

As federal judge orders Georgia to count tossed-out ballots

## Voter suppression looms large in 2018 US elections

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In the upcoming 2018 nationwide federal and state elections, many Republican-controlled state governments have intentionally adopted barefaced tactics to suppress voting rights, especially of minority and poor voters. Deliberate voter suppression has become a highly contentious issue with barely two weeks left before Election Day on November 6, when voters cast ballots for all 435 members of the US House of Representatives, 35 US Senators, 36 state governorships, and thousands of members of state legislatures.

Nowhere is this tactic being practiced more energetically than in the southeastern US state of Georgia, where the Republican Party's candidate for governor, Brian Kemp, is also overseeing the elections as its current secretary of state. Despite this glaring conflict of interest, Kemp has refused to recuse himself from his current position.

An arch-reactionary who ran as the most pro-Trump of all the Republican candidates, Kemp has spewed venom against undocumented immigrants, going so far as to state that he may "round up criminal illegals" in his own pick-up truck "and take them home."

Kemp has taken a central role in voter suppression. In July 2017, just after announcing his candidacy, he and his cohorts in the Secretary of State's office purged over 500,000 voters from the registration rolls. In an audio recording obtained by *Rolling Stone* magazine, in remarks to a group of campaign donors, Kemp expressed his concern about his Democratic opponent Stacey Abrams spending millions of dollars to mobilize voters, especially those casting absentee ballots.

In the audio recording, Kemp openly states: "They [Democrats] have just an unprecedented number of that

[absentee ballots], which is something that continues to concern us, *especially if everybody uses and exercises their right to vote*, which they absolutely can and mail those ballots in, we gotta have heavy turnout to offset that" (emphasis added).

According to reports, Kemp's office has invalidated hundreds or even thousands of absentee ballots on the spurious grounds that the signature on the ballot did not exactly match the one on file, or citing other technicalities. These voters, moreover, were not informed that their ballot was being rejected, let alone instructed on ways to correct the reported discrepancies.

Georgia law permits voters to cast an absentee ballot by mail prior to election day even if they are able to vote in person on November 6.

In a ruling issued on October 25 in response to an emergency lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a federal judge issued an order directing the state to count as provisional ballots all of the ballots tossed out for a supposed signature mismatch. In issuing this ruling, Judge Leigh Martin May emphasized that her order applied to signature mismatches only and not for ballots rejected for other technical reasons.

Lawyers working on behalf of Kemp, however, have asked the judge to suspend her order since "last-minute challenges to longstanding election procedures have long been disfavored because they threaten to disrupt the orderly administration of elections."

There have also been further obstacles erected to early voters in Georgia. In many voting places in Georgia, voters have had to stand many hours in the sun, causing some of them to faint from exhaustion.

Out of the half million voters purged by Kemp in Georgia, 107,000 were reportedly removed under the so-called “use-it-or-lose-it” law. Under this law, voters can be purged from registration rolls if they fail to return a voter-address confirmation mailed to them and also do not cast their ballot in the next “election cycle.” They can also be removed for abstaining from voting in two election cycles.

The ostensible reason for this law, according to Republicans, is to prevent “vote fraud” and to keep the state voter rolls “clean.” Although such laws violate the basic constitutional right to vote, they are nevertheless on the books of at least nine states.

This law was challenged recently in Ohio, a state where it has been aggressively implemented, by former Navy veteran Larry Harmon, after he was informed when he tried to cast a ballot in 2014 that he was not registered to vote. He was purged from the voter rolls because he had abstained from voting in the 2012 presidential election since he was dissatisfied by the choice between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney. The state justified the action by claiming that Harmon had also not returned the voter address confirmation, but he said he never received it.

In Ohio, where voter mobility is high, state officials identified in 2012 a massive 1.5 million, or 20 percent, of the state’s registered voters ineligible to vote because they had moved from their previous address and had not returned the address confirmation form.

Although this anti-democratic law was struck down by a lower federal court, which ruled that the law is a clear violation of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), the US Supreme Court in June 2018 upheld the law on appeal by the state of Ohio. This 5–4 decision has been taken as a green light to target millions of working-class voters.

Another state where aggressive voter purging has occurred is Kansas. As in Georgia, Republican gubernatorial candidate Kris Kobach is also the secretary of state and in charge of elections. Recently a federal judge struck down the requirement imposed by Kobach that voters produce either a passport or a birth certificate to prove their eligibility to vote. In addition, Kobach has sharply reduced the number of voting places.

It needs to be added that over the past seven decades

the Democratic Party has conspired with the Republicans to exclude third parties from participating in elections and reinforce the political monopoly of big business. This has been done by deliberately instituting difficult electoral procedures, rules and laws, thus forcing the US electorate to either vote for one of the two capitalist parties or abstain from voting altogether.



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