

More attacks on right to vote in US states

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Since the US Supreme Court struck down the Voting Rights Act last summer, legislatures in several US states have passed or introduced bills aimed at likely Democratic voters which will make it more difficult to vote in state and federal elections. Since the beginning of 2013, nine states have enacted stricter rules on voting, using the now well-worn tactics of photo ID requirements, curtailing early and absentee voting, and even requiring proof of US citizenship.

Thus far in 2014, 19 states have either enacted or taken steps to enact measures limiting the right to vote. These include Montana, Washington, Arizona, Colorado, Alaska, Iowa, Nebraska, New York, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, West Virginia, South Carolina and Alabama, as well as the “swing states” of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Virginia. At least 11 states have introduced photo ID measures. Two states, South Carolina and Massachusetts, have introduced “proof of citizenship” measures, modeled on those recently upheld by the US Supreme Court in Kansas and Arizona (see: “US court ruling upholds state efforts to disenfranchise voters”).

At least 11 states have introduced measures aimed at intimidating participants in voter registration drives. Five states have introduced legislation that would restrict voting by mail. New Hampshire’s legislature has introduced a bill that would make it more difficult for college students to vote. The state of Florida plans to resume its purge of voter rolls, allegedly to remove convicted felons but bound to affect voters with no criminal history as well, confident that after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelby County* last summer, the federal courts will not intercede.

Democratic and Republican politicians in Ohio, one of the most populous and influential “battleground” states, are trading blows in an ongoing battle over the legislature’s and governor’s attacks on voting rights. In February, the Republican-controlled legislature reduced early voting days, ended same-day registration, simplified the process of rejecting provisional ballots and mandated

that only the Secretary of State, and not county officials, could mail out absentee ballots. At the same time, the Secretary of State moved to further curtail early voting, including on the Sunday before Election Day, which is aimed at black voters who might vote after church services.

Opposing these measures for purely partisan reasons is Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ed Fitzgerald, the executive of Cuyahoga County, where the Democratic stronghold of Cleveland is situated. Fitzgerald has asked the federal Department of Justice to investigate the Republican-driven restrictions on voting. He stated that he would be mailing out absentee ballots to all registered voters regardless of new state laws prohibiting this, citing the legal doctrine of “home rule.”

On Monday, Republicans in the Ohio legislature proposed a budget amendment that would have cut 10 percent of state funding to any county that sent out absentee ballots in violation of the new rule allowing only the Secretary of State to do so. According to the Democratic-leaning news outlet MSNBC, the proposed amendment was dropped on Tuesday, after Republican governor John Kasich asked his party members in the state House of Representatives to do so.

In late March, Wisconsin’s Republican governor Scott Walker signed into law a bill eliminating early voting on weekends. He has promised to call a special legislative session to revise the state’s voter ID law should it be overturned in federal court before the 2014 midterm elections. On Tuesday, a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts ranked Wisconsin as the third-best state for well-run elections, which includes metrics on voter turnout and average time spent waiting in line at voting precincts.

In a revealing admission, a retiring Wisconsin State Senator, Republican Dale Schultz, made the following comment on the state’s new electoral measures: “It’s just sad when a political party has so lost faith in its ideas that it’s pouring all of its energy into election mechanics ... Making it more difficult for people to vote is not a good sign for a party that wants to attract more people.”

In June 2012, then Pennsylvania State House Majority leader Mike Turzai actually admitted the real purpose of Republican efforts to “reform” voting practices, when he boasted that the state’s photo ID law would deliver its electoral college votes to Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

For their part, Democrats at the state and federal level have largely limited their opposition to the attacks on the right to vote to legal challenges and appeals to get out the vote. In the US Congress, a bill to restore the provisions of the Voting Rights Act struck down by the Supreme Court is unlikely to pass, as the Democrats have been unwilling to make any serious effort.

The partisan fighting over access to the polls reveals a society in the process of shedding the last official trappings of democratic norms. The two big business parties differ not on the core democratic principle of the right to vote, but rather on the *extent* to which the working class should be excluded from any say over political affairs, no matter how limited.

The post-*Shelby County* attacks on the right to vote occur in the context of an unprecedented assault on social rights including health care, pensions, education, even water and housing.

Earlier this month the US Supreme Court struck down monetary limits on campaign contributions, assuring that the 2014 midterm elections will be even more awash in corporate cash than usual. Given this fact and the absence of the preclearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act, the midterm elections may be the most antidemocratic event of its kind in several decades.

More and more, the underlying reality of the domination of American society by a financial oligarchy is finding its mirror image in a legal, political and electoral system that less and less resembles anything that could pass for a democracy.



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