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Common Cause: Ongoing baseless, misguided partisan attacks on the integrity of the 2020 election undermine democracy

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The sensationalized allegations about “possible” voting fraud in a Racine County nursing home and “possible” widespread, statewide fraud caused by the actions of the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) during the 2020 elections made by Racine County Sheriff Christopher Schmaling last Friday are little more than a baseless, hyper partisan attack on legal and approved election procedures made by a highly partisan elected official that only serve to undermine public trust in our election system if they are not repudiated.

Further, the Republican politicians who have rushed to judgment and embraced these questionable allegations and called for resignations of WEC staff and commissioners are highly irresponsible, inflammatory and they only serve to further sow seeds of distrust in democracy and to add fuel to the fire of the conspiracy theories that continue to permeate the state and the nation about the results of the 2020 election.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester), State Senate President Chris Kapenga (R-Delafield), State Sen. Van Wanggaard (R-Racine) and others have prematurely called for the resignation of WEC Administrator Meagan Wolfe, almost simultaneously, with the announcement by Sheriff Schmaling of his unproven allegations. That is unfair and irresponsible in the extreme. Further, Schmaling has made allegations of wrongdoing but offered little or no evidence that the voting “irregularities” were either illegal or substantiated. Further, they failed to make any charges, or to even be in contact with the District Attorney of Racine County.

Schmaling alleged that the WEC violated Wisconsin election law by facilitating “illegal” voting in March of 2020 when all six commissioners — 3 Republican

appointees and 3 Democrats –voted unanimously not to send special voting deputies into nursing homes to assist residents with voting because of an alarming spike in COVID-19 infections in Racine County and elsewhere.

Vos's own partisan appointment to the WEC, former Republican State Rep. Dean Knudson expressed fierce disagreement with the actions of Schmaling and the call by Vos and other G.O.P. politicians for Wolfe and WEC Commissioners to resign. Commissioner Kundson questioned why Schmaling isn't pursuing charges against anyone in Racine County and with the Racine County District Attorney if he believes "fraud" had occurred and if the commissioners committed "a felony crime," as Schmaling alleged by authorizing the nursing home residents to be able to vote by absentee ballot instead of with Special Deputy Registrars coming into the nursing home during a period of severe public health concern.

"Certain public figures in Wisconsin are under intense pressure to find someone to be the fall guy for Trump's loss in 2020 in Wisconsin," Knudson told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "It is the equivalent of losing the playoff football game and six months later still complaining about the bad call by the referee and insisting that they never officiate a game again."

"There are a lot of individuals that are under pressure to try to find some explanation other than the obvious one," Knudson added. Asked what that obvious explanation was, Kundson said, "That (Joe) Biden got more votes in Wisconsin than Trump did."

The Racine County allegations come in the wake of continuing controversy and confusion that has been ongoing about an investigation into the 2020 election authorized by Vos in August. Vos named former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Michael Gableman to try to discover non-existent "fraud" in Wisconsin during the 2020 election. Gableman has said he believes Donald Trump defeated President Joe Biden in Wisconsin last year, even though two recounts and numerous court decisions confirmed a Biden victory by more than 20,000 votes. Gableman has publicly admitted he knows very little about how elections are or should be conducted in Wisconsin and his legal authority to investigate and to subpoena county election clerks has been called into question.

As if the highly questionable allegations in Racine by Schmaling, a Trump supporter, and the botched Gableman effort weren't sufficient to appease former President Donald Trump and his supporters, the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau almost two weeks ago issued its long-anticipated review of the 2020 election that had been authorized by state legislative Republicans. State Sen. Robert Cowles (R-Allouez), who co-chairs the Legislature's Audit Committee, said he hopes the report leads to bipartisan fixes for the issues the audit identified, but that the state's elections,

overall, are “safe and secure.”

Even so, that report has fueled G.O.P. calls for wholesale changes to the WEC, which was created solely by Republican votes in the Wisconsin Legislature in 2015. And last week, Trump-supporting Republicans in the State Senate, unhappy that the LAB report didn’t uncover and detail the non-existent “fraud” in 2020 that they are still desperately and fruitlessly seeking, announced plans to open yet another fishing expedition to looking yet again into the 2020 election, to be led by State Sen. Kathleen Bernier (R-Chippewa Falls). Apparently, there is no limit to how far Trump sycophants will go to pursue a different outcome to the 2020 presidential election results in Wisconsin, no matter how many times they fall short of changing it.

It is one thing to look at and carefully examine the election procedures that were in place in Wisconsin during a unique and unprecedented public health crisis that led to several actions that were out of the ordinary when compared to a “normal” election year, pre-COVID. There is always room for improvement and adjustments that can be made to improve election administration and security. Such reviews occur after every election. Election officials, clerks, and poll workers performed well under the unique and extenuating circumstances of these elections considered to be the most secure and successfully administered elections in recent history.

But the unproven Racine County allegations, the highly questionable Gableman “kangaroo court” inquest and now, the State Senate “investigation” are nothing more than hyper partisan political stunts that waste public taxpayer dollars and corrosively undermine the legitimate public trust and confidence that Wisconsinites have had and should continue to have in the conduct of elections in Wisconsin — all in order to appeal to the vanity of a former President who decisively lost the election in Wisconsin and in the nation — but who refuses to accept the result.

This unseemly and destructive partisan circus needs to end now.