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## NEWS

# What to know about two Oklahoma state questions on the November ballot



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Two state questions on the Nov. 5 ballot will ask Oklahoma voters to redefine who is a “qualified elector” and address public infrastructure needs for cities.

State Question 834, the more controversial of the pair, seeks to change who qualifies as a voter. The proposed change lands amid a nationwide push by GOP lawmakers to raise questions about who is being allowed to vote and how accurate election results are.

Supporters say the measure is necessary to prohibit noncitizens from voting in elections, but critics say it’s a solution looking for a problem when audits routinely show the state’s voting system is secure.

The Oklahoma Constitution currently defines a qualified elector — the qualifications that a person must meet to vote — as “*all* citizens of the United States over the age of eighteen years who are bona fide residents” of the state.

If passed, the definition would change to: “*Only* citizens of the United States *who are* over the age of eighteen years *and* who are bona fide residents” of Oklahoma.

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State lawmakers proposed the change this past legislative session and used Senate Joint Resolution 23. The measure had 69 legislators, all Republicans, sign onto the legislation. House Speaker Charles McCall, R-Atoka, said in a statement the joint resolution makes it “crystal clear that we want only legal citizens voting in Oklahoma elections.”

Another backer, Rep. Jon Echols, R-Oklahoma City, acknowledged at a recent news conference that Oklahoma does not have noncitizens voting in its elections. But he said that

since it had been allowed in the past, they want to stop it from ever happening again.

Echols was referring to a time when non-U.S. citizens were allowed to vote in about 40 states up until the 1920s. A federal law in 1996 prohibits anyone who is not a legal U.S. citizen from voting in federal elections, according to the National Immigration Forum.

“I think Oklahoma has the best election system in the United States,” he said as he was surrounded by other supporters. “As a matter of fact, the members that are here have never stopped trying to do things to make sure we have the safest, secure, most accurate elections.”

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Sen. Shane Jett, R-Shawnee, said the way the statute's language is written right now is not exclusionary. “We want to make sure that it is clear the will of the people is that only citizens vote,” he said. “We want to make sure that silliness doesn’t end up here in Norman, Oklahoma City or Tulsa.”

There is no evidence that people who are not legal U.S. citizens have voted in recent Oklahoma elections, said James Davenport, a political science professor at Rose State University.

Gov. Kevin Stitt and the Oklahoma State Election Board announced in September that more than 453,500 names over the last four years were purged from the voter rolls due to moving counties or states, inactivity, death, duplicate registration and felony conviction. The announcement did not say anything about removing noncitizens from the rolls.

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A state task force on election security and campaign reform released a report in March that concluded recounts and post-election audits have proven the accuracy of Oklahoma’s voting devices.

A more recent audit confirmed the accuracy of the state's voting system “with a 100% match of the certified election results” after the June primary election. Post-election audits are a routine part of the election process in Oklahoma.

Emily Stacey, a colleague of Davenport at Rose State University, described the proposed changes to who qualifies to vote as virtue-signaling by backers to appeal to a particular demographic of people who are unduly concerned with noncitizens voting.

“The change from ‘all’ to ‘only’ gives a sense of exclusivity that folks convinced of substantial immigrant voter fraud will immediately cheer, but it is a semantical change only,” she said.

But it could also signal that election integrity is being taken seriously by the Legislature, he said.

Oklahoma Democratic Party Chair Alicia Andrews, who worked as a precinct worker for years, said when she first heard about the question, she viewed it as a scare tactic that would cause people to question the value of their vote.

“If we get around to the certifying of the election and people say no, it will be easier to convince people that our process isn’t worth certifying because ‘Oh my gosh, we were letting people who weren’t supposed to vote, vote up until this point,’ she said. “It plants the seed, and it makes it easier to believe.”

## **Cities might get boost for infrastructure under State Question 833**

The second question on the ballot, State Question 833, would create public infrastructure districts. The idea is to provide cities and towns of any size a new way to finance improvements such as street, water, sewer, parking and other amenities. The cost to build and maintain the improvements would be repaid by the properties that benefit from them.

The areas must be within city limits and would require agreement from every landowner before anything can be done. City officials would oversee the board of trustees of the infrastructure district.

Specifics of how the districts will be implemented would be decided in the next legislative session if the measure passes. The soonest it could be used is likely November 2025.

Sen. John Haste, R-Broken Arrow, who authored the Senate Joint Resolution 16 that became the ballot measure, said the idea comes from a need for more housing and in turn, addressing infrastructure. Especially in rural areas, cities can have a hard time getting financing nailed down for public infrastructure projects, he said. Fast-growing cities like Edmond and Broken Arrow also need a way to keep up with growth, he said.

Other states like Missouri have done this successfully, he said.

“It’s like adding an additional tool to the tool belt, and it just gives another option,” he said.  
“It’s not like one thing is going to change everything.”