

State election officials worry about 2018 election security

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In this March 15, 2016, file photo, people line up to vote in the primary at a precinct in Bradfordton, Il. State election officials from across the U.S. are gathering this weekend in Indianapolis amid an uproar over a White House commission investigating allegations of voter fraud and heightened concern about Russian attempts to interfere with last fall's election. (AP Photo/Seth Perlman, File)

State election officials voiced doubt Saturday that adequate security

measures can be adopted before 2018 elections to safeguard against the possibility of a foreign government interfering in U.S. elections.

That's according to attendees at a weekend gathering of the National Association of Secretaries of State, whose conference was held amid an uproar over a White House commission investigating President Donald Trump's allegations of voter fraud and heightened concern about Russian attempts to interfere in U.S. elections.

The Department of Homeland Security said last fall that hackers believed to be Russian agents targeted voter registration systems in more than 20 states. And a leaked National Security Agency document from May said Russian military intelligence had attempted to hack into [voter registration](#) software used in eight states.

But both Republican and Democratic Secretaries of State, who are responsible for carrying out elections in many states, said they have been frustrated in recent months by a lack of information from federal intelligence officials on allegations of Russian meddling with the vote. They say that despite the best efforts by federal officials, it may be too late in to make substantive changes.

"I'm doubtful," said Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap, a Democrat. "We shouldn't feel like we've been tied to a chair and blindfolded ... It's very hard to help further instill public confidence that you know what you're doing if you don't have any information."

The conference in Indianapolis, which began Friday, is being attended by officials from 37 states. The FBI and Homeland Security attempted to allay fears by holding a series of closed-door meetings Saturday on voting security.

"This is a new thing and it takes a while to get things running and

everybody talking," said Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, a Republican. "I think this is something we will build on and it will get better over time."

There is no indication so far that voting or ballot counting was affected in the November election, but officials are concerned that the Russians may have gained knowledge that could help them disrupt future elections.

The gathering took place while Trump was in Germany for the Group of 20 summit, which included a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who said Saturday that he thinks Trump accepted his assurances that Russia didn't meddle in the U.S. presidential election.

It also comes one week after the commission investigating Trump's allegations of election fraud requested voter information from all 50 states, drawing bipartisan blowback. The request seeks dates of birth, partial Social Security numbers, addresses, voting histories, military service and other information about every voter in the country.

Trump has repeatedly stated without proof that he believes millions of fraudulent ballots were cast in the November [election](#), when he carried the Electoral College but lost the popular vote to Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The commission was launched to investigate those claims and is being chaired by Vice President Mike Pence and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who sent the information requests.

"I do think that this is an odd time to be forming a national database of some kind if we're so concerned about security," said Connecticut Secretary of State Denise Merrill, a Democrat.

The U.S. does not have a federalized voting system, relying instead on 9,000 different voting jurisdictions and more than 185,000 individual precincts. Officials believe that makes it difficult for hackers to have any major effect on the vote. If Kobach succeeds in obtaining the information he seeks, it could gather voter data for the entire U.S. in one centralized place.

Kobach was not in attendance at the weekend event and could not be reached for comment, prompting Democrats to reiterate their skepticism of the commission's intent. They expressed concern that the information could be used to justify stringent new voter security procedures making it more difficult for people to cast a ballot.

Dunlap, who is a member of Trump's commission, says Kobach's push for the voter data "spooked" people because it impacts "how individual citizens feel about their sovereign right to democratic self-governance."

That includes some of Kobach's fellow Republicans.

"We still have some questions that need to be answered that only Kris Kobach can answer," said Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill, a Republican who has yet to determine whether his office will release the data. "I don't think he made a good decision in this effort because of the way he chose to go through with it."

It remains unclear exactly how the data will be used for. Pence spokesman Marc Lotter said the commission will look for potential irregularities in voter registrations and advise states on how they can improve their practices.

But many secretaries of state say all or parts of the requested data are not public in their states. Some Democrats have said the commission is merely trying to provide cover for Trump's unsubstantiated claims of

[voter](#) fraud.

Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have said they will refuse to provide the information sought by the commission. The other [states](#) are undecided or will provide some of the data, according to a tally of every state by The Associated Press.

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