

Mass voter disenfranchisement in US elections

Tom Carter
9 June 2016

In recent weeks, numerous reports have emerged of arbitrary mass disqualifications, tampering with registration data, confusing and arcane voting procedures, and other efforts at voter suppression in the course of the primary elections and in advance of the US general election.

According to preliminary surveys, many voters were prevented from voting because they did not understand voting regulations, particularly early registration deadlines. Others were the subject of deliberate purges of voter rolls, the switching of their party affiliation without their knowledge or consent, their omission from the rolls at their polling places even though they were properly registered, or otherwise being turned away from polling places.

The brazen and provocative character of these voter suppression efforts is linked to the reactionary 2013 Supreme Court ruling gutting the enforcement provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a major reform of the period of civil rights struggles. The Voting Rights Act struck down arbitrary voting restrictions at the state and local level, a pillar of the Jim Crow system of segregation in the South.

Since the 2013 Supreme Court ruling, the Democrats have not introduced a single bill onto the floor of either house of the federal legislature that would mitigate the impact of the decision. Emboldened by this climate, state legislatures have unleashed a barrage of anti-democratic measures, such as “voter ID” laws, which discriminate against working class, poor, elderly and minority voters.

Voter ID laws are already in effect in 33 of 50 states. This year, new restrictions on voting will be operative in 17 states for the first time in a presidential election: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Voter disenfranchisement, gerrymandering and other forms of electoral corruption are increasingly accepted as a normal part of the American political system. Both capitalist parties have engaged in redistricting efforts that have twisted America’s election districts into absurd shapes that have no historical or geographical justification.

New anti-democratic provisions are often passed in election years by state legislatures in violation of federal law with the knowledge that by the time a judge can determine that the provisions are illegal, the elections will have already taken place and the desired result obtained.

The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Education Fund estimates that new voter ID laws will effectively disenfranchise 875,000 Latino voters this year.

The state of Missouri passed a voter ID law in May that is expected to disenfranchise 220,000 mainly poor and working class voters, although it is not expected to go into effect before this year’s November election. Wisconsin’s new law is expected to disenfranchise 300,000 voters.

Ohio election officials have purged tens of thousands of citizens from poor areas from the voter rolls on the spurious grounds that they have not “voted enough” in the past. The American Civil Liberties Union has filed a lawsuit in an attempt to halt the purges. If voters who have been purged do not re-register by a certain deadline they may turn up at polling stations in November only to discover that they are not able to vote.

“These people are perfectly eligible to vote,” Ohio ACLU Legal Director Freda Levenson told reporters. “They’ve lived in the same house since they’ve been registered, they haven’t moved, they haven’t been convicted of a felony, and they didn’t cancel their registration.”

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Georgia has also filed a lawsuit in an attempt to prevent similar purges of the voter rolls. The lawsuit alleges that purges of voters who have not “voted enough” violate the National Voter Registration Act of 1993.

On Tuesday, just as the polls were opening in six states, including California, multiple TV and media networks announced that Hillary Clinton had secured the Democratic nomination in a transparent effort to discourage supporters of the self-described “socialist” Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders from voting. The report was purportedly based on a survey of anonymous superdelegates; neither Clinton nor Sanders have secured the 2,383 pledged delegates necessary to secure the nomination without superdelegates.

A lawsuit filed by Election Justice USA, a voter advocacy group, alleges that 125,000 Democratic voters were dropped from the rolls and prevented from voting in the New York primary elections. More than 200 voters have joined the lawsuit. The group has also alleged that voters who requested provisional or affidavit ballots were falsely told that “there was no such thing.”

The attorney general’s office in New York received more than 1,000 complaints from voters, a rise from 150 reports in the 2012 elections. At least one voter reported a forged signature on a voter registration sheet.

In California, the most populous state, reports are emerging of many voters receiving the wrong ballots, with registered Democrats receiving Republican ballots or non-party ballots. Voters who received non-party ballots may have cast them without realizing that doing so would preclude them from voting in the presidential primary for either party. A vote cast with the wrong ballot cannot be corrected.

The “non-party” ballot contains blank pages where the presidential candidates would otherwise be listed, with only an arrow and the words “GO TO NEXT PAGE.” A voter receiving the ballot could read the 23-page document, packed with dense legalese, from beginning to end without seeing the names “Clinton,” “Sanders” or “Trump.”

Under existing California regulations, a person who is designated as a “no party preference” (NPP) voter in California would have had to re-register as a Democrat or Republican by May 23 in order to vote for the

presidential candidates of either party. There are approximately 2.2 million such voters in California. This means that a Bernie Sanders supporter who was listed on the rolls as an independent or “NPP” voter, and who did not know about the May 23 deadline, could have been handed a ballot on June 7 that did not have the name of his candidate on it.

Sanders campaigners were compelled to issue emergency instructions such as the following to their supporters: “California, DO NOT WRITE IN Bernie Sanders on your ballot. If you do not see Bernie Sanders’ name printed on your ballot, then you have the wrong ballot and you need to exchange it for the proper ballot. Do NOT send it back, go exchange it for A Dem party CROSSOVER ballot.”

The *Los Angeles Times* reported “chaos” at polling places on June 7 in an article headlined “Broken machines, incomplete voter rolls leave some wondering whether their ballots will count.” The article describes many polling places with broken or jammed machines, missing voter rolls, purged lists of party members, and poll workers who themselves did not understand the applicable rules and regulations.

Many voters were immediately handed a pink provisional ballot because the standard voting infrastructure had broken down. Others protested the provisional ballots because they are not counted immediately, take longer to read and fill out, and are frequently rejected as improperly marked--at a rate of about 10 to 15 percent.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact