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Editorial | Our View

Don't surrender state voter data

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Fourth of July fireworks at Ala Moana.

Every Independence Day, citizens of the U.S. reflect on what unites them as a nation — but there is another part of the American story. This is a federal republic, which means there are separate roles played by the states and the federal government.

Which government should fulfill which function has been a perennial subject for political debate, but on one point there is little disagreement: Regulation of elections

rests with the states.

The fact that there's broad agreement on this helps to explain why a federal commission's effort to acquire personal voter data from across the country has drawn protest from most states.

All the uproar stems from the formation of a White House Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, which reportedly has canvassed all 50 states to gain election data, including some personal information.

The initiative has arisen from President Donald Trump's assertion that mammoth voter fraud, involving 3 to 5 million voters, occurred during the 2016 election, despite the absence of supportive evidence.

As of Wednesday, the state Office of Elections still had not received the letter, from the commission. But based on reports from other states, Gov. David Ige has signaled our state wouldn't share the requested data.

This is a stance justifiable not only by concerns about security but on general principles, as well.

State elections staffers have said that the only information Hawaii would treat as public would be the voters' names, district precinct and voting status. That third category would include whether the voter's registration is current or "inactive." This could mean that the voter may not have confirmed their information, such as address, as up to date.

But the federal commission's fishing expedition goes much further. The governor's office cited a copy of the letter sent to the Connecticut secretary of state.

The letter, signed by the panel's vice chairman Kris Kobach, starts with a list of election-related questions. The letter requests any recommended changes to federal election laws, what commission support was needed for information technology security, any

evidence of voter fraud in the state, the record of election-related crimes in the state and other broad concerns.

But in the next paragraph, Kobach requests "the publicly-available voter roll data" — if it's a public document in the state — which would entail what Hawaii would consider public, and much more.

This means full names with available middle names or initials, addresses, dates of birth, political party (if recorded by the state), the last four digits of the Social Security number, voter history, information on felony convictions, voter registration in another state, military status and any overseas citizen information.

Clearly, some of this data is sufficiently sensitive to cause concern about identity theft, should the information not be kept securely, and the states have no real assurance of security.

State law does make a minimal data release permissible, but such statutes never intended for the information to become part of a national database. American voters have reason to fear this information will not be safeguarded for long, given the revelation by U.S. intelligence agencies that U.S. data have been hacked by Russian operatives.

It's possible that the data-farming mission won't proceed, in any case, because of legal problems. For example, some experts noted that the request was not submitted through the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, which violates a federal law.

If the project is spiked for that reason, so much the better. If not, Hawaii should resist any strong-arm tactics to wrangle data from states, based on the misbegotten notion that it's any of the federal government's business.

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