

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Sean Scully](#)

It's Super Tuesday, when 15 states (and 1 U.S. territory) are conducting elections. One state, Iowa, is using today to announce the results of the mail-in only Democratic caucus. As it turns out, polls are closing in most states after this newsletter arrives in your inbox, so we will have more Super Tuesday news tomorrow. Let's see what else is happening.



The Big Takeaway

News coverage tends to focus on national issues (Trump vs. Biden. Congress vs. itself, and so on) but in many ways the real action is in the states. And that's where States Newsroom comes in. So let's visit some states today.



*Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry won so much that he might just get tired of winning.
(Hillary Scheinuck/The Advocate, Pool)*

In Louisiana, Republicans control the governor's office and have a supermajority in the legislature, meaning they were able to do as they wished in a nine-day special session dedicated to a package of get-tough crime bills.

The Louisiana Illuminator [takes a look at the winners and losers](#) in the session.

The really big winner was the new Republican Gov. Jeff Landry.

“Fresh off an overwhelming victory in a low turnout election, Landry is currently at the peak of his power with less than two months in office,” the Illuminator writes. “Unlike his [mixed bag of a special session on election matters](#) in January, the Republican governor took nearly all Ws in the crime session.”

The big losers? The pitifully outnumbered Democrats.

“The position Democrats find themselves in comes from, in large part, the

legislative redistricting plans adopted in 2022, which redrew House and Senate maps to support Republican supermajorities in both chambers,” the Illuminator writes. “A federal judge ruled last month both versions violate the Voting Rights Act.”

But the judge has yet to say what to do about that violation, so for the moment, Republicans reign supreme in Baton Rouge.

Check out the other winners and losers [here](#).



Climate Action groups cried foul last month after utility companies sponsored a national conference of state energy regulators in Washington, D.C.

(Photo by Robert Zullo/States Newsroom)

As home energy prices spike, and as scandals shake the political establishment in several states, legislators across the country are trying to rein in the free-flowing spending on lobbyists by power utilities, [Stateline reports](#).

“It absolutely is a growing trend,” said Matt Kasper, deputy director of the Energy and Policy Institute. “There’s a lot of eyes on the industry, how it’s operating.”

The institute published a report last year showing how the richly funded utilities are stepping in to stymie new regulations, block competition from renewable energy, and even swing elections against unfriendly lawmakers or elected regulators.

Some of this is legal and some isn't (such as [the \\$61 million in bribes paid by an Ohio utility](#) to get lawmakers to pass a \$1 billion bailout of its nuclear plant).

“Utilities are often using their ratepayer-funded political machines to slow the nation’s urgently-needed transition away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy,” the Energy & Policy Institute wrote. “Working hand-in-hand with their trade associations, the Edison Electric Institute and American Gas Association, utilities continue to fight tooth-and-nail against policies that enable the adoption of essential technologies like rooftop solar power, energy efficiency and building electrification.”

At least a dozen states are considering laws and regulations that would limit such ratepayer-funded lobbying, Stateline writes.

In Maryland, for example, lawmakers are considering a bill preventing utilities from using customer money to lobby. Michigan would go even farther, considering a bill to ban regulated utilities from lobbying at all, no matter where the money comes from.

Of course, the very lobbying juggernaut that lawmakers are trying to regulate is working against the reforms. In Virginia, for example, bills to prevent candidates from accepting contributions from energy companies died a quiet death in the General Assembly.

Despite several well-reported corruption scandals, energy companies deny that they have any venal motives.

“We engage on their behalf through lobbying, advocacy and regulatory proceedings as part of our work to ensure that electricity customers have the affordable, reliable and resilient clean energy they want and need. Engaging in discussions with policymakers and regulators is essential to achieving these outcomes,” spokeswoman Sarah Durdaller said in a statement from trade group Edison Electric Institute. “We bring unique expertise and insights on how policy proposals will affect business operations, the cost for capital, and, ultimately, our customers.”



Nevada's pandemic-era program to buy food from in-state producers to give to food banks may run out of money before lawmakers meet next year to consider extending it, officials say.

(Photo courtesy Abraham Mehring)

In Nevada, a program passed at the height of the pandemic has proven popular, directing state money to buy locally grown food for the state's food banks. Residents and food banks like it because they get fresh meat and produce and farmers and ranchers like it because it supports local agriculture.

So far, [the Nevada Current reports](#), the program has snapped up 2.3 million pounds of Nevada-grown and processed food and pumped \$3.5 million into the state's agricultural economy.

But the funding that flowed so freely during the pandemic is running out. The program was seeded by \$2 million from the federal American Rescue Plan, officials told lawmakers this week, but when that is gone, the state will need to step in to keep the program alive.

“These dollars ... we're trying to stretch them out, so we don't see a fiscal cliff before we get to another legislative session and seek additional funding,” Julian Joseph Goicoechea, the director of the Nevada Department of Agriculture, told lawmakers on the Joint Interim Standing Committee on Natural Resources.

Nevada's legislature doesn't meet again until next year, meaning the program will have to wait to see if the state saves it.

In Indiana, lawmakers are looking at a different kind of protection for farmers.

A bill to limit foreign ownership of agricultural land has been sailing through the legislature, [the Indiana Capital Chronicle reports](#), but some critics are worried that it may end up killing beneficial and lucrative economic development projects.

“[House Bill 1183](#) would prohibit entities or people from six “adversarial countries” — a list that the U.S. Department of Commerce defines as Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Cuba and Venezuela — from owning or leasing Hoosier farmland along with mineral, riparian or water rights,” the Capital Chronicle writes.

But some lawmakers want to carve out exemptions, including a proposal to allow local governments to authorize waivers of the law. Sen. Mike Bohacek, R-Michiana Shores, said his community has spent \$15 million on infrastructure upgrades to allow a Chinese-owned company to build a corn milling plant. That would create local jobs and also allow farmers to avoid long drives to more distant markets.

“To not allow the locals an exception to be able to determine their own financial future with the investment they've made in their industrial parks,” Bohacek said. “This kind of thing can happen to your communities — it's just mine today.”

Backers of the bill say the issue goes well beyond economic development — it's a question of national security.

“I think we need to be careful that we don't have too many carve-outs of the legislation or it's going to obviously weaken it ... The focus of this bill is to be a little more selective about who we allow into Indiana to do business,” sponsor Rep. Kendall Culp, R-Rensselaer, said.

State Your Business

- [\(Missouri\) Florissant homes built on Coldwater Creek may sit on radioactive contamination](#)
- [New Mexico's biggest districts ask for public input on budgets](#)

- [\(South Dakota\) State House bans senator for breach of decorum](#)



Also Trending

You didn't think we could get through Super Tuesday without talking about elections, did you?

Residents in 18 of South Dakota's 66 counties are circulating petitions to allow voters to ban voting machines and require hand counting of all ballots, [South Dakota Searchlight reports](#). State law requires counties to put questions on the ballot if at least 5% of registered voters sign a petition in favor.

“These citizens who have been disenfranchised by their county commissioners – not listening or addressing their concerns – found another way to bring it to a vote of the people of South Dakota,” said Jessica Pollema, president of South Dakota Canvassing, which is helping organize the drives.

The effort stems from claims, for which there is no evidence, that the 2020 and 2022 elections were subject to widespread fraud and that electronic voting machines are subject to errors or hacking.

Election officials say there is no evidence of fraud and that hand counts are notoriously difficult and inaccurate. And anyway, state law already bans hand counts and federal law requires electronic machines for people with disabilities. In the two counties where the petitions have already been filed, the machine ban does not include an exception for voters with disabilities.

Lawmakers are working on a bill to allow local officials to reject such petitions, heading off votes that would clash with existing law.

“We want to make sure we're not passing something that we know from the start is illegal, because then the county or city will have to defend something they know is illegal,” South Dakota Association of County Commissioners lobbyist Eric Erickson told lawmakers in a committee hearing for the bill last week. “And often, if you're messing with someone's constitutional rights you're stuck paying attorney fees on both sides.”



*Some South Dakotans want to put this machine out of a job.
(Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)*

In Kansas, the Republican Senate leader is trying to head off an effort to add a voting machine ban to an election security bill, [the Kansas Reflector reports](#).

The bill started out relatively narrow — ending a three-day grace period for mail-in ballots to arrive in election offices and limiting the use of ballot drop boxes. But then GOP Sen. Mark Steffen of Hutchinson proposed requiring only hand counts in all elections.

Senate President Ty Masterson warned his colleagues that election security legislation was already a tempting veto target for Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly. He urged a no vote on Steffen's idea, at the same time as he expressed sympathy for his colleagues' eagerness to pass an election bill.

"This amendment will put the anchor around this," Masterson said. "A vote against the amendment is not a vote against the issue."

Steffen responded with scorn, repeating baseless election conspiracy theories

and saying the Senate leader's words demonstrated a lack of aggression in preventing fraud.

"They're an incredibly, beautifully verbose commitment to mediocrity," Steffen said. "Pure and simple. Mediocrity at its finest."



Don't worry, I am here to make your elections better. Promise.

(Photo by Tomohiro Ohsumi/Getty Images)

In Alaska, election experts said artificial intelligence can improve the nation's election system — or make a big mess out of it, [the Alaska Beacon reports](#).

"It's inherently a great tool. But there are people who are using it in nefarious ways, which is what happens with all powerful tools that are out there," said Amber Lee, a [marketing consultant](#) with extensive campaign experience, at a daylong conference sponsored by the [Alaska Small Business Development Center](#).

On the positive side, experts at the panel said, AI "can identify blocs of swing voters or neglected voters, for example," the Beacon writes. "It can be employed as a fact-checking tool to counter falsehoods, another example of constructive use. And it can save campaign workers time that might be devoted to minutia in the same way that it saves time for businesses, scientists and others using

artificial intelligence to process data, they said.”

Former U.S. Sen. Mark Begich, however, sounded a grimmer note.

The ability of AI to generate plausible but totally false writing and images could easily swamp legitimate information.

“Fake news becomes real news. Real news becomes history in that transition,” he said.

Washington has failed to regulate AI effectively and traditional media business models have fragmented, leaving bad actors much more room to cause harm.

“Who will hold them accountable as the free press continues to disintegrate into oblivion?” he asked. It will not be cable news or streaming news, as that is all opinion, he said. “So the accountability is missing in this equation and it’s not getting better; it’s getting worse.”

What to do? One former Alaska politician said candidates and political parties will have to return to old-fashioned methods like direct personal outreach to voters, which cannot be faked.

“It’s about human connection, going door-to-door, knocking on doors and looking in their eyes,” said Andrew Halcro, a former Republican state representative who ran for governor in 2006. “As a former candidate, I can’t tell you how many people told me, ‘I voted for you because you were the only person who knocked on my door.’”

Whether it is used for good or ill, said John Bittner, executive director of the Alaska Small Business Development Center, we’ll just have to learn to live with AI.

“The technology is so ubiquitous and so easy to use that there’s no way to stop it at this point,” Bittner said.



*Vote here. And here. And here. And there too.
(Photo by Natasha Khan/Cronkite News)*

In Arizona, Republican lawmakers say they want to boost election security by creating small, easy to manage precincts. They want to limit each voting precinct to just 1,000 voters, [the Arizona Mirror reports.](#)

GOP lawmakers, driven by evidence-free conspiracy theories, allege that the state's current large regional voter centers are hotbeds of fraud and error. Forcing voters to cast their ballots in old-school precincts would end such problems.

Election officials were quick to call the idea “a step backwards” for Arizona's election system.

And anyway, critics pointed out, with 4.1 million registered voters, the state would need to create at least 4,100 voting locations.

“It's already a huge problem for counties to find poll workers,” said Democratic Sen. Priya Sundareshan, of Tucson.



From The Newsrooms

Healthcare

- [Questions about LB 574 combining abortion and gender-care restrictions reach Nebraska Supreme Court](#)
- [\(Michigan\) Washtenaw, Wayne Counties report measles cases, offer info on potential exposures](#)
- [Judge: Iowa hospice program told worker to 'let people die'](#)
- [Absence of AI hospital rules worries nurses](#)

Civil Rights

- [\(Minnesota\) MPD union leader disciplined for failing to report misconduct](#)
- [\(North Carolina\) 'Johnston County is Klan Country,' expert says in Racial Justice Act hearing](#)
- [Pennsylvania state police to expedite body camera rollout after Philly official's excessive force claim](#)
- [\(Tennessee\) Gillespie postpones bill overturning Memphis ordinance to end police 'textual' stops](#)

Education

- [Critical race theory once again debated by Missouri Senators](#)
- [Contentious antisemitism bill passes Indiana Senate, heads for further negotiations in House](#)
- [\(Kentucky\) Foster parents working from home could qualify for child care subsidies under bill clearing Senate committee](#)
- [\(Nevada\) UNLV failure to remove pro-Palestine protestors from lecture violates policy, groups say](#)



One Last Thing

Facebook and other social media sites run by parent company Meta went down for several hours this morning, as voters were headed to the polls in Super Tuesday states.

The outage caused widespread confusion, with many users fearing their accounts had been hacked.

“We are recovering from an earlier outage impacting Facebook Login, and services are in the process of being restored,” said Meta on its [status page](#), [according to Gizmodo](#). “We apologize for any inconvenience that this may have caused.”

Even the White House got involved, assuring the media that this did not appear to be an attack on the election.

“We are aware of the incident and at this time we are not aware of any specific election nexus or any specific malicious cyber activity,” a senior Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency official said during a press call.



See? I told you I'd make it all better. You're welcome.

(Photo by Tomohiro Ohsumi/Getty Images)

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