

US Republicans target ACORN: the great “voter fraud” fraud

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A community activist group called ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) has become a lightning rod for Republican attacks as the US presidential election approaches.

In Wednesday night's presidential debate, John McCain warned that ACORN "is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy." He demanded to "know the full extent of Senator Obama's relationship" to this purportedly criminal organization.

In a recent fundraising email, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin warned that "far-left groups in this country will do anything to help the Obama-Biden Democrats win the White House and maintain their majorities in Congress. The left-wing activist group, ACORN, is now under investigation for voter registration fraud in a number of battleground states.... We can't allow leftist groups like ACORN to steal this election."

ACORN is now at the center of a media controversy fueled by Republican accusations. The FBI has announced an investigation, as have a number of states, counties and municipalities.

What is this group that is allegedly responsible for "destroying the fabric of democracy"?

ACORN describes itself as an organization of "low- and moderate-income people with over 400,000 member families" which focuses on such goals as raising the minimum wage and expanding access to affordable housing. It unreservedly supports the Democratic Party and has endorsed Barack Obama for the presidency. In the lead-up to the 2008 election, ACORN has launched a major voter registration campaign to bring poor and minority people—who tend to vote Democratic—to the polls in the upcoming

election. It claims to have registered over 1.3 million voters, largely in critical "battleground" states.

There is no evidence that ACORN has committed fraud, a charge that implies intent. As is typical of registration and petition drives, ACORN has hired low-paid workers to carry out registrations. Some of these workers, in an effort to take home more pay, have invented the names of registrants. However, ACORN claims that it examines all registration material and flags forgeries in an attempt to assist state officials in prosecuting cases of fraud. In fact, ACORN claims that Republican officials have used the same registration cards ACORN has flagged for attention as a means of discrediting the group's operations.

In any event, the Republicans have yet to explain the mechanics of how the supposedly false voting cards would actually result in thousands of false votes. The hue and cry over finding names like "Mickey Mouse" on a registration form begs the question: How could anyone cast a ballot under such a name? If the voters are fictional, as the Republicans claim, presumably they will not show up at the polls.

The Republican charge of "voter fraud" is itself a fraud. Through sensational accusations the Republicans hope to resuscitate their faltering presidential and Congressional campaigns. These charges could also be used to cast doubt over the legitimacy of the electoral outcome.

More fundamentally, however, the aim is to suppress the vote among sections of the working class and youth in an attempt to manipulate the outcome of the election. This is the real "voter fraud"—and there is a history to it.

The current charges against ACORN are only the latest chapter in this right-wing campaign to suppress voting rights. The campaign to restrict the franchise, found its most anti-democratic expression in the US

Supreme Court's intervention in the 2000 presidential election to hand victory to Bush by means of invalidating legally cast ballots, ruling that there was no inherent right among citizens to vote for the president. (Purchase online: *The Crisis of American Democracy: The Presidential Elections of 2000 and 2004*).

Since 2000, the Republican Party has taken steps to impede the vote not seen since the days of the Jim Crow voting restrictions targeting blacks in the South. Republican strategists sense that as the most rapidly growing sections of the electorate—youth, minorities, naturalized immigrants, and workers—punish their candidates at the polls, survival will depend on limiting these groups' access to the ballot.

On October 9, the *New York Times* ran an exposé revealing that tens of thousands of voters in the "swing states" that will ultimately decide the presidential election had been purged from the election rolls, perhaps illegally.

In Ohio, the Republican Party sued the secretary of state in an effort to toss out the names of 200,000 legally registered voters for discrepancies—most likely clerical errors—in their registration data. On Thursday, the Supreme Court ruled that the Republican Party did not have the right to bring the case.

In other states, new restrictions on the right to vote are aimed at those whose homes have been foreclosed and those who lack photo identification, such as drivers' licenses.

The mainstream media conveniently forgets that the US attorneys scandal that led to the resignation of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales also arose from a Republican attempt to suppress the vote. A number of the attorneys were sacked because they did not comply with Republican pressure to expedite the prosecution of voter fraud cases, so that they would take place before the 2006 elections. For example, the US Department of Justice has found that US Attorney David Iglesias was dismissed for failing to investigate a local ACORN chapter in New Mexico. (See "Special prosecutor appointed to investigate US attorney firings")

More craven than the Republican attacks on ACORN has been the cowardly response of Barack Obama and the Democratic Party. In response to McCain's attack on ACORN, Obama disowned any relationship to the organization, which has worked feverishly on his behalf for months. Moments earlier he had disowned Bill

Ayers, the former radical routinely condemned by Republicans as a terrorist. (See "In defense of Bill Ayers") Shortly afterward he listed those he considers his true associates. These include the world's richest man, Warren Buffett, and former Federal Reserve Board head Paul Volcker, whose high interest rate "shock therapy" in 1979 was responsible for devastating many of the communities where ACORN now seeks to register impoverished voters.

The Democrats are not opposed to voter suppression in either principle or practice. They engage in it when it suits their purposes, regularly purging the nominating petitions of left-wing, and especially socialist, opponents. Barack Obama's benefactors in the Illinois state Democratic Party have twice attempted to invalidate thousands of signatures of registered voters from third party nominating petitions in order to remove Socialist Equality Party legislative candidates from the ballot—Tom Mackaman (in 2004) and Joe Parnarauskis (in 2006). Obama personally came to Danville, Illinois, to campaign against Parnarauskis. (See "Democrats conspire against voters in bid to remove SEP from ballot" and "Judge orders election board to certify Illinois SEP candidate").

The notion, peddled by the Republicans—that the great threat to American democracy is that ineligible voters might somehow cast ballots—is absurd. The US is a country where only half of the eligible population votes and where the great majority of the electorate is politically disenfranchised by the two-party duopoly of big business.

In fact, the greatest threat "to the fabric of democracy" is the capitalist class, which cannot maintain democratic norms under conditions of growing social inequality in which the vast majority of the population is increasingly impoverished.



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