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The Importance of Privacy in the Information Age

How important is it to you to protect your private information? In my office, I am seeing increasing concern from the public about voter registration information being subject to Public Records Laws. Voter registration falls under Chapter 119 of the Florida Statutes or the "Public Records Law" which makes any records made or received by any public agency in its official business available for inspection. As such, there is little my office can offer in the way of protection. The solution can only come through a change in the law, as stated in Chapter 119 which goes on to say "unless specifically exempted by the Florida Legislature".

For several years, my associates and I in the Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections (FSASE) have actively sought protection of your information in Tallahassee. Finally, in the current legislative session, Senate Bill 1072 and House Bill 707 are progressing through the legislative process.

I have heard from many voters who feel strongly enough about this issue that they have asked to be removed from the voter registration rolls. They are willing to "give up" their voting rights in exchange for their privacy. There are also frantic phone calls from stalking/abuse victims who fear for their lives and request protection of their public information. Although there are information protection options available for victims, there is a cumbersome application process and protection is not immediate. Many of these victims are in temporary living situations, have no access to the internet, or have transportation issues which makes it difficult to complete an application process. At issue, too, is the concern from the mother of a minor who had pre-registered to vote at a high school registration drive. Once filed by the student, the voter registration application became public record, and there was nothing this mother could do to protect her child's information from persons online with nefarious motives.

So, how important is it to you to protect your private information? I would encourage you to contact your legislators and let them know your feelings. Navigating life through the Information Age has made us all increasingly vulnerable as we enjoy the advantages of computer mediated technology. While it's true that private data collection is widespread and information is readily available through many public sources, fear of protecting your personal information should NEVER be a deterrent to exercising your right to vote. Bottom line: Voters shouldn't have to choose between exercising their right to vote and protecting their privacy.

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