

PUBLIC INTEREST

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PILF Insights: Maine Secretary of State Aide Collaborated to Smear West Virginia Secretary of State Over H.R. 1/S. 1


‘Discredit Warner’s Reputation as Much as Possible...’

November 2021 – Through public information requests, the Public Interest Legal Foundation has learned that state election offices were collaborating with leftist organizations to attack West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner. Last March, Congressional Democrats began their initial push for their comprehensive plan to federalize state election systems with **H.R. 1/ S. 1, the “For the People Act.”** Democratic leadership and nonprofit allies could count on nearly all Democratic votes, but **Senator Joe Manchin** (D-WV) had them worried. West Virginia’s top election official, Secretary of State Mac Warner, was opposed to the federal takeover represented by the proposal. This was particularly important because Senator Joe Manchin’s position on the filibuster. **WV Secretary of State Mac Warner** testified before the United States Senate and delivered a clear message: *Stay out of our business—you’ll only make things worse.*

Left wing groups working with state election offices anticipated Secretary of State Warner’s disapproval of H.R. 1/S. 1, and developed a messaging strategy to smear and discredit Warner. PILF discovered this plan when a communication record of the conversation came up in response to a public records request to the **Maine Secretary of State**. A government employee in the Secretary of State’s Office participated.

What Was Said and Planned?


According to records obtained by PILF, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State of Maine, **Emily Cook**, participated in a Slack¹ virtual workspace which, on or around March 23, 2021, outlined plans to attack Sec. Warner for his opposition to H.R. 1/S. 1. The document shows that collaborators work to “discredit” him because he is a “Stop the Steal guy” and is known for “spreading the Big Lie and current misinformation.” In other words, Sec. Warner is someone who the Maine Secretary of State’s office and leftist groups thought could be blamed for inciting the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Members of the Slack group were advised to not “nationalize” their critiques or “draw Manchin in” and instead keep all fire on Warner.

 **Jonah Minkoff-Zern** March 24th at 9:16 AM
@channel important - WV Secretary of State Warner is getting a lot of attention already in WV for speaking out again HR 1 and is testifying today. Warner is a "Stop the Steal" guy so there's lots we could and need to do. Do we have or could folks create some talking points and sample posts that are ready to go and we could share around using the following guidance from our friends with For West Virginia's Future: "My general suggestion is two-fold: 1) Discredit Warner's reputation as much as possible ahead of the hearing for his work spreading the Big Lie and current misinformation inside WV. 2) Redirect any false talking points he presents inside the hearing a la Race Class Narrative- don't spend time repeating his falsehoods,

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instead talk about what the act means for everyday Americans and how folks like Warner are stopping that for their own selfish political reasons, aka hes showing us why this Act is so important. General recommendations: avoid nationalizing the convo by mentioning Republicans or Biden, dont draw Manchin in on this, and dont spend any time repeating his lies." and reupping this link from Into Action that has WV specific graphics: <https://giphy.com/search/for-the-people-act>

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 **Declaration for American Democracy**
Workspace URL: dfadcoalition.slack.com
Email: [REDACTED]@maine.gov

[Sign In](#)

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What Was Sec. Warner Actually Saying about H.R. 1/S. 1?

Sec. Warner gave congressional testimony that the bills would federalize elections, set up systems that are wasteful and not feasible in rural setting, and even “strip away” working systems for military personnel to securely vote.ⁱⁱ He summed up the problems: “the deadlines cannot be met, the requirements are not achievable, no machines in existence meet the mandates, and the bill contains unreasonable prescriptions for election administration.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sec. Warner and every West Virginia county clerk were united against the bills. Later, Sen. Manchin would effectively kill S. 1.^{iv} The state’s senior senator and chief election official are still at odds^v over a compromise plan which, according to recent PILF research, would actually cause more problems with regard to the state’s absentee voting system.^{vi}

Who Operated the Slack Channel? What is It? Who’s Involved?

Special Assistant Cook’s involvement in this matter was no accident. If you’re in a Slack “workspace,” your presence there is deliberate. The system operates like a topic-based collection of chat rooms and feels like a sleek social network. It is a non-public communication tool with two-factor authentication available to protect access.

Cook was part of a Slack space operated by the **Declaration for American Democracy**, “an anti-oppression coalition working together to make the promise of democracy real for all of us.”^{vii} Coalition members include the League of Women Voters, Protect Democracy, Organizing for Action, Greenpeace, SPLC Action, Code Pink, Oxfam, and many more. Within that space, Cook was part of a Slack channel dedicated to social media messaging between coalition groups.

How Did We Learn About This?

PILF filed a request under **Maine’s Freedom of Access Act** for records, and the request yielded a 590-page package of documents. Within these documents was an email to Cook’s state email address received from Slack, updating her on new messages to conversations of which she is a part in the Declaration of American Democracy Slack workspace.

It seems the Maine Secretary of State’s Office is so concerned about passing H.R. 1/ S. 1 that they are willing to even discredit a fellow Secretary of State to try to influence a key Senator’s vote.

PILF Insights is a new reporting series by the Public Interest Legal Foundation which delves into issues and stories with the help of freedom of information acts research. Insights will focus on behind-the-scenes moves involving legislation, litigation, and the general politicking related to election integrity matters by election officials.

ⁱ “Slack is a messaging app for business that connects people to the information they need. . . Slack makes access to your colleagues easy — message anyone inside or outside your organization and collaborate just like you would in person.”
<https://slack.com/help/articles/115004071768-What-is-Slack->

ⁱⁱ https://www.rules.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Warner1.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} *Charleston Gazette-Mail*; Joe Manchin: Why I’m voting against the For the People Act (June 6, 2021),
https://www.wvgazettemail.com/opinion/op_ed_commentaries/joe-manchin-why-im-voting-against-the-for-the-people-act/article_c7eb2551-a500-5f77-aa37-2e42d0af870f.html

^v WVNews; West Virginia Secretary of State Urges Sen. Joe Manchin to Reject ‘Freedom to Vote Act’ (September 15, 2021), https://www.wvnews.com/news/wvnews/west-virginia-secretary-of-state-urges-sen-joe-manchin-to-reject-freedom-to-vote-act/article_df10a250-1673-11ec-89f5-23e195f08639.html

^{vi} PILF; Manchin’s H.R. 1/S. 1 Compromise Bill Threatens West Virginia’s Absentee Ballot System (September 14, 2021), <https://publicinterestlegal.org/featured/manchins-h-r-1-s-1-compromise-bill-threatens-west-virginias-absentee-ballot-system/>

^{vii} <https://dfadcoalition.org/#dfad>