while he was the Senate president.

"Every budget that we passed and most bills that we got signed had some support from both sides," he said.

When serving on committees, lawmakers should follow the lead of the chairman and communicate whether they will support a bill, said Rep. Travis Grantham, R-Gilbert.

"And always give them early warning into whether or not you can or cannot support something," said Grantham, who declined to run for reelection after reaching his term limits.

Lawmakers should also focus on the contents of a bill and not just who sponsored the legislation, said Sen. Christine Marsh, D-Phoenix, who lost to Carine Werner in Legislative District 4.

"I think that some bipartisanship and working across the aisle is absolutely the way to go. I think that's the best way to serve our own constituents and state as a whole," Marsh said.

Overall, the new lawmakers should build relationships with their colleagues, empower their staff, educate themselves on the various rules, policies and procedures, and remain humble.

Rep. David Cook, who lost in the Legislative District 7 primary to Sen. Wendy Rogers, said, "So focus on the 75% of what you can and should be able to come to an agreement upon and find common ground on, because the government needs to function for the people. And if you don't focus on any of the 75%, you will find yourself out of office."

LITIGATION LINGERS



Former Arizona Republican Party Chair Kelli Ward, right, with husband Michael Ward, walk out of Maricopa County Superior Court after their arraignment as they joined at least 10 other people who were also arraigned for conspiracy, forgery and fraud charges role in an effort to allegedly overturn Donald Trump's 2020 election loss in Arizona to Joe Biden Tuesday, May 21, 2024, in Phoenix. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)

SO-CALLED 'FAKE ELECTORS' CASE COULD STILL BE IN COURT BY NEXT ELECTION

BY KIERA RILEY *kriley@stateaffairs.com*

The prosecution of Arizona Republicans and allies of President-elect Donald Trump for their alleged role in the "alternate elector" scheme is at a standstill as 2024 comes to a close.

As the criminal prosecution enters a new calendar year, several motions are pending, with appeals from either side likely to follow any ruling from a lower court judge. An attorney for one defendant said he thinks the case remains at "square one and a half."

"I think next year, at this time, we might not be in a very different place," Kurt Altman, attorney for Michael Roman, director of Election Day operations for the Trump campaign in 2020.

In April, Attorney General Kris Mayes announced the state grand jury had levied felony charges against the 11 Arizona Republican presidential electors and seven Trump associates for their role in allegedly attempting to send electoral votes to Trump instead of Joe Biden in 2020.

The state grand jury returned charges on nine counts: one count of conspiracy, a class two felony; two counts of fraud, one a class two felony and one a class five felony; and six counts of forgery, a class four felony.

The indictment names Sen. Anthony Kern, R-Glendale, Sen. Jake Hoffman, R-Queen Creek; former Arizona Republican Party Chair Kelli Ward; her husband Michael Ward; then-Executive Director of the state Republican Party Gregory Safsten; RNC committeeman and Chief Operating Officer of Turning Point USA, Tyler Bowyer; chair of the Arizona Republican Presidential Electors Nancy Cottle; secretary of the electors Lorraine Pellegrino, former Senate candidate Jim Lamon; former chairman of the Cochise County Republican Committee Robert Montgomery and member of Gila County Arizona Republican Party Samuel Moorhead.

The seven indicted Trump confidantes are attorneys Rudy Giuliani, Christina Bobb, Jenna Ellis and John Eastman, attorney and campaign adviser Boris Epshteyn, Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, and Michael Roman, director of election day operations for the 2020 Trump campaign.

All 18 plead not guilty, but Ellis and Pellegrino have since agreed to plea deals with the state. Ellis saw the dismissal of all nine charges in exchange for testimony, while Pellegrino pleaded guilty to a single misdemeanor count of filing a false document.

The remaining 16 defendants have a long road ahead, according to Altman.

Outstanding now are motions to dismiss the indictment based on the state's anti-SLAPP, or "strategic lawsuits against public participation" law, a statute requiring the dismissal of lawsuits "substantially motivated by a desire to deter, retaliate against or prevent the lawful exercise of a constitutional right."

In August, defense attorneys argued in front of Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Bruce Cohen that the indictment was politically motivated and runs afoul of the anti-SLAPP statute.

But Cohen recused himself in November after an attorney for Hoffman flagged emails in which he rebuked statements made by Trump and encouraged fellow judges to do the same.

The case is now before Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Joseph Kreamer, with no ruling on any motions to dismiss, or motions to remand, in sight. Further motions challenging grand jury proceedings are due in the coming weeks, too.

"That has to happen before we can even move forward in the case," Altman said. "These are all very preliminary motions that can either set the case back to the start or make it go away entirely before we even get into the nitty gritty of the courtroom drama that may come."

A preliminary trial date is set for January 2026. Altman said there is always a chance the current schedule could ring true but was doubtful. He instead predicted the case would still be hanging around by the next election cycle.

"We're at square one and a half," Altman said. "This is going to be a long haul."

JUDICIAL SECURITY

JUDICIAL RETENTION BECOMES POLITICAL IN 2024



BY KIERA RILEY
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Judicial retention elections have by-and-large been invisible to voters beyond the ballot in past cycles, with no signs, no voting guides and no attempt at overhaul.

But in 2024, a ballot measure to limit when judges stand for retention and campaigns organized for and against two state Supreme Court justices created a conspicuous race.

Whether judicial retention elections are wont to see the same level of electoral attention and attempts at reform in coming years remains an open question, but those engaged in retention elections say, despite heightened visibility, this year's results did not necessarily make for a watershed moment.

Per final election results, voters roundly rejected Proposition 137, a measure tailored to eliminate term limits for judges given "good behavior," with 77.67% of people voting against its passage, while Justices Clint Bolick and Kathryn King, who saw campaigns both for and against their retention, passed voter muster and were both retained by 58.19% and 59.35%, respectively.

The end result was effectively no change in the status quo.

"It resoundingly seems to me to indicate that voters still want to have a voice, they don't want to let that go," said Timothy Berg, an attorney and chair of a PAC to advocate and educate on the current retention system, Arizonans for an Independent Judiciary. "It also seems to me that the voters also weren't swayed much by all the campaigning that went on."

In 2022, three Maricopa County Superior Court judges were not retained by voters, giving way to the perception of the increasing "politicization" of retention elections. In 2024, the fear materialized as an attempt at legislative reform, with Republicans forwarding a resolution limiting when judges are made to stand for retention elections.

Under Proposition 137, judges and justices would only be made to go before the voters if they were convicted of a felony offense, or any crime involving fraud or dishonesty, were involved in any personal bankruptcy proceedings, had any foreclosed mortgage or if the Judicial Performance Review Commission deemed the judge did not meet standards.

The measure headed to the ballot as campaigns around the 2024 judicial retention election started to take shape. Though some voting guides advocated against retaining a handful of Superior Court judges, most of the attention, and money, coalesced around Justices Clint Bolick and Kathryn King, given their earlier ruling upholding the 1864 abortion ban.

Protect Abortion Rights, No Retention Bolick and King formed to oust the justices, while Judicial Independence Defense PAC sought to see the two retained. A third PAC, Arizonans for an Independent Judiciary, advocated for the retention of all judges and the system.

As of October, Judicial Independence Defense PAC raised $530,000 and spent $333,007. Protect Abortion Rights, No Retention Bolick and King brought in $17,477 and spent $5,492.

Both campaigns printed signs, though the Judicial Independence Defense PAC commanded more street corners. Berg said this year was "extraordinary" in the sense that signs and spending in judicial retention elections went on at all.

"I spoke at a seminar in October with a bunch of lawyers, and I asked them, 'How many of you have ever seen a campaign sign before this year for a judicial election?' And out of 40 people, three people raised their hand," Berg said. "Then I asked, 'How many of you haven't seen one this year?' And nobody raised their hand."

Beyond PACs, grassroots group Civic Engagement Beyond Voting put together Gavel Watch, a voting guide on judicial elections. Gavel Watch advocated against the retention of Bolick and King.

"The purpose of our oversight is not to throw lots of judges off the bench, it's really just to call attention to what the judiciary does," Cathy Sigmon, co-founder of Civic Engagement Beyond Voting and Gavel Watch, said. "We're so privileged in Arizona to have that oversight. I'll continue to call attention when any judge seems to sort of put their own political judgment above what the law states."

Though abortion served as some conduit for campaigns against judges, given Bolick and King's vote to keep the 1864 ban in place, the issue did not entirely carry into how voters weighed in on retention.

The Arizona Abortion Access Act passed with 61.61% support, while Bolick and King were retained at a similar margin.

"I think what it showed is that, fortunately, campaigns to get rid of judges are hard to do, and that's as it should be … you don't want a system where a judge makes what he or she thinks is the right decision, but it's unpopular, and you bounce the judge for doing that," Berg said. "It showed voters made a distinction between what they wanted the policy of the state to be, which is the initiative, and what they thought judges should be doing, which is doing their jobs, and not necessarily punishing them for disagreeing with them."

As for Prop. 137, efforts to oppose were wrapped into efforts by Gavel Watch and by Protect Abortion Rights No Retention Bolick and King, but there was no organized campaign for or against the measure. The effort failed by nearly 80%.

"Hopefully they realize that that is not a winning issue," Sigmon said.

Berg agreed the margin to which Prop. 137 failed was particularly illustrative of how voters view the current judicial retention system.

"At the end of the day, the state kept that system, and it was used the way it should have been used."



A yard sign in Phoenix encourages Arizonans on Oct. 19, 2024, to vote "no" on retaining state Supreme Court Justices Clint Bolick and Kathryn Hackett King, who joined the high court's majority in allowing enforcement of an 1864 near-total abortion ban. (AP Photo/Sejal Govindarao)

LAWMAKERS LEAVE

Ethics complaints, resignations add to a contentious legislative session in 2024

BY JAKOB THORINGTON
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A slate of ethics investigations and resignations of Arizona lawmakers surfaced during the 2024 legislative session.

Democrats rarely had a full caucus in the House with several resignations throughout the year.

Democratic state Rep. Leezah Sun, resigned on Jan. 31, after the House Ethics Committee determined she threatened a lobbyist from the city of Tolleson.

Sun denied allegations that she threatened to push the lobbyist off a balcony, but she did admit to saying she would "b**** slap" the lobbyist. She also said she made the statement because she's "expressive" and didn't intend any malice behind it.

"A desire to physically harm someone – by either assaulting them or throwing them over a ledge – or to take their life cannot be considered levity in any situation," Ethics Committee members wrote in their report.

House Democrats had prepared an expulsion motion after the Ethics Committee report, but Sun resigned before any further action could be taken.

That wasn't the end for Sun's political career. She challenged Sen. Eva Diaz, D-Tolleson, in the primary election but was unsuccessful. However, voters did elect Sun to the Tolleson Union High School District Governing board and she was elected chair of the LD22 Democratic precinct committee.

LD22 also saw controversy with the representative appointed to replace Sun in Rep. Elda Luna-Nájera, D-Tolleson.

The Tolleson Union High School District launched an investigation into Luna-Nájera, formerly the district's Governing Board president, after district Superintendent Jeremy Calles accused her of sexual harassment toward him.

Investigators determined in September that Luna-Nájera and Calles had a consensual but "inappropriate" sexual relationship, with Luna-Nájera continuing to pursue a relationship with Calles after he had discouraged her advances.

Board members reorganized and removed Luna-Nájera as president. She was elected to the House in November, but House Democrats haven't approached the subject with the investigation occurring out of session.

"While the report indicates their relationship was consensual we are disappointed by the lack of judgment shown by all involved. The school board has a process in place that is unfolding and we respect that process," House Democratic leadership wrote in a statement to the investigation's conclusion.

Former state Rep. and congressional candidate Jevin Hodge's tenure at the Legislature was short-lived, resigning weeks after he was appointed to replace former state Rep. Athena Salman.

Hodge's resignation came a day after The Arizona Republic published an article detailing sexual misconduct allegations from 2015 when Hodge was a student at George Washington University.

"I apologize now, again, to those that may have been caused pain by my actions. As a leader, I must demand more of myself," Hodge said in a written statement when he resigned. "Public service means knowing when to lead — and it also means knowing when to step aside. As I said yesterday, I unequivocally deny the allegations made against me. However, now is not my time to lead."

Other lawmakers saw issues with their re-election campaigns that prevented them from running in 2024's election cycle.

Rep. Austin Smith, R-Wittmann, withdrew his candidacy for re-election in Legislative District 29 after he was accused of forging signatures on his nomination petition in May.

Smith denied the allegations but decided to withdraw and not defend the election challenge filed against him because he said the litigation costs would have been too high for his family.

"I might be confident of victory, but all it would take is a judge believing any one person, and all would be lost," Smith said in a written statement after he withdrew his candidacy. "I recently got married to an amazing woman, and we're just starting our life together. We have our plans and aspirations, and none of them involve starting out tens of thousands of dollars in debt as a price of being involved in public service. Even if I won, I would have to pay those debts."



State Rep. Leezah Sun speaks at the 2023 Legislative Forecast Luncheon hosted by the Arizona Chamber of Commerce & Industry at Chase Field in Phoenix. Sun was one of several lawmakers in 2024 who resigned or were under scrutiny for unethical behavior. (Photo by Gage Skidmore)

House Ethics Committee Chairman Rep. Joe Chaplik, R-Scottsdale, also decided not to pursue an ethics complaint filed by Democrats against Smith and said he didn't want the committee to engage in "speculative inquiry" weeks after plaintiffs withdrew their complaint against Smith.

Rep. Melody Hernandez, D-Tempe, also withdrew her candidacy after an elections challenge accused her of falling short of the required signatures she needed to qualify for the ballot and noting she isn't eligible to run due to racking up more than $1,000 in campaign finance fines.

Hernandez's campaign owed more than $2,000 for being late in submitting campaign finance reports at the time of her decision to withdraw her candidacy.

Other lawmakers faced ethics probes that ultimately didn't amount to any major consequences.

House Republicans filed ethics complaints against incoming Minority Leader Oscar De Los Santos, D-Laveen; and Rep. Analise Ortiz, D-Phoenix, when the two led an outburst on the House floor chanting "Shame!" at Republicans who delayed a vote on repealing the state's 1864 abortion ban.

De Los Santos and Ortiz described their behavior as "passionate debate" and called the complaint an attempt by Republicans to suppress speech with which they disagreed.

The two Democrats were accused of inciting a riot on the House floor and the Ethics Committee determined they engaged in disorderly behavior, but no further action was taken by the House.

De Los Santos would become the new leader of the House Democrats caucus and Ortiz would be elected to the Senate in her district.

ELECTION LAWSUITS

Legal challenges to elections switched in 2024 from results to administration

BY KIERA RILEY
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A long year of election litigation challenged all but the results, standing in stark contrast to 2022 and illustrating a shift toward tooling with election administration as opposed to lawsuits brought in individual races.

Many of the legal challenges filed in 2024 stand to bleed into the coming year, too, with potential appeals and a new Elections Procedures Manual in 2026 leaving more legal questions on the table for the next election cycle.

"The litigation in the election space has been increasing, year after year after year. I don't see that changing in 2025," election attorney Andrew Gould said. "But what's interesting is the litigation will take place in 2025. In other words, I don't know if there's a down cycle for this anymore."

> ***"The litigation in the election space has been increasing, year after year after year. I don't see that changing in 2025."***
>
> Andrew Gould, Election attorney

The year started with legal challenges to the 2022 election still sustaining a pulse and promises of litigation against the 2023 Elections Procedure Manual impending and eventually materializing from the Legislature, the RNC and the Arizona Republican Party and the Arizona Free Enterprise Club.

In the lead up to the election, low and high courts also fielded lawsuits challenging petitions, initiatives set to head to the ballot, summaries of the initiatives and management of voter registration databases.

But absent from the post-election period was a swell of election litigation challenging results.

"This year, the margins just weren't close," Gould said. "So the more we get into a mindset of, we want to win by more mandate, bigger margins, I think you'll see election challenges fade away. But I think if we are in a mindset that all I need is 50 plus one, then we're always going to have election challenges."

Gould said the cycle brought more lawsuits filed in advance of the election and "more and more litigation directed toward the structure of administration of elections versus individual candidates and challenges," a trend he said he expected to continue into the next year.

"Candidates and people that want to get an initiative on the ballot need to know what the rules of the game are efficiently in advance so they can participate in the Democratic process," Gould said.

Challenges to the Elections Procedure Manual are set to continue into the next calendar year as the Secretary of State's Office is tasked with drafting a new manual in 2025, with a draft due to Attorney General Kris Mayes and Gov. Katie Hobbs by Oct. 1.

Most recently, a Superior Court judge ruled on the Legislature's challenge to the procedures manual. The court voided provisions allowing for voters to be made inactive, as opposed to having their voter registration cancelled if they affirm they are a non-resident of their county in a juror questionnaire. The ruling also allows for leniency for errors in petition circulators registration and requiring counties to canvass the election or see their votes omitted from the statewide canvass.

In September, both a federal judge and a Court of Appeals judge blocked provisions of the manual enumerating and expanding upon behaviors considered voter harassment and a provision allowing the \sSecretary of state to certify the statewide election without counties that failed to do so.

Still pending are questions on recorders and the state's responsibilities on managing and voiding ineligible voters from voter rolls.

Gould predicted further challenges to election administration will come earlier and earlier, noting past dismissals of cases based on the Purcell doctrine – case law barring changes on the eve of an election, or laches – a doctrine requiring the dismissal of a case filed too late in the game.

"People have seen that and thought, I want to avoid those issues and file earlier, so that those defenses aren't raised and the point is well taken," Gould said.



Election workers process ballots at the Maricopa County Tabulation Center Wednesday, Nov. 6, 2024, in Phoenix. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)

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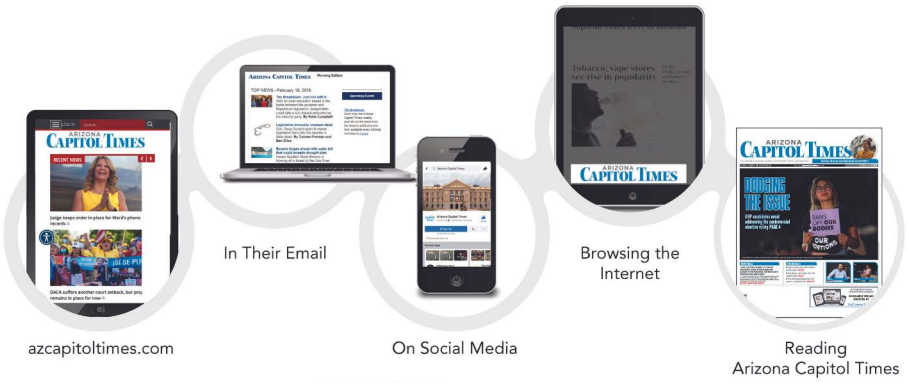
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FROM OTHER STATES

NEWS OF INTEREST FROM ACROSS THE NATION

Arkansas

GOVERNOR APPOINTS 2 JUSTICES TO SUPREME COURT, NEW SECRETARY OF STATE

Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders has named two new justices to the state Supreme Court and a new secretary of state. The Republican governor announced the appointments that will take effect in January to fill vacancies created by this year's election. Sanders named Justice Cody Hiland and Solicitor General Nicholas Bronni to the court seats. Sanders named Hiland to fill another vacancy and his term ends at the end of the year. She also named her deputy chief legal counsel Cole Jester to replace Secretary of State John Thurston, who will become state treasurer in January.



Arkansas Solicitor General Nicholas Bronni speaks at a news conference at the state Capitol in Little Rock, Arkansas on Friday, December 20, 2024. Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders appointed Bronni to a seat on the state Supreme Court. (AP Photo/Andrew DeMillo)

California

DISCRIMINATION COMPLAINTS STEMMING FROM GAZA PROTESTS RESOLVED

The U.S. Department of Education said it has reached an agreement with the University of California system resolving complaints from Jewish and Muslim students of discrimination and harassment during protests last spring over the war in Gaza. The department's Office for Civil Rights said it investigated a total of nine complaints against University of California schools in Los Angeles (UCLA), Santa Barbara, San Diego, Davis and Santa Cruz. The complaints alleged the schools failed to respond effectively to antisemitic and anti-Arab harassment. Under the agreement, the schools must step up reporting of complaints to the OCR office.

Colorado

170 SKIERS, SNOWBOARDERS RESCUED AFTER A LIFT CRACKS

WINTER PARK — Officials are investigating what caused a crack in a Colorado ski lift that forced the evacuation of over 170 stranded skiers and snowboarders. The evacuation happened Saturday on a gondola lift at Winter Park Resort. A spokesperson says the lift stopped automatically when a crack was detected in a structural piece of the lift. Passengers were lowered down by ropes over the course of about five hours. No injuries were reported during the rescues, which came at the start of the busy holiday season.

Florida

STATE REQUIRES TEACHING BLACK HISTORY, BUT SOME DON'T TRUST SCHOOLS TO DO IT JUSTICE

TALLAHASSEE — Thirty years after Florida required schools to teach African American history, how the subject is taught remains inconsistent across Florida classrooms, a review by The Associated Press has found. In the eyes of some advocates, Black history instruction in public schools is inadequate and under fire by the administration of Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has championed efforts to restrict how race, history and discrimination can be talked about in the state's public schools. That's pushing churches and community groups to take up the mantle of teaching Black history, which some families no longer trust the state's education system to do.

Indiana

LAW SHROUDS EXECUTIONS IN SECRECY, PROMPTING PUSHES FOR PUBLIC OVERSIGHT

Executions have historically been carried out with at least some public scrutiny, from public hangings in the town square to lethal injections in prisons witnessed by journalists. Indiana was expected to again diverge from that tradition by barring media witnesses from the execution of Joseph Corcoran. But shortly after state authorities announced his death, an Indiana news organization said one of its reporters had been invited by Corcoran to witness the execution. First Amendment advocates and death penalty experts say media witnesses play a crucial role by providing the public with firsthand and factual accounts of executions.

Kansas

TRUMP ALLY EXPLAINS HOW MASS DEPORTATIONS COULD WORK

TOPEKA — A Kansas official who's an informal adviser to President-elect Donald Trump's transition team on immigration issues doesn't expect mass deportations to prompt arrests of migrants at sensitive locations such as schools and churches. But Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach does expect Trump to take action that will spark a legal challenge over the citizenship status of children born in the U.S. to immigrants living in the country illegally. He also expects Trump to encourage local and state law enforcement officers to help with efforts to arrest and detain migrants. Kobach said during an Associated Press interview that he's in regular contact with Trump's team.

Louisiana

STATE HOLDS INMATES PAST THEIR RELEASE DATE, DOJ LAWSUIT CLAIMS

Louisiana's prison system routinely holds people weeks and months after they have completed their sentences. That is according to a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Department of Justice. The suit against the state of Louisiana follows a multiyear investigation into what federal officials say is a pattern of "systemic overdetention" that violates inmates' rights and costs taxpayers millions of dollars a year. In a joint statement provided to The Associated Press, Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry and state Attorney General Liz Murrill blamed the problem on the "failed" criminal justice reforms advanced by "the past administration."

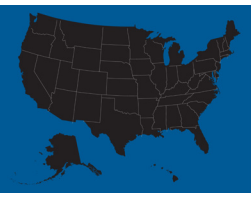
Missouri

GOVERNOR COMMUTES SENTENCE OF WHITE COP CONVICTED OF FATALLY SHOOTING BLACK MAN

JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri's governor has commuted the sentence of a white Kansas City police officer who was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in the fatal shooting of a Black man. Gov. Mike Parson decided to free Eric DeValkenaere, who was serving a six-year prison sentence after he was convicted in 2021 of killing 26-year-old Cameron Lamb. At trial, DeValkenaere testified he fired after Lamb pointed a gun at another detective. Prosecutors have argued, however, that police lacked a warrant to be on the property. Parson also commuted the sentence of Patty Prewitt, who had served nearly 40 years in prison for the killing of her husband.

FROM OTHER STATES

NEWS OF INTEREST FROM ACROSS THE NATION



Montana

GLOBAL WARMING CAN'T BE IGNORED, TOP COURT SAYS, UPHOLDING CLIMATE CASE

HELENA — Montana's Supreme Court has upheld a landmark climate ruling that said the state was violating residents' constitutional right to a clean environment by permitting oil, gas and coal projects without regard for global warming. The justices, in a 6-1 ruling, upheld an August 2023 decision by a state judge. That decision was considered a breakthrough in attempts by young environmentalists and their attorneys to use the courts to leverage action on climate change. The justices found unconstitutional a policy that prevented Montana from considering the effect of greenhouse gases when issuing permits for fossil fuel development.

Nebraska

GOVERNOR HOSPITALIZED AFTER HE IS BUCKED OFF A HORSE

OMAHA — Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen was injured after being bucked off a horse and is expected to be hospitalized for several days. Pillen, a first-term Republican, was with his family when he was thrown off a new horse and injured. The Governor's Office says he was taken to a hospital in Columbus, Nebraska, and then transported to the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. The office says the 68-year-old Pillen is conscious and alert and has been in touch with his staff. He is expected to remain at the Omaha hospital for several days. Pillen was elected governor in 2022. Before becoming governor, he worked as a veterinarian and owned a livestock operation.

New Mexico

UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT RESIGNS AFTER AUDIT CITING IMPROPER USE OF PUBLIC FUNDS

SILVER CITY — Western New Mexico University's president has agreed to resign. Joseph Shepard's resignation comes after a state audit found evidence of wasteful spending by top WNMU officials and regents that didn't comply with university rules. Shepard's last day will be Jan. 15. The Santa Fe New Mexican reports that Shepard's resignation comes with a one-time payment of $1.9 million and a new teaching job at the university. Shepard says the allegations against him were lies. State lawmakers started raising questions last year about Shepard's spending on international travel and high-end furniture. Regents have thrown their support behind Shepard despite the scrutiny. WNMU has said it takes its fiduciary responsibility seriously.

New York

WHAT DOES 'BIG TECH' HOPE TO GAIN FROM WARMING UP TO TRUMP?

NEW YORK — In a string of visits, dinners, calls, monetary pledges and social media overtures, big tech chiefs have joined a parade of business and world leaders in trying to improve their standing with President-elect Donald Trump before he takes office in January. The tech list includes Apple's Tim Cook, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, SoftBank's Masayoshi Son and Amazon's Jeff Bezos. Meanwhile, the list of what the executives may be hoping for includes an open path toward developing artificial intelligence, easier access to energy for data centers and an easing of antitrust enforcement.

Ohio

LAWMAKERS OK CHARGING UP TO $750 FOR POLICE AND JAIL VIDEOS

COLUMBUS — People seeking copies of police and jail videos in Ohio may have to pay up to $750 per department if Gov. Mike DeWine signs a measure approved by the state Legislature. The amendment to the state's sunshine laws was quietly introduced and passed last week by the GOP-controlled Legislature. It's not clear if the Republican governor supports it. A news media group is urging a veto. First Amendment and government transparency advocates said they were blindsided by the measure. These are public records, routinely provided for free or at little cost following a decades-old state court ruling.

Oregon

SHERIFF CONCERNED ABOUT LETTERS ASKING PEOPLE TO TRACK POSSIBLE IMMIGRANTS

LINCOLN CITY — A sheriff in rural, coastal Oregon says he's concerned about letters asking residents to collect information on immigrants. The Lincoln County Sheriff's Office says the letters have been circulating throughout the county. KPTV reports that the letter asks people to write down the license plate numbers of cars believed to belong to immigrants who might lack a permanent legal status. The sheriff and the mayor of a small town in the county were among those who received copies of the letter in their mailboxes. Sheriff Curtis Landers told KPTV that he has notified the FBI. Under Oregon's sanctuary law, local police are mostly prohibited from enforcing federal immigration law.

Texas

ABORTION FOES FOCUS ON PILLS WITH LAWSUITS, POSSIBLE FEDERAL ACTION

The battles over abortion in the U.S. are increasingly focusing on the pills that are now the most common way pregnancies are ended. Texas sued a New York doctor this month over a prescription to a Texas resident. It could become the first test of a shield law that New York and some other Democratic-controlled states have passed to protect medical providers who make that kind of prescription via telehealth. There's also a lawsuit aimed at rolling back federal approval for one of the drugs. And states are considering laws to make them harder to obtain for abortion.

Utah

HOMELAND SECURITY AGENT PLEADS NOT GUILTY TO DRUG DISTRIBUTION CHARGE

SALT LAKE CITY — Sen. Mitt Romney has given his final remarks after seeing the Republican Party for which he was once the standard bearer drastically transform under Donald Trump. At a news conference at his Salt Lake City office, the retiring senator reflected on his two-decade political career, which included the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, a term as Massachusetts governor and several skirmishes with Trump loyalists in Congress. Romney, 77, chose not to run for reelection this year after representing Utah in the Senate since 2019.

Wisconsin

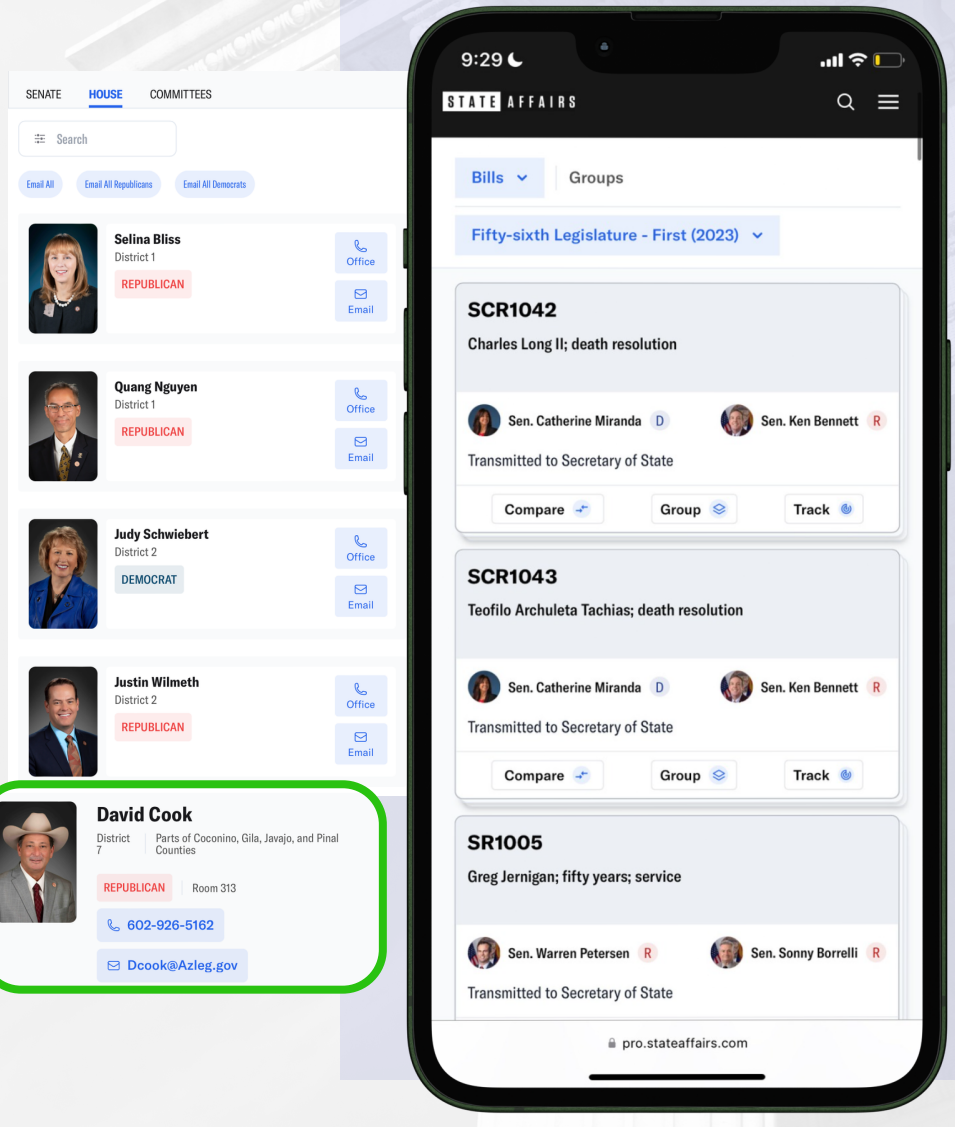
GOVERNOR APPOINTS NATURAL RESOURCES CHIEF AFTER YEARLONG SEARCH

MADISON — Democratic Gov. Tony Evers has finally selected a new leader for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Evers announced that he has appointed Karyn Hyun as the agency's secretary. The position has been vacant since Adam Payne quit in early November 2023 after just 10 months on the job. Tensions between the DNR and Republican legislators have run high since Evers first took office in 2019. The GOP has criticized the agency for everything from overregulating pollution to buying too much land for preservation. A spokesperson for Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu didn't immediately respond to an email inquiring about Hyun's chances of being confirmed. She can serve unconfirmed until the Senate votes to reject her.

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