VIA CERTIFIED MAIL

May 15, 2018

Melanie Ann Pustay
Director of the Office of Information Policy
United States Department of Justice
Suite 11050
1425 New York Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Re: Appeal of FOI/PA No. 17-00362-F

Dear Director Pustay:

I am writing pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, to appeal the sufficiency of the response by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to the above-referenced request (the “Request”) by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law. As set forth below, DOJ’s response to the Request is plainly inadequate. It is clear that DOJ has failed to perform a sufficient search for or to produce all responsive documents. Moreover, while DOJ claims that many of the responsive documents or portions thereof are exempt from production pursuant to 5 U.S.C. §§ (b)(5), (b)(6), and (b)(7)(A), these subsections do not apply to the withheld materials.

I. The Request and DOJ’s response

On July 20, 2017, the Brennan Center made a FOIA request to the DOJ seeking certain information related to a letter sent by the Voting Section to states covered by the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) on June 28, 2017 (the “Letter”). Specifically, the Request sought:

1) All documents the DOJ received or receives from state or local election officials in response to the Letter; and

2) All communications and documents, including but not limited to emails and memoranda, between any DOJ officer, employee, or agent, or any White House liaison to the Department, and any other person, including but not limited to any officer, employee, or agent of the White House or the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity concerning the Letter.
After repeated inquiries by the Brennan Center, the DOJ provided a response eight months later, on March 20, 2018. That response letter indicated that DOJ denied the first part of the Request in its entirety on the ground that all responsive documents were exempt from disclosure under 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(A) because their disclosure could reasonably be expected to interfere with law enforcement proceedings. The letter also indicated that some of the documents that were responsive to the first part of the Request were also exempt from disclosure under 5 U.S.C. §§ 552(b)(5) and (b)(6) because they contain deliberative material or their disclosure could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

The DOJ did produce 407 pages in response to the second part of the Request, but withheld four pages of responsive documents on the ground that they were exempt from disclosure under 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(A) because their disclosure could reasonably be expected to interfere with law enforcement proceedings. The majority of the 407 pages that the DOJ produced consisted of a 273-page spreadsheet of elections data from Chicago that is completely unrelated to the Letter. The remainder of the production contained a number of redactions. The DOJ indicated that the redactions were made pursuant to 5 U.S.C. §§ 552(b)(5) and (b)(6) because they contain deliberative material or their disclosure could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. The response letter also stated that certain portions of the four pages withheld from production would have similarly contained redactions pursuant to FOIA subsections (b)(5) and (b)(6).

II. The inadequacy of DOJ’s response

DOJ’s production is inadequate. Not only has DOJ failed to conduct a sufficient search of its records, it has unreasonably withheld and redacted the documents that it has identified as responsive.

A. The scope of the production is inappropriately limited.

DOJ has a duty under FOIA to construe the Request “liberally” and conduct a search for documents that is “reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents.” Nation Magazine, Washington Bureau v. Customs Serv., 71 F.3d 885, 890 (D.C. Cir. 1995) (quoting Truitt v. Dep’t of State, 897 F.2d 540, 544-45 (D.C. Cir. 1990)). Though it is impossible to tell just how limited DOJ’s search was or how many responsive documents were omitted from the production, it is clear that DOJ has not satisfied its obligations.

On March 19, 2018, one day before DOJ provided its response to the Request, it sought clarification of the Request from the Brennan Center during a phone call. DOJ indicated that it interpreted the second part of the Request to be entirely duplicative of separate FOIA requests that the Brennan Center had made for documents related to the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity (PACEI), which were and are the subject of litigation in Brennan Center, et al. v. DOJ, et al., 17-cv-6335 (S.D.N.Y.), and asked the Brennan Center to confirm if that was the case. In response, that same day, the Brennan Center provided DOJ a written explanation of the distinction between the requests, a copy of which is enclosed (Exhibit A). The Brennan Center emphasized that the Request sought “all communications and documents” concerning the Letter, including communications between the DOJ and “any other person”—not simply communications between the DOJ and the PACEI.
Nonetheless, all but three pages of the DOJ’s production—which arrived just one day after the Brennan Center provided this explanation—had already been produced by DOJ to the Brennan Center in response to the FOIA requests related to the PACEI. Even the three pages that had not previously been produced, which contain a letter from DOJ to Senator Whitehouse, were related to the PACEI.

It seems highly unlikely that DOJ is not in possession of any documents or communications related to the Letter that do not relate directly to the PACEI, especially since the Department has claimed that its Letter had nothing to do with the PACEI. Thus, the duplicative nature of the production alone would suggest that DOJ did not conduct a search reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents. But another recent production provided by DOJ in the context of the ongoing litigation confirms that DOJ’s search was insufficient. On April 27, 2018, DOJ provided an additional 100-page production in response to the PACEI-related FOIA requests. Included in that production was a series of redacted emails concerning the DOJ’s response to an op-ed about the Letter. A copy of those emails is enclosed here for reference (Exhibit B). The documents are obviously responsive to the Request, but they were not included in the DOJ’s response to the Request. DOJ must perform a reasonable search that is not limited to documents concerning or involving the PACEI.

B. DOJ’s reliance on FOIA exemptions to withhold information is misplaced.

Congress passed FOIA with the intent of providing for government transparency through broad public access to government records. Milner v. Dept. of Navy, 562 U.S. 562, 571 (2011) (quoting Department of Justice v. Tax Analysts, 492 U.S. 136, 151 (1989)). Though the law exempts certain information from disclosure, the baseline presumption is that disclosure is required. Accordingly, these exemptions are for narrow categories, id., and the government has the burden of establishing that they apply, Department of Justice v. Reporters Comm. For Freedom of Press, 489 U.S. 749, 755 (1989) (citing 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B)). In its response, DOJ attempts to stretch these exemptions well beyond their intended scope and fails to offer any explanation for doing so. The exemptions plainly do not apply to some of the documents that DOJ has withheld or redacted, and in other cases the lack of explanation makes it impossible to evaluate whether DOJ’s failure to disclose information is justified.

1. The rejection of the first part of the Request

The most egregious example of DOJ’s failure to comply with FOIA is its blanket refusal to produce any documents it received in response to the Letter. In order to justify withholding documents pursuant to the exemption in subsection (b)(7)(A), DOJ must demonstrate that “disclosure (1) could reasonably be expected to interfere with (2) enforcement proceedings that are (3) pending or reasonably anticipated.” Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington v. Dept. of Justice (hereinafter “CREW”), 746 F.3d 1082, 1096 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (quoting Mapother v. Dep’t of Justice, 3 F.3d 1533, 1540 (D.C. Cir. 1993)). In other words, the DOJ must not only identify the pending or anticipated enforcement proceedings, but also identify how disclosure of the particular documents at issue will interfere with those proceedings. Id. at 1099. Moreover, “it is not sufficient for the agency to simply assert that disclosure will interfere with enforcement proceedings,” it must also at the very least define the categories of documents that it is withholding and “explain the specific risks entailed in premature disclosure” of each category. Id.
DOJ’s response does not identify any pending or anticipated enforcement proceedings, let alone explain how the disclosure of the States’ responses to the Letter would interfere with those proceedings. The only type of enforcement proceeding that seems even plausibly related to the Letter would be a potential proceeding to enforce the provisions of the NVRA or the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) against one or more of the States. Given the lack of documents produced in response to the second part of the Request, which sought documents and communications related to the Letter, it seems unlikely that there are any such proceedings pending or anticipated. But even assuming *arguendo* that DOJ may anticipate NVRA or HAVA enforcement proceedings against one or more of the States, there is no reason that release of the States’ responses to the Letter could reasonably be expected to interfere with those proceedings. Nor is it believable that DOJ has pending enforcement proceedings against all fifty states to whom it sent the Letter.

Without the identification of specific enforcement proceedings and an explanation of how disclosure of the particular records at issue will interfere with those proceedings, FOIA requires disclosure of material that is far more obviously capable of having a prejudicial effect on an investigation than the documents at issue here. For instance, lacking such an explanation, the court in *CREW* rejected DOJ’s blanket application of the exemption to documents that contained information, including witness names and contact information and leads obtained through witness interviews, grand jury subpoenas, proffer agreements, and internally compiled descriptions of the evidentiary record and how it relates to the investigation. 746 F.3d at 1096-99. Surely, then, the responses by public bodies regarding their compliance with federal law must be subject to disclosure.

2. The information withheld from the response to the second part of the Request

DOJ’s response to the second part of the request was also inadequate. First, DOJ withheld four pages from this production pursuant to the exemption in subsection (b)(7)(A). DOJ once again failed to identify any relevant law enforcement proceedings or explain how disclosure of these four pages might interfere with those proceedings. In fact, DOJ offers no information about the documents that allows the Brennan Center to even surmise whether the documents might be relevant to such a proceeding if there is one pending or anticipated. For all of the reasons set forth above, the Brennan Center therefore challenges the decision to withhold these documents as well.

Second, a number of the redactions of the 407 pages DOJ did produce are inappropriate. There are two instances, at pages CRT-000007 and CRT-000018, copies of which are enclosed (Exhibit C), where the identity of a DOJ employee is excised from relevant communications to which they are a party, ostensibly pursuant to subsection (b)(6), which exempts from disclosure “personnel and medical files and similar files the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” It cannot be that the disclosure of the name of a federal employee that engaged in internal communications relevant to official business that are subject to disclosure would implicate personal privacy at all, let alone constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

There is also an unwarranted redaction pursuant to subsection (b)(5) on page 318 of the 373-page production document included in the response. For ease of reference, that page is enclosed here (Exhibit D). DOJ has redacted a list of topics set for discussion at an internal
exemption in subsection (b)(5) only protects information that is both “predecisional” and “deliberative.” *National Ass’n of Home Builders v. Norton*, 309 F.3d 26, 39 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (quoting *Petroleum Info. Corp. v. United States Dep’t of the Interior*, 976 F.2d 1429, 1433 (D.C. Cir. 1992)). Information is deliberative if it “reflects the give-and-take of the consultative process.” *Id.* Agenda items do not reflect this give-and-take, they simply document the topics that this process concerned. They are therefore not deliberative and not exempt from disclosure under subsection (b)(5). *Fox News Network, LLC v. United States Dep’t of the Treasury*, 739 F. Supp. 2d 515, 550-51 (S.D.N.Y. 2010) (requiring disclosure of agenda items).

For all these reasons, the Brennan Center respectfully requests that DOJ respond to this appeal within 20 days and produce responsive records forthwith. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(ii). If you have any questions about the Request or this appeal, you may reach me directly at (646) 292-8363.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Sean Morales-Doyle

Enclosures (5)

Cc: Wendy Weiser, Director, Democracy Program
   Brennan Center for Justice
Exhibit A
Ms. Cooper,

Thank you for speaking with me today regarding FOI/PA No. 17-00362-F. I appreciate you confirming that we will be receiving a response to that request within the next few days. I am writing to respond to a question you raised about the scope of the request.

Your question was how the second part of the request differed from the requests that are currently the subject of litigation between the Brennan Center and DOJ in the matter currently pending before the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York as case number 17-cv-6335, which have been assigned the numbers DOJ-2017-004083 and DOJ-2017-05737. The short answer is that unlike the requests that are covered by the litigation, FOI/PA No. 17-00362-F requests all communications and documents concerning the June 28, 2017 letter sent by T. Christian Herren to all states covered by the NVRA (“the Letter”), including communications between the DOJ and “any other person.”

Specifically, the second part of the FOIA requests the following (with emphasis added):

“All communications and documents, including but not limited to emails and memoranda, between any DOJ officer, employee, or agent, or any White House liaison to the Department, and any other person, including but not limited to any officer, employee, or agent of the White House or the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity concerning the Letter.”

This request bears some similarity to the May request to DOJ that is the subject of litigation, but it does not overlap entirely with that request. In May, the Brennan Center and the Protect Democracy Project requested all communications between the DOJ and the PACEI. The May request also requested communications between the DOJ “and any other person,” but only those communications “regarding the [PACEI] or any other effort since November 8, 2016 to establish a commission, task force, or committee to study voter fraud or any aspect of the voting system.” Neither request would necessarily reach all DOJ documents concerning the Letter, or even all communications between the DOJ and persons besides the PACEI concerning the Letter.

I hope this clarifies the distinction between our requests and helps to inform the forthcoming response. Please let me know if you require additional information. I appreciate your attention to this matter and I look forward to the response.

Regards,

Sean Morales-Doyle  
Counsel – Democracy Program  
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law  
120 Broadway, Suite 1750  
New York, NY 10271  
o: (646) 292-8363  
m: (773) 412-3786  
sean.moralesdoyle@nyu.edu  
www.brennancenter.org
Exhibit B
Devin O'Malley, a Justice Department spokesman, said the department's review of list maintenance procedures hadn't been done in many years.

"The Department of Justice is committed to free and fair elections for all Americans. Congress enacted the NVRA's list-maintenance provisions specifically to advance that goal. The Department had not conducted a review of state and local list-maintenance activities under the NVRA for many years," he said in a statement. "The Department looks forward to working with state and local election officials to facilitate appropriate list-maintenance activities toward our common goal of free and fair elections for all voters."

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/department-of-justice-voter-purge_us_595d22b1e4b0da2c7326c38b

I look forward to discussing this. Thanks.
From: Flores, Sarah Isgur (OPA)
Sent: Wednesday, July 19, 2017 4:09 PM
To: Brand, Rachel (OASG) <brand@jmd.usdoj.gov>; Gore, John (CRT) <John.Gore@crt.usdoj.gov>; Panuccio, Jesse (OASG) <jpanuccio@jmd.usdoj.gov>
Subject: RE: Vanita Gupta column on Civil Rights Division

From: Brand, Rachel (OASG)
Sent: Wednesday, July 19, 2017 3:04 PM
To: Gore, John (CRT) <b.gore@usdoj.gov>; Flores, Sarah Isgur (OPA) <sisflores@jmd.usdoj.gov>; Panuccio, Jesse (OASG)
Subject: FW: Vanita Gupta column on Civil Rights Division

FYI. (b)(5)

From: R Brand <b) (6) Rachel Brand's Personal Email
Sent: Wednesday, July 19, 2017 2:01 PM
To: Brand, Rachel (OASG) <rbrand@jmd.usdoj.gov>
Subject: Fwd: Vanita Gupta column on Civil Rights Division

Begin forwarded message:

From: "Woodruff, Betsy" <Betsy.Woodruff@thedailybeast.com>
Date: July 19, 2017 at 11:45:01 AM EDT
To: R Brand <b) (6) Rachel Brand's Personal Email
Subject: Vanita Gupta column on Civil Rights Division

Hey Rachel,

I'm doing a piece on the DOJ's response to this Vanita Gupta NYT op-ed saying the Civil Rights Division is gearing up to purge the voter rolls

Just wanted to let you know since it's your purview...do you have any thoughts on background about it? or ideas of folks I should reach out to about it? It's a pretty astounding thing to say about the CRD
The Voter Purges Are Coming

By VANITA GUPTA  JULY 19, 2017

The Trump administration’s election-integrity commission will have its first meeting on Wednesday to map out how the president will strip the right to vote from millions of Americans. It hasn’t gotten off to the strongest start: Its astonishing request last month that each state hand over voters’ personal data was met with bipartisan condemnation. Yet it is joined in its efforts to disenfranchise citizens by the immensely more powerful Justice Department.

Lost amid the uproar over the commission’s request was a letter sent at the same time by the Justice Department’s civil rights division. It forced 44 states to provide extensive information on how they keep their voter rolls up-to-date. It cited the 1993 National Voter Registration Act, known as the Motor-Voter law, which mandates that states help voters register through motor vehicle departments.

The letter doesn’t ask whether states are complying with the parts of the law that expand opportunities to register. Instead it focuses on the sections related to maintaining the lists. That’s a prelude to voter purging.

Usually the Justice Department would ask only a single state for data if it had evidence the state wasn’t complying with Motor-Voter. But a blanket request to every state covered under that law is virtually unprecedented. And unlike the
commission, the Justice Department has federal statutory authority to investigate whether states are complying with the law.

These parallel efforts show us exactly how the Trump administration will undertake its enormous voter suppression campaign: through voter purges. The voter rolls are the key. Registration is one of the main gateways to political participation. It is the difference between a small base of voters pursuing a narrow agenda and an electorate that looks like America.

Here's how the government will use voters' data. It will create a national database to try to find things like double-voters. But the commission won't be able to tell two people with the same name and birthday apart. Such errors will hit communities of color the hardest. Census data shows that minorities are overrepresented in 85 of the 100 most common last names.

Purging voters is part of a larger malicious pattern that states have employed across the country. Georgia and Ohio are being sued for carrying out early versions of what we can expect from the Trump administration.

To enact his plan, President Trump has assembled the voter suppression dream team of Kris Kobach, Ken Blackwell, Hans von Spakovsky and J. Christian Adams, who have all made wildly inflated claims about voter fraud.

Mr. Kobach has been at the vanguard of a crusade against Motor-Voter and has been sued at least three times for making it harder for Kansans to vote. Before the 2016 election, he illegally blocked tens of thousands of voters from registering. Mr. Blackwell rejected registration forms because they were printed on paper he thought was too thin. Mr. von Spakovsky has led numerous unsuccessful legal efforts to diminish voter participation and to fight voting rights. Mr. Adams published personal information about people whom he wrongly accused of committing multiple felonies in a flawed hunt for fraud.

The commission's efforts have been similarly sloppy so far. At least seven lawsuits claim it has violated federal and constitutional law, including privacy rights or transparency laws.
The litigation and pushback from the states that have refused to turn over voters’ data have slowed the efforts down, for now. But my biggest fear is that the government will issue a report with “findings” of unsupported claims of illegal voting, focused on communities of color.

These wild claims won’t be just hot air. Members of Congress will seize on them to turn back protections in federal law. States will enact new barriers to the ballot box. Courts will point to the commission’s work to justify their decisions.

The irony is that there are serious threats to our voting systems, from cyberattacks to aging machines to Russian interference to discriminatory voter ID laws at the state level. Those are the real problems, but that’s not what the commission was created to address.

In response to all this, citizens are pulling themselves off voter rolls out of fear that their personal information will be leaked. A Denver elections official said her office has seen a 2,150 percent increase in voter registration withdrawals. Taking ourselves off the rolls means sacrificing our voices and giving the Trump administration exactly what it wants.

We need to push back. Local election registrars are really in control of the rolls and have the final say on most purges. We need to organize in our communities and ensure they hear our concerns. Voting experts must debunk the administration’s false claims of fraud. Civil rights law firms should continue to do battle in courtrooms. Local politicians from both parties ought to stand firm against pressure from Washington. Rest assured that the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights coalition, and our allies, will be in the thick of this fight.

Vanita Gupta, the president and chief executive of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, was a head of the civil rights division at the Justice Department in the Obama administration.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 19, 2017, on Page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: The Voter Purges Are Coming.
Exhibit C
United States Attorney’s Office
Eastern District of New York
271-A Cadman Plaza East
Brooklyn NY 11215

> That the Pence Commission has asked NYS and other states for its voter rolls.
> Sent from my iPhone
ICYMI...

Begin forwarded message:
From: rjosephesq via Garden State Bar Association <gsba-nj@googlegroups.com>
Date: June 29, 2017 at 9:11:28 PM EDT
To: rjosephesq@rwjosephlaw.com
Subject: [GSBA Google Group] Trump's voter-fraud commission wants to know voting history, party ID and address of every voter in the U.S.
Reply-To: rjosephesq@aol.com

**Wonkblog**

Trump’s voter-fraud commission wants to know voting history, party ID and address of every voter in the U.S.

By Christopher Ingraham June 29 at 5:19 PM

Play Video 1:24

President Trump is signed an executive order on May 11 initiating an investigation into voter suppression and election fraud. Here’s what we know so far. (Patrick Martin/The Washington Post)

The chair of President Trump’s Election Integrity Commission has penned a letter to all 50 states requesting their full voter-role data, including the name, address, date of birth,
Exhibit D
Hey - downstairs but they don’t have clearance from you.

> On Feb 14, 2017, at 7:26 AM, Riordan, Maureen (CRT) <Maureen.Riordan@usdoj.gov> wrote:
>       
>       Thank you Christy. Look forward to seeing you this afternoon! This list is awesome!
>       
>       -----Original Message-----
>       From: Christy McCormick [mailto:CMcCormick@eac.gov]
>       Sent: Monday, February 13, 2017 10:51 PM
>       To: Riordan, Maureen (CRT) <Maureen.Riordan@crt.usdoj.gov>
>       Subject: Re: Tuesday meeting time
>       
>       Hi Maureen,
>       
>       Long day!
>       Here are some topics for the meeting:
> 
> [b][b](b)[b][b]
> 
> I hope this is a helpful starting point on several areas in which we could cooperate. Not sure we have
> time to thoroughly discuss them all, but even if we just touch on them it would be good.
>       
>       See you tomorrow!
>       Christy
>       
> >> On Feb 13, 2017, at 9:44 AM, Riordan, Maureen (CRT) <Maureen.Riordan@usdoj.gov> wrote:
>       >>
>       >> Major miscommunication. We are back to 2pm. I’ll call you later today and explain.
>       >>
>       >> -----Original Message-----
>       >> From: Christy McCormick [mailto:CMcCormick@eac.gov]
>       >> Sent: Monday, February 13, 2017 7:18 AM
>       >> To: Riordan, Maureen (CRT) <Maureen.Riordan@crt.usdoj.gov>
>       >> CC: Wheeler, Tom (CRT) <Tom.Wheeler@crt.usdoj.gov>; Gore, John (CRT) <John.Gore@crt.usdoj.gov>
>       >> Subject: Re: Tuesday meeting time
>       >>
>       >> Good morning Maureen,
>       >>
>       >> That works for me. See you then!
>       >>
>       >> Christy
>       >>
>       >>> On Feb 13, 2017, at 5:23 AM, Riordan, Maureen (CRT) <Maureen.Riordan@usdoj.gov> wrote:
>       >>>
>       >>> Morning Christy
>       >>> We were wondering if you could come earlier on Tuesday? One of our meetings was rescheduled to 3pm.
>       >>> We want to have sufficient time to meet with you. Does 1pm work for you?
>       >>> Thanks in advance
>       >>> Maureen
>       >>>
>       >>> Maureen Riordan
>       >>> Attorney
>       >>> Voting Section Civil Rights Division
>       >>> U.S. Department of Justice
>       >>>