

Florida governor to launch new purge of voter rolls

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Florida Governor Rick Scott has announced he will soon launch a new hunt for noncitizens on Florida's voter rolls, seeking to purge ineligible voters. The announcement comes less than two months after the US Supreme Court struck down the heart of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and just in time for the ramping up of Scott's reelection campaign.

Prior to the Supreme Court decision in June, a potential purge was being blocked by a lawsuit filed last year by a Hispanic civil rights group and two naturalized citizens. The suit cited the federal law that required voting districts in 15 states with a history of discrimination to obtain federal approval before changing the way they hold elections. The lawsuit became moot following the gutting of the Voting Rights Act in June.

Within one week of this Supreme Court decision, several states announced the implementation of new measures that will have a discriminatory impact on minority and working class voters. Looking back at last year's attempted purge of Florida's voter rolls, one can find similar targets.

At that time, the Department of Justice warned that Florida's voter purge, which targeted roughly 180,000 people, was illegal, prompting all of the state's county election supervisors to stop the purge. The list of flagged individuals, many of whom had Latino-sounding names, also turned out to be largely inaccurate.

Polk County Supervisor of Elections Lori Edwards has stated that last year's searches were sloppy and inaccurate. "They were sending us names of people to remove because they were born in Puerto Rico. It was disgusting," she reported. Puerto Ricans were granted US citizenship in 1917.

The state's initial list of suspected non-US citizens

on the voter rolls exponentially shrank from 182,000, to 2,600, to 198 just before the November election, when the state tried to restart the purge. After thousands of taxpayer dollars had been wasted, the state could not turn up any noncitizens who were registered to vote. The failed purge resulted in lawsuits by advocacy groups who said it disproportionately targeted Hispanics, Haitians, and other minority groups.

When the purges failed, Florida Republicans sought other avenues to suppress working class and minority voters. They cut the number of early voting days in half, changed ballot length restrictions so they could add frivolous constitutional amendments to 12-page ballots, and restricted voter registration.

The result last November was chaos in areas such as Miami-Dade County with large minority populations. Reportedly, these efforts discouraged at least 201,000 Floridians from voting in the presidential election last year. After the election, prominent Florida Republicans brazenly admitted that their motive had been to make it harder for Democrats to vote.

However, Governor Scott is determined to continue with a new purge, now that federal legislation has been gutted. "If there's anybody that we think isn't voting properly, from the standpoint that they don't have a right to vote, I think we need to do an investigation," he explained the very day the high court made its decision.

Scott's top election official, Ken Detzner, is now creating a new list of suspected noncitizen voters by cross-checking state voter data with the federal database SAVE (Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements), managed by the Department of Homeland Security. However, some supervisors remain irked after being promised access to SAVE last fall by Detzner, who has yet to follow through on his promise.

Myrna Pérez, deputy director of the Democracy

Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's law school, has stated that purges so close to an election should be avoided. "They offer lots of opportunities for eligible voters to get improperly removed because they frequently happen in a rushed, haphazard manner behind closed doors," she said. "The data is usually flawed."

The initial wave of voter suppression following the Voting Rights Act decision has come in states with Republican-dominated legislatures, since the immediate impact of such efforts weighs most heavily on the Democratic Party. Governor Rick Scott, a Republican, seeks a similar effect in his own reelection campaign.

The striking down of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which required preclearance of any proposed changes in voting regulations prior to an election, will also make litigation by citizens even more impotent. This is because Section 2, which was left standing, only allows citizens to obtain legal relief when suing state officials over discrimination after the election has taken place. This will potentially be the case for any new victims of Scott's antidemocratic purges.



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