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N.J. attorney general reminds cops of their Election Day limits amid fears of voter intimidation

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Citing an infamous New Jersey governor's race, the state's top cop sent a letter Friday to police and prosecutors reminding them what officers can and can't do on Election Day.

Attorney General Gurbir Grewal also directed counties to appoint an assistant prosecutor to act as a go-to for officers with election questions.

The office has "already have begun to hear allegations of voter intimidation in other states," Grewal said in a statement. "Today we clarify how law enforcement leaders across the state can best support local and state officials in maintaining the integrity of our voting system."

Residents are largely voting by mail amid coronavirus concerns, although every municipality will have at least one polling place for disabled voters and those who want to cast provisional ballots.

In 1981, the Republican party sent armed, off-duty cops to stand at New Jersey polling places in minority neighborhoods while wearing armbands that read "National Ballot Security Task Force."

The Republican National Committee later signed an agreement saying it wouldn't undertake "ballot security activities" in minority communities "where a purpose or significant effect of such activities is to deter qualified voters from voting," and a court limited the party's voter activities for decades.

Nov. 3 will be the first presidential election since a federal court let those limits expire.

Grewal's letter noted that even well-intentioned officers "may cause unease for some New Jersey residents seeking to exercise their right to vote."

Civilian poll workers are in charge of polling places, he said, and police may generally remove someone only if called upon by election officials.

Cops can "maintain order, peace and quiet during the hours of registry and election" and help carry "the ballot box or boxes to the office of the municipal clerk after the ballots are counted," the letter said.

An off-duty cop may work on an election board or serve as a poll watcher, but "under no circumstances may such an officer wear a police officer's uniform or carry an exposed weapon."

State and federal law already prohibit voter intimidation, damaging ballot boxes or blocking somebody from voting, and nobody may campaign within 100 feet of a polling place.

Grewal normally sends out deputies to help oversee voting on Election Day.

Fears of voter intimidation have risen since President Donald Trump called on supporters to “monitor” polling places, and his son has asked “able-bodied” people to create an election security “army.”

Those calls are plainly illegal, according to a new report from the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU’s law school.

The state’s Homeland Security office also published a report warning of “domestic extremists” ahead of the election.

The new threat assessment said other countries may also work to “delegitimize the elections and spread dissent among the electorate” by “inventing and circulating conspiracy theories about voter fraud, post office failures, ballot errors, miscounting, and criticism or support of frivolous lawsuits challenging the election.”

During an unrelated appearance Wednesday at Rowan University, Grewal said he had “complete confidence in the electoral process.”

NJ Advance Media staff writers Jonathan D. Salant and Karin Price Mueller contributed to this report.