

US elections: Republicans marshal “poll watchers” to suppress working class vote

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The Republican Party has announced plans to place thousands of recruits in polling places in many closely contested states on Election Day. These so-called “poll watchers” will be tasked with challenging the credentials of would-be voters in predominantly Democratic urban centers.

Republican spokesmen describe these efforts as an attempt to prevent voter fraud and maintain the “integrity of the vote.” They claim that pro-Democratic registration drives, which have produced a pre-election surge in newly registered voters, particularly in black, Hispanic and urban working class centers, are riddled with fraud and illegality. They have failed, however, to produce any significant evidence to back up their charges.

The Republican crusade for voting “integrity” is a transparent ruse. The obvious purpose of the operation is to disqualify minority and working class voters and suppress voter turnout.

The plans of the Republican Party are such a flagrant exercise in voter intimidation that they provoked a sharp editorial in the *New York Times*, which noted on Tuesday: “There is a real danger that these challengers could be used to block eligible voters from casting their ballots or, just as bad, to drastically slow down voting in some parts of the state.... Election Day voting is far more fragile than people realize. A small number of challengers, strategically placed and up to no good, could disenfranchise thousands of voters, and even change the outcome of a presidential election.”

In Ohio alone, Republicans have hired 3,600 party operatives, to be paid \$100 each. The challengers will be concentrated mainly in cities such as Cleveland and Cincinnati, and particularly in neighborhoods most heavily populated by black workers who vote overwhelmingly Democratic.

Other key states that have been targeted include Florida and Arizona. Ohio, Florida and Missouri are the only closely contested states that require poll watchers to be registered before Election Day. It is likely that in all of the so-called “battleground” states the Republicans will engage in similar tactics.

The purpose of the Republican campaign is three-fold. First is to directly block tens of thousands of registered voters from casting a ballot. The party has already submitted a list of 35,000 voters in Ohio whose registrations, it maintains, are invalid. The list consists of voters whose registration notices were sent in the mail, but returned to the state as undeliverable. For the most part, this discrepancy can be accounted for by the high mobility of poor and working class voters, who tend to change addresses more frequently than upper-income people.

The notification sent to any registered voter who subsequently moved would as a matter of course be returned to election offices and stamped undeliverable, since postal authorities are directed not to forward registration notices. The Republican Party is planning on challenging any of these voters who show up at the polls on November 2.

The second aim is to disrupt and delay the voting process and intimidate voters, so that many who arrive at the polls may decide, out of fear or

frustration, to leave without casting a ballot. As the *Times* editorial notes, “One of the gravest dangers is that partisan teams will challenge many, if not all, voters in selected precincts, with the goal of slowing voting to a standstill. In Ohio, every challenge will require a deliberation over whether the person in question should be allowed to vote. In presidential elections, lines in urban polling places are often hours long under normal conditions. If the challengers can add 10 minutes per voter, waiting times may become so long that thousands of voters will simply give up.”

Long lines will especially impact working class voters, who will not have time to wait hours to cast a ballot.

According to Ohio state law, a challenge can be made if the challenger has a reasonable doubt that the voter is not a citizen, is not at least 18 years old, or is not a legal resident of the precinct where he or she has come to vote. If a challenge is made, an election official must make a decision as to whether the challenge is valid. Voters who refuse to answer any of the questions put to them by the official will be denied the right to vote.

The heavy dose of intimidation involved in the process was made clear by the *Advocate*, a central Ohio newspaper, which noted: “Voters who are challenged will be asked to fill out a two-page form stating their name, if they are a US citizen, where they were born, if they have resided in the state 30 days, the names of two persons who know where they live, the county and precinct in which they live, and if they are of legal voting age. The bottom of the form contains the following warning in bold type: ‘Whoever commits election falsification is guilty of a felony of the fifth degree.’”

A similar lengthy process will be necessary in Florida. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, a Florida newspaper, “State law says poll watchers’ challenges must be addressed on-site by election workers before a citizen is given or denied a ballot. In many cases it will require calls to election headquarters to double-check voter registration or asking the citizen to sign another affidavit. If the challenge can’t be resolved, the would-be voter may cast a provisional ballot and the county canvassing board would decide later if the citizen is qualified.”

Recent court rulings in both Florida and Ohio have held that provisional ballots—ballots that will be set aside and considered only after Election Day—will be deemed valid only if they were cast in the correct precinct. The votes of citizens who are challenged because they went to the wrong precinct will be thrown out.

A third aim of the Republican operation could be to generate such havoc, disarray, and even violence that the entire process will be thrown into doubt, and the results of the election will be uncertain in key districts or states. This would be particularly helpful for the Republican Party if it begins to look as though the Democrats will win Ohio or other pivotal states.

Ohio is one of many states that have experienced a surge of newly registered voters. The Republican Party may seek to use the uncertainty generated by its own challengers—together with its pre-election cries of

fraud—to throw the election into the courts and call the result into question.

The recruitment of vote challengers follows a number of other instances of vote suppression. In Nevada, a company hired by Republicans to register voters reportedly filed forms filled out by Republicans and threw out forms filled out by Democrats. Republicans have also challenged new registrations in other closely contested states, including Colorado.

There are a number of lawsuits pending—including suits challenging the use of touch screen voting machines with no paper trail and suits contesting restrictions on the counting of provisional ballots—that could affect the outcome of a close election or throw the results into question.

If the elections are very close in some states, the final decision may come down to the counting of provisional ballots, which could number in the hundreds of thousands and take days or weeks to tally. Armies of lawyers have been readied by both sides to contest the results in different states. All of this means that what happened in Florida in 2000 could be repeated in a number of states when the election is held next Tuesday.

The steps being taken by the Republican Party to suppress the vote are a continuation and deepening of anti-democratic tactics it employed in 2000. In that election, the Republican Party did not use poll challengers in a systematic manner. However, the Republican administration of Florida, headed by Jeb Bush, the brother of George W. Bush, engaged in voter intimidation, particularly of black voters, to depress the vote for the Democratic candidate, Al Gore.

Bush was ultimately handed the presidency by a Supreme Court decision halting a recount in Florida that would have ensured a more accurate determination of the will of the voting population—and most likely have thrown the state into the Democratic column, giving Gore, who won the national popular contest by 500,000 votes, sufficient electoral votes to defeat Bush.

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia argued at the time that American citizens did not have a constitutional right to vote for the president of the United States, and suggested that the Republican-controlled legislature in Florida could legally ignore the popular vote in the state and select its own presidential electors. Scalia—the ideological leader of the most right-wing bloc on the Court—ridiculed election laws in Florida that stipulated that the “intent of the voter” was the criterion for a legal vote. He essentially placed the onus for having one’s vote counted on the voter, suggesting that any technical ballot deficiency could be used to discard votes.

It was during the mid-term elections of 2002 that the Republican Party first used poll challengers on a broad basis to suppress voter turnout and intimidate voters. There were many reports of voters deciding not to vote as a result of Republican provocations.

The machinations of the Republican Party are a naked self-indictment of the policies of the Bush Administration. This is a government that exudes contempt and fear of democratic expression, and is fully aware of the deep popular hostility aroused by its policies.

The Bush Administration came to power through criminal means, has ruled through such means, and has every intention of remaining in office through such means. For the social layers represented by the Bush administration, the vote is not a right, but a privilege to be granted only in so far as the decision is the “correct” one.

The use of challengers is not the only means that the Republican Party is prepared to use to remain in power. Earlier in the year, administration officials floated the idea of postponing the elections in the event of a terrorist attack, and this remains a possibility.

While it is the Republicans who are spearheading the voter suppression drive, the Democrats have themselves carried out a systematic and reactionary attempt to deny ballot access to third-party candidates. Many of the same methods employed by the Republican Party, including arbitrary challenges of legally registered voters, have been used by the Democratic Party to strike signatures from nominating petitions submitted by the Socialist Equality Party and the campaign of Ralph Nader.

The Bush administration was able to hijack the 2000 election only because of the cowardice and prostration of the Democrats, and has carried out its reactionary policies without any serious opposition from the Democratic Party and the “liberal” establishment. The Democratic Party represents a rival faction within the same ruling elite. It is more concerned about the possible emergence of an oppositional movement from the left that appeals to the social interests of working people than it is concerned about the anti-democratic maneuvers of the Republicans.

The tactics being employed by the Republican Party in this election are not entirely new. They recall methods used for decades in the Jim Crow South—then controlled by the Democratic Party—to prevent blacks from voting. Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist got his start in politics as a Republican lawyer enforcing literacy tests against Hispanic voters in Arizona.

However, in its openness and scope, the attack on voting rights in 2004 marks a new stage in the assault on democratic rights. The attack on the right to vote represented by the Republican campaign is not an episodic phase in American politics. It is an indication of the deep crisis of the entire political system. It is no longer possible to have a “routine” election in the U.S. What is involved is a fundamental breakdown of American democracy.

What lies behind this breakdown? This question receives no serious treatment within the media or from the Democratic Party. At its root, the crisis of the electoral process is a product of the deep and irreconcilable conflicts that run through American society. It is impossible to maintain democratic forms of rule under conditions of enormous social inequality, a growing economic crisis, and the determination of the ruling oligarchy to pursue an ever more ruthless policy of military aggression and social reaction.

The attacks being mounted by the Republican Party on the right to vote are directed not simply against the Democratic Party, but rather against the democratic rights of the working class. The two-party system in the US serves ever more openly as the handmaiden of a financial oligarchy, separated from the broad mass of the people by an unbridgeable class divide and incapable of registering or reflecting their needs and concerns.

In the end, the only means by which this oligarchy can impose its will are those of repression and dictatorship. The defense of basic democratic rights is directly bound up with the struggle to build an independent political movement of the working people that fights to transform economic life on the basis of egalitarian, socialist principles. This is the perspective that underlies the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates in the 2004 election.



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