

La. won't provide voters' personal info

State declines to help Trump's fraud inquiry

BY MARK BALLARD

Louisiana joined about two dozen states in refusing to turn over personal information about voters for President Donald Trump's election fraud investigation.

Secretary of State Tom Schedler, who like Trump is a Republican, made his announcement Monday afternoon after his office's attorneys reviewed last week's sweeping request for voter information by the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity. The information sought includes Social Security numbers, the maiden names of mothers and dates of birth.

"The President's Commission has quickly politicized its work by asking states for an incredible amount of voter data that I have, time and time again, refused to release," Schedler said in a statement. "My response to the Commission is, you're not going to play politics with Louisiana's voter data, and if you are, then you can purchase the limited public information available by law, to any candidate running for office. That's it." Louisiana's public voter list includes only names, addresses, party affiliation and voter history. Voter history indicates whether people participated in previous elections, not how they voted.

Later Monday afternoon, Maryland announced it too would refuse to share access to private voter information, saying it was prohibited by state law.

Louisiana and Maryland joined about two dozen states that are either flat-out refusing or are limiting what data they will provide.

The rest of the states, including Arkansas and Alabama, remain undecided. Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos tweeted Monday morning: "No info has been provided to the Commission yet. We are looking into all options & will take the full amount of time given to respond."

States were given until July 14 to hand over a dozen or so points of information about individual voters held in the files of elections officials.

The resistance crosses party lines.

Mississippi Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann, a Republican in a deep-red, Trump-supporting state, told the commission to "to jump in the Gulf of Mexico. ... Mississippi residents should celebrate Independence Day and our state's right to protect the privacy of our citizens by conducting our own electoral processes."

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat whose state strongly backed Hillary Clinton for president, tweeted last week: "NY refuses to perpetuate the myth voter fraud played a role in our election. We will not comply with this request."

Trump, however, was not satisfied, tweeting over the weekend: "Numerous states are refusing to give information to the very distinguished VOTER FRAUD PANEL. What are they trying to hide?" And White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters the opposition to providing the data is "mostly about a political stunt."

The commission, created by Trump in May, is led by Vice President Mike Pence and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, a Republican.

In November's presidential election, Clinton won 65.8 million votes to Trump's 62.9 million. But Trump garnered 304 electoral votes to Clinton's 227, giving him the victory.

Trump said he would have won the popular vote too "if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."

"What's going on with voter fraud is horrible," Trump told ABC News in a January interview. "You have people that are registered who are dead, who are illegals, who are in two states. You have people registered in two states. They're registered in a New York and a New Jersey. They vote twice. There are millions of votes, in my opinion."

State elections officials acknowledge that occasional voter cheating slips through the protections but point to numerous studies and audits that show fraud is not widespread - certainly nowhere near the millions of instances the president claims.

Writing as the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, co-signed a letter raising concerns that the unprecedented scope of the information request would violate privacy rights and could lead to voter suppression.

"In addition to being used to conduct further discriminatory voter

purges, one shudders to think of the many ways this information could be misused," Richmond wrote the National Association of Secretaries of State. "We believe it is imperative that you place the interests of your own voters and the United States Constitution above any ill-thought partisan effort to disenfranchise American voters and justify President Trump's grossly inaccurate misstatement that 3-5 million unauthorized immigrants had robbed him of a popular vote majority."

Schedler said denying the Trump commission the information mirrors efforts he made to protect Louisiana voter data from President Barack Obama administration's Department of Justice.

In July 2011, the U.S. Justice Department filed a lawsuit against the state, claiming it wasn't exerting "sufficient vigor" to register as voters people who received state benefits. The Justice Department was demanding much of the same information now being sought. The request was later withdrawn.

"I denied the Obama Justice Department's request and I'm denying President Trump's commission's request because they are both politically motivated," Schedler said. "The release of private information creates a tremendous breach of trust with voters who work hard to protect themselves against identity fraud. That's why it is protected by six federal laws and two state laws. This Commission needs to understand clearly, disclosure of such sensitive information is more likely to diminish voter participation rather than foster it."