

As early balloting begins: tensions build over Bush vote-suppression drive

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20 October 2004

Early voting began Monday in five US states, including the critical battleground state of Florida, with conflicts already erupting over the efforts by the Republican Party and the Bush campaign to depress voter turnout in working class and minority areas. These efforts are especially pronounced in those states where a close election will be decided.

In a foretaste of the likely post-election struggle, Florida's Republican-controlled state government won a round when the state Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit brought by labor unions and upheld a decision that provisional ballots will be counted only if voters cast them at the correct precinct.

Provisional ballots were introduced after the 2000 election fiasco to allow voters whose names were wrongly struck from registration lists to cast ballots. Instead of being turned away from the polls, such voters are given provisional ballots that are sequestered until their registration can be checked after election day. The law states that those who are, in fact, registered will have their ballots opened and counted.

Florida Secretary of State Glenda Hood, an appointee of Governor Jeb Bush, the president's brother, ruled that provisional ballots will be counted only if they are cast in the precinct where the voter is registered. This insures that many thousands of such ballots, cast by validly registered voters, will be destroyed rather than counted.

Many voters make the mistake of going to the wrong precinct on election day and are not allowed to vote there, since their names do not appear on the registration rolls for that geographical area. In states such as Florida, this is partly due to frequent changes in precinct boundaries resulting from rapid population growth. The problem is likely to be exacerbated this year by the impact of four hurricanes, which have destroyed many familiar polling sites.

In Florida, this kind of error is not politically neutral: it disproportionately affects new and first-time voters, and voters in poor neighborhoods where hurricane destruction is more widespread because of shoddy building and slower reconstruction. Hence the Republican Party's desire to restrict provisional ballots as much as possible.

Several Florida unions filed suit against Hood's decision, seeking to compel the state to count all provisional ballots cast by registered voters, whether the precinct was correct or not. They argued that thousands of voters, mainly poor and minority, would be denied the right to vote. A unanimous state Supreme Court upheld the state government action.

There are other signs of efforts to depress the minority vote in Florida. Elections officials in several big counties restricted the number of early-voting sites or refused to open any in minority neighborhoods. In Volusia County, only an NAACP lawsuit compelled the county to open up more than one early-voting site, which was located 30 miles from Daytona Beach, where most black residents of the county live.

In Duval County, which includes the large north Florida city of Jacksonville, Hood announced Monday that a few additional early-voting sites would be added in response to demonstrations outside the county elections office. Duval County Elections Supervisor John Stafford abruptly resigned over the weekend, citing health problems. He had suffered a heart attack, but that occurred months ago.

Duval County officials initially proposed only a single early-voting site for a county of one million people, whose largest city, Jacksonville, sprawls over 840 square miles. The county itself is larger than the state of Rhode Island.

The county has also aggressively used technicalities to disqualify voters. Many large Florida counties have rejected voter registration forms as improperly filled out when there was no check mark in boxes affirming that the registrants were citizens, mentally competent, and not felons. In Duval County, 45 percent of such rejected registrations came from black voters.

In the 2000 election, Duval County disqualified 27,000 ballots, most of them cast by black voters, as "overvotes." These errors were caused by a confusing presidential ballot, similar to the notorious "butterfly ballot" used in Palm Beach County. The defective layout of the ballot form was compounded by incorrect printed instructions, which told voters to cast a vote on every page, even though the presidential candidates were spread over two pages.

The intensity of the conflict in Florida demonstrates an important fact of American political life. The political tensions that erupted in the month-long post-election crisis of 2000 have not subsided. On the contrary, the conflict is resuming at an even higher level, two weeks before election day.

While the Democratic Party capitulated to the theft of the 2000 election, and the entire political and media establishment pretends that the Supreme Court intervention in *Bush v. Gore* is ancient history, tens of millions of working people regard the Bush administration as illegitimate and unelected, and are rightly concerned that a new effort to steal a presidential election is

underway.

Methods as crude or even cruder than those in Florida are being employed in many closely contested states. In Nevada, a company hired by the Republican Party to conduct voter registration has reportedly thrown away registration forms for Democratic voters and kept only those for Republicans. A former employee of Sproul & Associates told a Las Vegas television station about the company's actions. Sproul is conducting similar voter registration drives in Oregon, West Virginia, Minnesota and other states.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the mayor, a Democrat, asked for a larger than usual number of ballots to be printed to accommodate the expected surge in new voters. The county executive, Scott Walker, a Republican, who is also the local co-chairman of the Bush campaign, initially refused the request, citing the danger of fraud—the usual pretext given by the Republican Party for its efforts to prevent people from voting.

In Colorado, where 165,000 new voters have registered, officials of the Republican-controlled state government have warned of potential vote fraud and sent hundreds of registrations to the attorney general's office for review, with the threat of prosecution.

In New Mexico, the state Republican Party sued the secretary of state, a Democrat, to require that new voters show identification at the polls, but lost the case. The demand for IDs, and particularly photo IDs, is aimed at poor and immigrant voters, who frequently do not carry ID or are reluctant to show it to authorities.

In Michigan, the Bush administration itself intervened, arguing in federal court against a Democratic challenge to the rules established by the state's Republican secretary of state, which restricts the counting of provisional ballots in the same manner as Florida.

Meanwhile, across the state line in Ohio, a federal judge threw out similar rules established by Republican Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, ordering that provisional ballots be counted regardless of the precinct where they are cast.

Justice Department spokesman Mark Corallo denied that the decision to intervene in the Michigan case was intended to further Bush's election campaign, claiming instead that it represented defense of state authority. "Congress made an explicit decision not to disturb states' long-standing authority to determine how ballots are to be counted, and the United States believes that courts must respect that congressional decision," Corallo said.

That comment is remarkable for its barefaced hypocrisy, given that Corallo, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Bush himself all owe their jobs to the US Supreme Court decision in 2000 to disregard "states' longstanding authority to determine how ballots are to be counted," by overturning the Florida Supreme Court's determination that the state constitution required a full recount of the ballots cast in that state.

Both Republican and Democratic officials have warned that if the November 2 vote is close, as seems likely, the final result could well be determined in the courts. In a fundraising letter to big contributors, Bush campaign general counsel Tom Josefiak warned that Florida-style litigation may take place in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, New Mexico and other states. The result might not be known for "days or weeks," he wrote. Each side has recruited tens of thousands of lawyers for duty at polling stations

on election day and for subsequent lawsuits.

In a significant interview with the *New York Times* October 17, former Clinton White House chief of staff Leon Panetta expressed concern about the long-term implications of the mounting political conflicts. "Trust in our basic institutions is being undermined in a number of ways: in corporate America, with our religious community, in the press, and certainly in government, particularly with the revelations of the failure of our intelligence systems in Iraq," Panetta told the *Times*. "Now we're in an era of disputed elections. Everyone would like to believe the Constitution is designed to resolve these disputes, but I don't know how many national elections you can take to the Supreme Court and not at some point have an explosion in this country."

Underlying the conflicts between the two parties, which represent rival factions within the US ruling elite, are deep-going social tensions arising from the ever-growing concentration of wealth and social polarization between a financial aristocracy and the broad mass of working people. This social chasm—compounded by war, worsening economic insecurity, corporate corruption, and attacks on democratic rights—is beginning to find expression in a political radicalization of among broad layers of the population.

The growth of political engagement, albeit distorted by the prism of bourgeois politics, is expressed in a striking increase in the number of people registering to vote, the vast majority of them working class and minority voters. In Florida, for instance, there are more than one million additional potential voters compared to 2000, including 200,000 more black voters. Ohio has registered 600,000 new voters compared to four years ago, the bulk of them in industrial working class centers like Cleveland, Toledo, Cincinnati and Dayton.

Similarly huge surges in registration have been reported in Pennsylvania, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada, among other states. Much of this new registration reflects popular hostility to Bush: in Philadelphia, for example, Democratic registration is up by 35,000 compared to four years ago, while Republican registration has fallen 22,000. Democrats also gained in the four large counties that comprise the Philadelphia suburbs.

In Ohio, according to a detailed analysis by the *New York Times*, new registrations in low-income and minority neighborhoods are up 250 percent compared to four years ago, while new registrations in better-off Republican areas are up only 25 percent. In Florida, the corresponding figures are increases of 60 percent and 12 percent. In St. Louis, Missouri, 50,000 have newly registered, compared to only a few thousand in 2000.



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