

Misinformation, violence and a paper shortage threaten midterm elections, officials say

Written by Wisconsin Examiner Republish
Friday, 20 May 2022 07:49 -

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“They are giving those who want to sow violence, doubt and misdirection in the election process ... political camouflage for their threats and their attacks.” – Damon Hewitt of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

MADISON - Members of a U.S. Senate panel and election administrators raised a bevy of concerns Thursday about the challenges elections officials will face this fall, saying problems ranging from a lack of paper to coordinated misinformation campaigns could affect confidence in U.S. democracy.

A bipartisan panel of current and former elections officials and experts told the Senate Rules and Administration Committee that state officials face threats of physical violence, while dealing with misinformation, supply chain challenges and funding shortfalls — making the administration of this year’s midterm elections more difficult.

Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat, listed those developments at the start of the hearing. She highlighted threats that have led Colorado officials to receive active shooter training and obtain bullet-proof vests, with morale among elections administrators nationwide worryingly low.

“In light of these challenges, we must support the election officials working on the front lines of

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our democracy,” Klobuchar said.

In addition to relatively new concerns related to holding elections in a pandemic, ranking Republican Roy Blunt of Missouri noted foreign and domestic adversaries persist in targeting election infrastructure and spreading online misinformation.

Violence sparked by online sources

Damon Hewitt, the president and executive director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, said misinformation remained an issue in administering elections.

Online misinformation [inspired the racist killer of 10 Black people at a Buffalo grocery store](#) last weekend, and has led to threats against elections bureaucrats, he said.

Recently passed state laws limiting ballot access in the name of election security also arose from unfounded misinformation, Hewitt said. The laws, passed in many Republican-led states since the 2020 elections, lend legitimacy to theories that elections are not secure, he added, worsening the risk of violence.

“They are giving those who want to sow violence, doubt and misdirection in the election process ... political camouflage for their threats and their attacks,” he said. “Put simply, these laws undermine our democracy and its promise.”

Wesley Wilcox, the Republican supervisor of elections for Marion County, Florida, said he also had been subjected to threats, despite the state’s strong performance in the 2020 election cycle.

“Florida was touted as the gold standard and model for voting in the 2020 election,” he said. “But lately the accolades have waned and high-fives for job well done have ceased. Instead, they’ve been replaced by threats of violence against us or our families.”

There’s not even enough paper

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One new problem for this election cycle is the supply chain backlog, which has limited elections offices' access to a basic but crucial item needed for elections: paper.

Louisiana Secretary of State R. Kyle Ardoin, a Republican, said his state had to contact every paper producer in North America "to ensure we will have the supplies we need."

"This is a crisis that demands immediate attention and bipartisan action," Ardoin said. "It is not an exaggeration to say that if this situation is not handled, it could lead to a serious erosion in the confidence of our elections."

The increase in voting by mail has only heightened the need for paper supplies, Ardoin said. That was one reason to promote in-person voting, he said.

Leigh M. Chapman, the acting secretary of state for Pennsylvania appointed by Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf, declared Tuesday's primary elections in the commonwealth a success, "with minimal issues."

One issue, though, a breakdown in Lancaster County's process for counting 22,000 early-vote ballots that required those ballots to be hand-counted, reinforced a request from Chapman's department to allow pre-canvassing.

Pre-canvassing is the process of election officials counting ballots that have come in before Election Day. While 37 states allow pre-canvassing, Pennsylvania is among those that do not, making it harder for election officials in the commonwealth to report vote totals earlier and deal with Election Day issues as they come up, Chapman said.

She added that Florida's pre-canvassing regime allowed election watchers to call the state in the 2020 presidential election on Election Day. Major networks didn't call the result in Pennsylvania, by contrast, until four days later.

Big Lie barely mentioned

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Senators and a witness panel made up of current and former state election officials mostly avoided discussion of former President Donald Trump's false claims about malfeasance in the 2020 election that caused his loss. The false narrative has gained prominence within the Republican Party nationwide, including among elected officials and candidates in this year's election.

While not mentioning Trump or his supporters by name, Chapman said it was "especially disturbing" that some disinformation has come from those "with a sworn duty to defend our democratic process." She was clear about the integrity of the 2020 election and the harm that lies about voter malfeasance cause to confidence in U.S. democracy.

"The November 2020 election in Pennsylvania, like every election since, was free, fair and secure," she said. "Allegations of illegal activity in Pennsylvania's 2020 presidential election have been repeatedly dismissed in more than two dozen federal court cases and debunked by independent fact-checkers. Repeating this falsehood over and over harms our democracy and voters' confidence in our elections process."

Senators aired familiar partisan arguments about voting accessibility and security during portions of the hearing.

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, a Republican of Texas, said that expanding nontraditional avenues of voting, like mail-in voting, was inviting fraud.

"Democrats keep moving in the direction of election chaos," he said.

Ardoin told Cruz his office couldn't quickly enough process absentee ballots to be sure that they were legitimate.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, an Oregon Democrat, asked Chapman if mail-in ballots had presented any problems in this week's primary elections.

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She answered they had not.

Wilcox said in an opening statement his goal was to make it easy to vote, but hard to cheat.

Alex Padilla, a Democrat who joined the Senate after serving as the California secretary of state, told Wilcox that slogan can be used as a pretext to restrict voting rights, with too much attention paid to stopping nearly nonexistent cheating and not enough focus on making voting easier.

“If you look at data, we’ve got the harder-to-cheat part down because voter fraud in America is exceedingly rare,” he said. “What I first get frustrated by is my colleagues forget about the first part, the easier-to-vote part.”

by Jacob Fischler, [Wisconsin Examiner](#)
May 20, 2022

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