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Thursday, 21 March, 2013

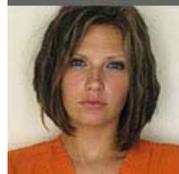
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Election Commission rescinds plan to review voter citizenship

Thursday, March 21, 2013 at 4:14pm

By [Steven Hale](#)



The Davidson County Election Commission has decided not to go ahead with a controversial plan to review the citizenship of recently registered voters who were born outside of the United States.

The commission voted 3-2 a month ago approving a proposal from Commissioner Steve Abernathy to ask the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security to single out those voters for examination. Abernathy has expressed concern that non-U.S. citizens are ending up on the rolls unlawfully.

By voting Thursday to rescind that vote, the commission abandoned a move that Metro attorneys called "constitutionally suspect" and said would likely have violated the National Voter Registration Act — commonly known as the motor voter act.

The state is currently undergoing it's own review of the voter registration rolls, and commissioners said Thursday they've been told to expect the results of that study by the end of April. Abernathy expressed frustration about the three elections — many involving close races — that have taken place over the 14 months the commission has been waiting on the state's study. But he told reporters that he saw Thursday's outcome as a victory, because the commission will eventually get the information he was seeking.

"I felt like that it was important that we be able to ensure that our voter rolls are accurate," he said. "People that are here legally, that haven't obtained their citizenship, shouldn't be registered to vote and the motor voter act clearly creates situations where they may in fact have that occur."

Abernathy said he believes between 3,000 and 10,000 non-U.S. citizens could be unlawfully registered to vote because of what he described as a flawed system. The so-called motor voter act requires states to give individuals the opportunity to register to vote when they go to apply for or renew a driver's license. As a result, Abernathy said, some immigrants who are in the country legally but have not yet become citizens may register when presented with the opportunity, believing they must be legally allowed to do so. In that case, Abernathy said, legal immigrants might also be unknowingly putting themselves at risk of deportation.

Now, Abernathy said he will wait on the results of the state's review. He raised the possibility of taking legal action if the state does not act within a reasonable time frame, but said he hopes it won't come to that and doesn't believe it will.

Immigrant rights groups, and other activists, many of whom crowded into the meeting Thursday requiring the use of overflow rooms supplied with audio of the proceedings, were pleased with the commission's decision to abandon a plan they have said was discriminatory.



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"We applaud today's decision by the Election Commission to protect the citizens of Davidson County," said Stephanie Teatro, director of advocacy for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. "As a county that strives to be world-class and welcoming, we should work to facilitate the civic engagement of New Tennesseans, not create discriminatory barriers to full participation. Today's reversal is a step in the right direction."



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