

US midterm elections

Republicans marshal "poll watchers" to intimidate Democratic voters

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The Republican Party, with the backing of the Bush administration, will post thousands of party functionaries at polling stations in various parts of the country on Election Day, November 5, to intimidate working class and minority voters from casting their ballots. This anti-democratic operation is being carried out under the cover of "poll watching."

Large numbers of "poll watchers" are to be posted in key places where the contest for congressional seats and governorships is expected to be very close, particularly targeting minority voters and those in strongly Democratic districts.

With characteristic cynicism, the Republican right and the Bush administration are mounting this "keep-them-from-voting" effort in the name of electoral "reform." In the aftermath of the 2000 election crisis in Florida—which exposed pervasive methods of election fraud and discrimination that disenfranchised tens of thousands of minority and working class voters—the forces that organized the theft of the White House are escalating their attack on the right to vote.

Millions of Americans across the country who should be eligible to vote are in one way or another prevented from voting or having their votes counted, either by restrictive voter registration procedures, the failure of antiquated voting machinery, or outright intimidation and ballot rigging. But as far as George W. Bush and the Republicans are concerned, purging the electoral process of fraud does not mean eliminating obstacles to the exercise of the franchise and the counting of all votes cast, but rather the opposite—finding new pretexts for keeping working class voters from the polls.

The idea is to use the legal right of candidates to place poll watchers at election sites as the cover for

stationing political operatives who will challenge the credentials of likely Democratic voters, especially in minority neighborhoods where the overwhelming majority of those who cast ballots are expected to vote for the Democrats. With control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate hanging on the distribution of a relatively small number of votes in a limited number of highly contested races, the Republicans calculate they can help shift the outcome by using bullying tactics to suppress the vote.

Such methods are not entirely new. For more than half of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party, which politically dominated the US South, intimidated black voters from participating in elections through a combination of Jim Crow laws and physical terror. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, part of the majority on the US Supreme Court that handed the 2000 election to Bush, began his political career as a Republican lawyer enforcing literacy tests to keep Hispanics from voting in Arizona.

Poll watchers are barred by law from harassing voters. They have no right, for example, to demand that voters produce ID's or other proofs of citizenship or residency. There are federal civil rights and election laws that make such practices a crime.

Yet the Republican operation to intimidate would-be voters has evoked barely a whimper of protest from the Democratic Party. This is consistent with the prostration of the Democrats before the Republican assault on democratic rights, demonstrated first in their refusal to seriously fight the impeachment conspiracy against Clinton, then in their half-hearted effort to halt the theft of the 2000 presidential election, and finally in their support for Bush's unprecedented attack on civil

liberties, carried out in the name of the “war on terrorism.”

An indication of the methods to be expected of the Republicans on Tuesday was seen in early balloting last month. According to Democratic Party officials, on October 21 five Republican poll watchers showed up at the courthouse in heavily-Democratic Pine Bluff, Arkansas, a key district in the contest between incumbent Republican Senator Tim Hutchinson and Democratic candidate Attorney General Mark Pryor.

According to eyewitness accounts, the Republican supporters only questioned African-American voters. Democratic spokesman Guy Cecil commented, “They were literally going up to them and saying, ‘Before you vote, I want to see your identification.’” Some potential voters were also photographed.

Trey Ashcraft, chairman of the Jefferson County Election Commission, summoned a deputy from the Sheriff’s Office several times to escort poll watcher Diane Jones out of the clerk’s office for interfering with the voting process.

Voter Bonita McCray told the *Pine Bluff Commercial* that she was asked by poll watcher Allison Johnson to produce her identification. “When she insisted, I put my ID back in my purse,” she said. “They had no right to do this.” Officials in the clerk’s office, however, said that a number of voters were intimidated by the harassment and left without casting their ballots.

Charlotte Munson, Pine Bluff Deputy Clerk, reported that a Republican poll watcher walked behind her counter to photograph voter information she had pulled up on her computer screen.

Such conduct is illegal and unconstitutional. Under Arkansas state law, challenges can be made only after a voter has cast his or her ballot. None of the Republican violators were detained or arrested.

In Michigan, state Republicans are planning to send several hundred “watchers” on Election Day to challenge voters from heavily Democratic precincts in urban and minority areas. In Detroit, which is overwhelmingly African-American, it is accepted by both parties that more than 90 percent of voters who go to the polls on Tuesday will vote for Democratic candidates.

In Florida, the Democratic Party filed suit last Thursday to block Republicans from massing poll watchers at voting precincts in Miami-Dade County.

Circuit Judge Eleanor Schockett issued a ruling November 1 prohibiting the Emergency Campaign to Stop Bill McBride, a Republican political action committee, from placing observers in 450 of 553 Miami-Dade polling places. Bill McBride is the Democratic challenger to Governor Jeb Bush, the president’s brother.

The Republican committee had attempted to side-step a county law that requires each potential observer to submit a separate application, and submitted instead a compiled list of applicants. Regulations also require “watchers” to represent political parties or candidates. The Florida Republican Party has now denied any official connection to the anti-McBride committee, but made no public statement to that effect prior to the Democrats’ lawsuit.

Also in Florida, Governor Bush plans to utilize a list of allegedly ineligible voters to bar approximately 94,000 people from participating in the gubernatorial election. This same list—which includes felons and deceased individuals—was exposed as vastly inaccurate during the 2000 presidential election. Even the company that generated the list, DBT Online, has admitted it is “seriously flawed.” Nevertheless, Florida election authorities plan to utilize it to bar voters from casting their ballots.



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