

ELECTIONS

Russian meddling and election integrity in CA

Now that Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation "did not establish that members of the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities," we can all move on to fighting over whether those activities actually changed the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.

Attorney General William Barr's letter to Congress summarizing the Mueller report says the special counsel determined that there were two main Russian efforts to influence the 2016 election: "The first involved attempts by a Russian organization, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), to conduct disinformation and social media operations in the United States designed to sow social discord, eventually with the aim of interfering with the election."

"The second element involved the Russian government's efforts to conduct computer hacking operations designed to gather and disseminate information to influence the election. The Special Counsel found that Russian government actors successfully hacked into computers and obtained emails from persons affiliated with the Clinton campaign and Democratic Party organizations, and publicly disseminated those materials through various intermediaries, including WikiLeaks.

Mueller has brought criminal charges against a number of Russian individuals, Russian military officers, and Russian companies or entities in connection with these activities. They're never going to be in a U.S. courtroom, but the indictments tell us what happened.

The Internet Research Agency employees, "posing as U.S. persons and creating false U.S. personas, operated social media pages and groups designed to attract U.S. audiences." To accomplish their goal of sowing discord, they "posted derogatory information about a number of candidates," spent money "buying political advertisements on social media," and "staged political rallies inside the United States."

Did it change the outcome of the election? There's derogatory information about presidential candidates everywhere during a campaign, so paid ads on Facebook and Twitter are like droplets in the ocean. The effectiveness of paid ads on social media is questionable anyway.

What about the staged polit-



Secretary of State Alex Padilla speaks at a news conference at the Capitol, Monday Jan. 28, 2019, in Sacramento, Calif.

ical rallies? It's interesting that the Russian government has that tactic in its playbook. But in the 2016 campaign, the rallies that made the difference were staged by Donald Trump. I personally attended two of them in Nevada. I can tell you from talking with people who waited in line for hours to hear Trump speak that the Russians didn't make them do it.

What about the hacking operations? Did the leaks of emails from the Democratic National Committee and the Gmail account of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta change anybody's mind? It doesn't seem likely. Nobody needs the Russians to find "dirt" on Hillary Clinton. If you do a simple Google search you'll have to rent a skip loader.

But there was another area of Russian interference that has received less attention on cable TV. In September 2017, Department of Homeland Security officials informed 21 states that their election systems or websites had been targeted by hackers and that some of the attempts had been successful. The details are shrouded in secrecy, but last July, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said hackers within Russia's GRU military intelligence service targeted state and county election offices responsible for overseeing the 2016 U.S. elections. The

Russian hackers breached a state election website and stole sensitive information on about half a million American voters. And perhaps most concerning, the Russian government infiltrated a company that provides software for voting machines used throughout the United States.

The method used to hack the voting software company is called "spear-phishing." The Russians sent over 100 email messages, which appeared to be from the company, to election administrators in Florida counties. Spear-phishing emails aim to trick people into revealing their usernames and passwords, or clicking a link that downloads malicious code. No matter how secure an election system may be, a hacker can stroll right into it if somebody hands over a password.

In California, new voting technology is coming for the 2020 election. Secretary of State Alex Padilla has de-certified all the older voting equipment effective August 27, 2019, forcing counties to buy the new electronic voting machines. "Our democracy faces increasingly sophisticated threats from nefarious actors, both foreign and domestic," Padilla said in February. "The time is now for all California counties to modernize voting equipment."

But how secure is it?

"You can have the best encryption, firewalls, all the tools you want," Padilla told the L.A. Times in February, "But if one member of our staff clicks on a link from a long-lost uncle who just won the lottery and wants to transfer money, it's all compromised."

In other words, it's not secure from spear-phishing. So add the risk of hacking to the unresolved voter-registration mess at the DMV and the challenge of implementing the California Voter's Choice Act, which eliminates local polling places in favor of vote centers that will be open for 11 days.

Even if the vote centers can be made cyber-secure, they remain wide open to low-tech fraud. A group of saboteurs with a copy of the publicly available voter file could drive around a county for a week and a half, visiting hundreds of vote centers, pretending to be thousands of different voters, casting ballots that will be counted.

It would certainly be ironic if the Trump-Russia collusion investigation ultimately led to voter ID laws in all 50 states. Rod Serling couldn't have written a better ending.

Susan Shelley is an editorial writer and columnist for the Southern California News Group. Susan@SusanShelley.com. Twitter: @Susan_Shelley.

ENTITLEMENTS

The risks of paid family leave bills

By Rachel Greszler

Republicans are jumping on the paid family leave bandwagon.

Recently, Sens. Mike Lee, R-Utah, and Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, introduced the CRADLE Act to let workers tap Social Security for paid family leave. The day before that, President Trump proposed a 6-week federal paid family leave program and a one-time, \$1 billion fund to help private employers set up paid family leave programs in his FY 2020 budget.

These proposals contrast with Democrats' predominant proposal — the Family Act — which would establish a federal paid leave program covering all types of family and medical leave and paid for through a new payroll tax on workers and employers.

All of these initiatives are problematic for the same reason: No matter how limited, low-cost, or non-invasive federal paid family leave may start, it will inevitably expand over time. This is the nature of all federal entitlement programs.

Consider the Social Security proposal, which would let workers "trade" future retirement benefits for family leave today. It calls for no new taxes and is supposedly self-funded. But letting workers use America's favorite entitlement program as a piggy bank for family leave would open the door to tapping it for other "good causes" like paying off student loans or purchasing a home. There's a more immediate problem, too.

For years, Social Security has been paying out more than it takes in. At the current rate, scheduled benefits will have to be slashed by about 25 percent beginning in 2034. Tapping those funds early will only hasten benefit cuts.

The reason Social Security is in such sad shape is because lawmakers keep increasing its mission, its benefits and, hence, its costs.

The Lee-Ernst proposal would allow workers to claim benefits to take leave following the birth or adoption of a child. Already lawmakers are saying that's not enough.

If enacted, pressure would immediately mount, not only to expand the type of leave financed through Social Security, but to increase the amount of money that could be withdrawn. The argument would be that many workers — particularly lower-income ones — need 100 percent benefits in order to afford taking family leave. Next would come demands to excuse workers from delaying their retirements until they have foregone retirement benefits equal to the leave benefits they "borrowed" earlier. After all, what future policymaker will want to force workers — predominantly lower- and middle-income women — to retire later than everyone else just to repay money used for a good cause?

At the end of the day, a well-intended proposal to help workers stay at home with their new children could turn into a massive new federal entitlement. And a federal program would be worse than the programs many workers have today. Paid family leave is already available to more than a third of U.S. workers, and most are more generous and don't require workers to navigate a federal bureaucracy. What about workers who don't yet have access to paid family leave? Proposals, such as universal savings accounts and allowing workers to tap their 401(k)s without penalty for paid family leave, would help increase access to paid family leave.

When it comes to helping workers receive paid family leave, policymakers need to consider not just the merits of what they propose, but the merits of what will become of what they propose. A one-size-fits-all federal program with excessive costs would not be better for workers than further expansion of employer- and state-based programs.

Rachel Greszler is a research fellow in economics, budget and entitlements for The Heritage Foundation.

SYSTEM OF CARE

O.C.'s strong efforts on homelessness

By Lisa Bartlett and Andrew Do

It has been nearly a year since the County of Orange clinically assessed an unprecedented number of unsheltered homeless individuals living along the Santa Ana River Trail and the Santa Ana Civic Center. Through that engagement, the County has increased its capacity to serve unique needs of the homeless community and has continued to build a System of Care that is integrated, regionally coordinated and addresses the myriad needs. The four main components of the System of Care that intersect with homelessness are Healthcare, Behavioral Health, Corrections and Housing.

In the last year, the County has focused on the development of employment and housing resources to help individuals and families experiencing homelessness transition from homelessness to self-sufficiency. After all, homelessness solutions rely on stable income and housing.

Chrysalis Employment Program facilitates appropriate

placement of people experiencing homelessness into employment opportunities. The Orange County Board of Supervisors committed \$200,000 to the program to help individuals re-enter the workforce and increase their income, in conjunction with investments from multiple local cities.

Landlord Incentive Program was granted \$250,000 last year by the Board of Supervisors. This program will be operated by the Orange County United Way to incentivize landlords to accept Housing Choice Vouchers so that we expand our affordable housing units helping those who are on the brink of homelessness.

Housing Funding Strategy adopted by the Board of Supervisors provides a framework for meeting the 2,700 units of permanent supportive housing goal and a spending plan for \$70.5 million of Mental Health Services Act previously allocated by the Board. To date, over 1,000 units are in development.

Additionally, the County of Orange has developed public-private partnerships that will help drive long-term sustainable solutions that benefit our

communities and are key in the development of a System of Care.

■Be Well OC Campus — In partnership with CalOptima, Kaiser, St. Joseph Hoag Health, and the County a regional mental health and wellness campus will be created to provide a coordinated system of mental health care and support for all Orange County residents regardless of payer source. This ecosystem will address the whole person with mental health, addictions treatment and short-term residential care.

■Housing Finance Trust — In partnership with Association of California Cities — Orange County (ACC-OC), legislation was signed into law in September 2018 to create the Orange County Housing Finance Trust, which will allow for cities regionally to develop solutions that address homelessness through the creation of 2,700 permanent supportive housing units, the goal established in the Housing Funding Strategy.

Earlier this year, with the help of hundreds of community volunteers, stakeholders and partners, we conducted

the 2019 Point in Time count, a biennial count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless across all 34 cities and unincorporated areas. We are thankful for the community's support and for the more accurate and comprehensive data that will come from this effort as a result of an improved methodology. In April, the results of the 2019 Point In Time count will be released and this data will help inform future resource and service development and regional coordination.

While our work on building a System of Care that addresses homelessness is far from over, we are committed to finding long-term solutions, engaging in collaborative efforts and partnerships that contribute to our progress. We look forward to seeing the positive impacts our investments in housing and employment and public private partnerships will have on individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

Chairwoman Lisa Bartlett of the Orange County Board of Supervisors represents the Fifth District. Supervisor Andrew Do represents the First District.