

Vote tampering feared in US presidential race

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14 September 2004

Only seven weeks remain until Election Day in the United States, and the charged atmosphere surrounding the reelection campaign of the Bush administration has focused increasing attention on voting and vote-counting procedures that have led millions to lose confidence that their ballots will be fairly cast and tabulated.

The vote-counting suspicions are centered on the continued use of antiquated equipment in some localities, the introduction in others of electronic voting systems that provide no paper trail for checking vote totals, and the fact that, according to one advocacy organization, the central tabulators used in 30 states to count up to 2 million votes at once are susceptible to hacking and vote-tampering (See: "Consumer organisation highlights security hole in US vote-counting system").

Following the vote-counting debacle in Florida in 2000 that led to the installation of George Bush by a 5-4 majority of the US Supreme Court, Congress passed the misleadingly named "Help America Vote Act."

Among the provisions of this legislation was the appropriation of federal funds to states for upgrading voting equipment. Most of the money was not distributed until June 2004, however, and the states have until 2006 to install the new voting machines. As a result, according to a report in the *Washington Post*, about 32 million voters in 19 states will still use the punch-card ballots that led to the "hanging chads" in Florida four years ago.

Some 72 percent of Ohio's voters, for instance, will be using punch-card ballots this year, and eight other closely contested states also continue to use this procedure.

The percentage of voters using electronic machines is expected to more than double in comparison to the last presidential election, but the new computerized equipment in most cases does not provide any paper record alongside the electronic vote. Critics have pointed out that the countless automated teller machines around the country provide receipts, but there is no similar protection for voters that would provide proof that their ballots have been correctly recorded.

Fears of vote-tampering and vote suppression are far from exaggerated or imaginary. The most elementary democratic procedures, including a provision that would allow voters to register and cast their ballots at the same time, on Election Day, are not even considered by the Democratic or Republican politicians. Voting procedures remain a chaotic patchwork based on laws that differ for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Procedures for independent and working class candidates to obtain ballot status vary similarly, and in most cases are prohibitive.

The Help America Vote Act will no more effectively extend and defend the right to vote than the much-touted campaign finance "reform" legislation sponsored by senators McCain and Feingold several years ago has loosened the grip of the super-rich on US election campaigns. Despite the promises of the big business politicians, every supposed reform only succeeds in creating new loopholes and new means for maintaining the "dollar democracy" in which wealth determines the outcome of the vote.

The 2002 bill, for instance, introduced voter identification requirements. According to a "compromise" between Republicans and Democrats, first-time voters who register by mail must include an acceptable ID or show such identification at the polls. States are permitted to add additional requirements. Florida and Missouri, for instance, are among 17 states that require all voters to produce identification when they vote. Many poorer voters have no driver's license or other acceptable ID.

Another stipulation in the 2002 bill is the requirement that states provide provisional ballots to voters whose names aren't on the rolls when they arrive to cast their ballots. Voters would then be able to cast a ballot, and officials could determine their eligibility afterward. One problem, however, is that many states refuse to count a ballot if it is cast in the wrong precinct or congressional district, thus effectively disenfranchising a voter because of an official error. In a recent Chicago election, less than 10 percent of 5,914 provisional ballots were counted.

States are also requiring that voters casting provisional ballots fill out complex affidavits. The time-consuming paperwork amounts to a new kind of literacy test that will have the effect of discouraging voters.

In general, the Republicans are spearheading efforts such as these to suppress the votes of poor people and minority workers, in the expectation that most of these would be cast for the Democrats. The Democrats, however, are carrying out their own attacks on democratic rights, in the form of efforts to deny ballot status to candidates of the Socialist Equality Party and others running in opposition to the two major parties. Though Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry has issued a mild statement warning of vote suppression, the Democrats are neither willing nor able to appeal to the millions of workers who are being effectively disenfranchised.

The denial of the right to vote to convicted felons is one of the major techniques of political disenfranchisement. Alabama Republican Party Chairman Marty Connors did not mince words when he declared last year, "As frank as I can be, we're opposed to [restoring voting rights] because felons don't tend to vote Republican."

With the explosive growth of the US prison population in the past 20 years, this is no small question. Forty-eight states deny the right to vote to prison inmates, 33 of these states continue to deny the vote to parolees, and 29 deny it to those on probation. Fourteen states permanently forbid felons from voting, even after they have served their sentences and are no longer on probation or parole. The total of disenfranchised citizens is about 4.7 million. As a result of these provisions, 13 percent of African-American men are denied the right to vote.

While these efforts at disenfranchisement are more prevalent in the South, they are by no means confined to the states of the old Confederacy. In Ohio, for instance, the Prison Reform Advocacy Center has sued the state, asking a federal judge to remedy a situation in which local election boards have given false information to released felons trying to have their voting rights restored. When procedures were tested recently, 21 of Ohio's 88 election boards gave wrong information to individuals posing as felons who inquired about the procedure for registering. Some boards falsely said that the felons would have to first complete parole. Others claimed incorrectly that documents proving they had been released from prison were required.

Florida is a major focus of attention in the upcoming election, given its pivotal role in Bush's narrow "victory" in the Electoral College in 2000. Earlier this summer, civil rights advocates raised an alarm in connection with Florida's latest efforts to purge felons from the lists of registered voters. Florida's governor is Jeb Bush, the brother of the president.

The Florida Secretary of State, Glenda Hood, was accused of implementing a plan whose methodology resulted in leaving Hispanic voters, who are more likely to vote Republican, on the rolls, while purging many thousands of black voters.

It was also found that more than 2,100 voters were incorrectly listed on the felon purge list, where Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 3 to 1. Ms. Hood—appointed by Governor Bush to succeed the notorious Katharine Harris, whose rulings contributed to the theft of the 2000 election—claimed ignorance and ditched the felon list. The governor called the list an oversight. The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law and other groups, however, remained suspicious. "Florida is absolutely committed to blocking voters," said Barbara Arnwine, the director of the Lawyers Committee.

The felon list is only one of the methods being utilized. According to *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, "the smell of voter suppression coming out of Florida is getting stronger." Herbert pointed out that the Florida Department of Law Enforcement has sent dozens of armed state troopers into the homes of elderly black voters in the city of Orlando in recent months, allegedly pursuing an investigation of voter fraud. The pretext for this obvious attempt at intimidation is an allegation involving absentee ballots that arose during the city's mayoral election six months ago.

"The officers were armed and in plain clothes," Herbert reported. "For elderly African-American voters, who remember the terrible torment inflicted on blacks who tried to vote in the South in the 1950s and 60s, the sight of armed police officers coming into their homes to interrogate them about voting is

chilling indeed." As Herbert points out, no charges need ever emerge from this exercise. Many voters have already expressed alarm, as a result of the raids, about using absentee ballots.

The signs of voter suppression in connection with the upcoming elections demonstrate that the 2000 vote scandal was by no means a peculiar or exceptional event. Attacks on the right to vote are endemic to the US political system, and underscore the hypocrisy of the pontifications by the government and both major parties on the merits of free elections elsewhere. Even former President Jimmy Carter, recently returned from Venezuela, where he acknowledged the basic fairness of the vote that defeated the recall of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, suggested that voting procedures in the US were far inferior, and that election observers would probably refuse to even carry out similar duties in this country unless procedures were improved.

The current attacks on the right to vote can be understood only in the light of the historical record. The 15th Amendment to the US Constitution, granting the right to vote to former slaves, required a Civil War. The 19th Amendment, finally extending the right to women, was the product of nearly a century of struggle. The mass struggles of the labor and civil rights movements were needed before the days of poll taxes, literacy tests and other means of denying the vote to Southern blacks were ended.

For the past quarter-century, however, there has been a growing onslaught aimed at undoing the effects of earlier reforms. There is no constituency within the ruling establishment to defend the right to vote, just as there is no constituency to defend other democratic rights. The enormous growth of social polarization in recent decades has made it impossible for the ruling elite to live with many of its previous concessions on democratic rights. Even elections in which only 50 percent of the population votes and tens of millions of workers and poor people are too disgusted and alienated to cast ballots for the two major parties are no longer considered "safe," and more active methods of voter suppression and tampering are required.

It will take massive political struggles to defeat these new attacks on democratic rights today, struggles that pose the need for the international unity of the working class against the profit system that breeds inequality and is incompatible with elementary democratic rights.



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