

Sun Journal

Gov. Paul LePage casts doubts on a 'clean election in Maine'

Christopher Cousins

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Gov. Paul LePage — who has won two statewide elections in Maine — has joined Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump in calling elections in Maine and the United States illegitimate.

During his weekly Tuesday morning phone chat on WVOM radio, LePage said that as long as Maine doesn't require voters to provide identification, the system cannot be trusted.

“I am not confident that we are going to have a clean election in Maine,” said LePage in response to a question from the hosts, who introduced it by noting that LePage has won two statewide elections under the same system he now questions. “The Democratic Party insists on not having IDs. Will people from the cemetery be voting? Yes, all around the country. The media and the Democratic Party want everyone to vote, whether they're citizens or not.”

Secretary of State Matthew Dunlap wrote in response to questions from the Bangor Daily News Tuesday morning that voter identification is a “political issue.” In Maine, voters must show identification to register but not to obtain a ballot.

“I can enumerate safeguards that govern the process of conducting elections,” he wrote.

Trump's claims that the United States election system is flawed or “rigged” against him have been escalating as the candidate's support in the polls has eroded in recent weeks. Trump addressed the issue Saturday during his visit to Bangor but focused on the media's coverage of his comments.

“The election is being rigged by corrupt media pushing completely false allegations and outright lies in an effort to elect her president,” said Trump, who was also caught on tape during a private Q&A with Mainers saying the women accusing him of sexual misconduct are liars.

Republicans in the Maine Legislature have tried several times in recent years, including in 2015, to require voters to provide identification at the polls but those efforts have failed. At least 31 states require some form of photo identification to be presented at the polls, although federal courts have recently issued several rulings against states' efforts to toughen voter identification rules.

In those cases, judges found no credible evidence of voter fraud. In a ruling that struck down a North Dakota law designed to create new barriers at polling places, a federal judge wrote: “The undisputed evidence before the Court reveals that voter fraud in North Dakota has been virtually non-existent.”

Past claims by Maine Republicans, notably former party chairman Charlie Webster’s 2012 assertion that “dozens of black people” who were unfamiliar to local election clerks had cast ballots in Maine, have yielded no convictions. A commission impaneled by former Republican Secretary of State Charlie Summers and led by retired judge John Atwood found no evidence of voter fraud and recommended against stricter voter ID laws in 2012.

As recently as Monday, Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap explained why voter fraud on the scale that LePage and Trump suggest would be highly improbable, given the prevalence of paper ballots in Maine and the scrutiny that local officials who are familiar with their localities apply to the process.

But Dunlap is a Democrat, which apparently makes him suspect in LePage’s perception of the electoral process. As he has on other issues, LePage apparently based his suspicions about the integrity of a statewide system that has elected him twice on anecdotes and a guiding but generally unfounded principle that Democrats are “crooked.”

“Maine has a proud history of full access for voters to participate in our elections,” wrote Dunlap Tuesday morning in response to questions from the BDN. “It’s curious that the governor would question the integrity of a system under which he was elected twice.”

Democrats have continued to make the case that voter ID laws provide a solution to problems that don’t exist.

“The majority of us didn’t feel it would be appropriate to place a hurdle in front of someone’s fundamental and constitutional right to vote,” argued Democratic Rep. Louis Luchini of Ellsworth during floor debate in 2015.

Noting that polls increasingly show that Trump support has leveled out at far below 50 percent, some political observers assert that his new emphasis on unproven election fraud constitutes an effort to suppress the vote, creating a path to Electoral College victory.

On a separate topic, LePage trashed the Maine media for what he said was a refusal to cover a story about the Ahram Halal Market in Portland, which is under investigation for welfare fraud that allegedly involved the conversion of food stamp benefits into cash.

“We’ve been trying to work with the Maine media to get it out to the people but they have just refused to do it,” said LePage. “If I didn’t know better I’d say they’re complicit in this fraud.”

LePage said his communications staff have been talking to “reporters in Augusta ... for months” about the issue.

To set the record straight: No one has ever approached the Bangor Daily News about this story and my colleague at the Portland Press Herald, Scott Thistle, said the same when we spoke this morning.

More setting the record straight: LePage also complained that he had received no coverage for being named among the most fiscally responsible governors in the country by the Libertarian Cato institute and suggested that it's because of a media conspiracy against him. Readers of the Daily Brief might remember when we reported that on Oct. 6. A BDN blogger also wrote about it just yesterday. We also reported on Cato's rankings in 2014, when LePage was ranked third most fiscally responsible governor.