

Heinrich joins forces with Collins over Russia interference, elections security

Written by By Matthew Reichbach NM Political Report
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During the 2016 election, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security didn't know which state officials to communicate with to relay the threat of attempted Russian interference.

That confusion is one thing U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich wants to fix with the Securing America's Voting Equipment (SAVE) Act, which he introduced with Maine Republican Senator Susan Collins.

"I think overall, over the course of the last few decades, we may have become complacent as a country as to the potential for this," Heinrich said of attempts to influence elections in the United States.

"There were cases where they were maybe engaged with the wrong decisionmaker or talking to the vendor instead of, say a secretary of state or a county clerk," Heinrich said. "Just getting all

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of that written down in a way that sort of provides a roadmap for a real-time event so that the response is quick provides a lot of advantages.”

If passed, the legislation would strengthen the security of the country’s elections system, which are not centrally run by the federal government, but by state and local officials.

The bill doesn’t tell states how to run their elections, Heinrich said.

The elections system’s vulnerabilities were tested during the 2016 election.

Federal officials told 21 states they were targeted by Russian hackers in 2016. [New Mexico was not one of those states](#)

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HEINRICH, COLLINS ALARMED AFTER INTELLIGENCE HEARINGS

During hearings of the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee, Heinrich and Collins learned information about Russian interference in the 2016 election that spurred them to introduce the bill.

“Everyday it seems like there is a new development about Russia’s efforts to undermine our democracy and drive wedges within our communities,” Heinrich said. “Yesterday we learned that President Trump’s campaign chairman and a top adviser have been indicted for conspiracy against the United States and another senior adviser has actually plead guilty to false statements to the FBI about coordinating with Russians during the Trump campaign.”

Heinrich said safeguards for voting systems that weren’t even considered ten years ago are necessary today.

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“I think overall, over the course of the last few decades, I think we may have become complacent as a country about the potential for this,” Heinrich said. “I also think that as systems were designed, what may have been considered secure ten years ago, in today’s cyber world would no longer be considered secure.”

“We saw a level of activity that we’ve never seen on this side of the Atlantic before,” he said and mentioned meddling in the French and German elections.

The bill seeks to address direct attacks on voting systems and elections, though Heinrich did mention the “bots and trolls” that Russia used “to spread misinformation” and “division” through social media.

Lawyers from Facebook, Google and Twitter testified in front of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee about the Russia-backed efforts to sway the election. The U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee will hear from the companies Wednesday.

Collins said she cosponsored the legislation in response to Russian attempts to directly interfere with the elections systems.

“The fact that the Russians probed the election-related systems of 21 states is truly disturbing, and it must serve as a call to action to assist states in hardening their defenses against foreign adversaries that seek to compromise the integrity of our election process,” Collins said in a statement. “Our bipartisan legislation would assist states in this area by identifying best practices to protecting voting equipment, and ensuring states have the resources they need to implement those best practices.”

NM WELL-PROTECTED COMPARED TO SOME STATES

In a joint conference call with Heinrich, New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver said some of New Mexico’s laws protecting ballots could explain why the hackers looked elsewhere.

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“We are fortunate,” she said. “We have a 100 percent paper ballot system, we have a robust post-election audit system.”

Unlike New Mexico, some states use electronic voting machines with no paper trail. This legislation would help those states, Toulouse Oliver said.

The bill would designate voting systems as critical infrastructure for the purposes of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The department made that designation [earlier this year](#), but with passage of this bill, Congress would codify it into federal law.

In the United States, there are sixteen critical infrastructure sectors including energy, government facilities and defense industrial base. The election infrastructure is a subsector of the “government facilities” sector.

When designating the election infrastructure as critical infrastructure, then-Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, who served under President Barack Obama, noted many state and local election officials opposed the designation.

“The designation of election infrastructure as critical infrastructure subsector does mean that election infrastructure becomes a priority within the National Infrastructure Protection Plan,” Johnson said in a statement released at that time. “It also enables this Department to prioritize our cybersecurity assistance to state and local election officials, but only for those who request it.”

The bill would also create a grant program that would help states upgrade their voter systems, among other things.

Toulouse Oliver said she looked forward to the grants “because election systems and elections in general are vastly underfunded at the state level across the country.”

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The legislation would also provide for security clearance for the election official in each state “so that if there is a threat that we saw in 2016 that the Department of Homeland Security is not just giving them vague suggestions, that they can be more blunt about what’s actually going on and what are some of the remedies that they can employ to make sure it doesn’t have an impact on our election.”

Whether the legislation can pass into law before the 2018 elections is unknown. Heinrich noted that half of the current congressional term is over.

“Just making it a priority for everyone is going to require a great deal of work. This is drafted to be very nonpartisan, very supportive of respecting local state’s rights. We truly hope to avoid some of the partisan battles that we’ve seen in the past.”

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