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Why Are Republicans So Afraid of Voters?

There is no “both sides do it” when it comes to intentionally keeping Americans away from the polls.

By The Editorial Board

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As of Sunday afternoon, more than 93 million Americans had cast a ballot in the November elections. That’s about two-thirds of the total number of people who voted in 2016, and there are still two days until Election Day.

This is excellent news. In the middle of a global pandemic that has taken the lives of nearly a quarter of a million Americans, upended the national economy and thrown state election procedures into turmoil, there were reasonable concerns that many people would not vote at all. The numbers to date suggest that 2020 could see record turnout.

While celebrating this renewed citizen involvement in America’s political process, don’t lose sight of the bigger, and darker, picture. For decades, Americans have voted at depressingly low rates for a modern democracy. Even in a “good” year, more than one-third of all eligible voters don’t cast a ballot. In a bad year, that number can approach two-thirds.

Why are so many Americans consistently missing in action on Election Day?

For many, it’s a choice. They are disillusioned with government, or they feel their vote doesn’t matter because politicians don’t listen to them anyway.

For many more, the main obstacle is bureaucratic inertia. In New York City, a decrepit, incompetent, self-dealing board of elections has been making a mockery of democracy for decades. Just in the past four years, tens of thousands of absentee ballots have been sent to the wrong addresses, and hundreds of thousands of voters have been wrongly purged from the rolls. For the past few days, some New Yorkers have been forced to stand in line for four or five hours to cast their ballots.

But across the country, the group most responsible for making voting harder, if not impossible, for millions of Americans is the Republican Party. Republicans have been saying it themselves for ages. “I don’t want everybody to vote,” Paul Weyrich, a leader of the modern conservative movement, told a gathering of religious leaders in 1980. “As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.”

This strategy has become a central pillar of the G.O.P. platform. It is behind the party’s relentless push for certain state laws and practices — like strict voter-identification requirements and targeted voter purges — that claim to be about preserving electoral integrity but are in fact about suppressing turnout and voting among groups that lean Democratic.

The strategy also is behind the partisan gerrymandering that Republican state lawmakers have mastered over the past decade, redrawing district lines to keep themselves in power even when they lose a majority of the statewide vote. (Democrats gerrymander when they can, too, but the most egregious examples of the past decade have been by Republicans.)

And the party is behind the early shutdown of this year’s census, which the Trump administration insisted on over the objections of longtime Census Bureau officials, and which it hopes will result in an undercount of people in Democratic-leaning parts of the country.

The Supreme Court's conservative majority has greenlit the Republicans' anti-democratic power grabs. In 2013, by a 5-to-4 vote, the court struck down the heart of the Voting Rights Act, giving free rein to states with long histories of racial discrimination in voting. Last year, the court, again by a 5-to-4 vote, refused to block even the most brazenly partisan gerrymanders, no matter how much they disenfranchised voters.

This year, in the face of the unprecedented hurdles to voting introduced by the coronavirus pandemic, Republicans are battling from coast to coast to ensure that casting a ballot is as hard as it can be. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott mandated a single ballot drop-box per county — including the increasingly Democratic Harris County, population 4.7 million. Republican lawmakers there are also suing to throw out more than 100,000 ballots cast by Harris County voters from their cars, at drive-through sites.

In Nevada, the Trump campaign and the state Republican Party have sued to stop counting mail-in ballots until observers can more closely monitor the signature-matching process. In Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Wisconsin, Republicans have fought to prevent the counting of all mail-in ballots that arrive after Election Day, even if they are postmarked on or before Nov. 3.

This all amounts to “a concerted national Republican effort across the country in every one of the states that has had a legal battle to make it harder for citizens to vote,” said Trevor Potter, a Republican lawyer who formerly led the Federal Election Commission and worked on both of John McCain's presidential campaigns.

The effort has been turbocharged by President Trump, who has spent the past year falsely attacking the integrity of mail-in ballots. Mr. Trump's lies have been echoed by the attorney general, William Barr, who has claimed that mail balloting is associated with “substantial fraud.” Not remotely true. Mr. Trump's own handpicked F.B.I. director, Christopher Wray, has said there is no evidence of any coordinated voter-fraud effort. Scholars, researchers and judges have said for years that voting fraud of any kind is vanishingly rare in this country. That hasn't stopped Republicans from alleging that it happens all the time. They know that accusations of fraud can be enough by themselves to confuse voters and drive down turnout.

When that tactic fails, Republicans turn to another tried-and-true one: voter intimidation. Frightening people, particularly Black people, away from the ballot box has a long history in the United States. Modern Republicans have done it so consistently that in 1982 a federal court barred the national party from engaging in any so-called anti-voter-fraud operations. The ban was renewed again and again over the decades, because Republicans kept violating it. In 2018, however, it expired, meaning that 2020 is the first election in which Republicans can intimidate with abandon.

All the while, Mr. Trump happily plays the part of intimidator in chief. He has urged his supporters to enlist in an “Army for Trump,” monitoring polls. “A lot of strange things happening in Philadelphia,” Mr. Trump said during a recent campaign stop in Pennsylvania. “We’re watching you, Philadelphia. We’re watching at the highest level.”

Representative democracy works only when a large majority of people participate in choosing their representatives. That can happen only when those in power agree that voting should be as easy and widely available as possible. Yet today, one of the two major political parties is convinced it cannot win on a level playing field — and will not even try.

What would a level playing field look like? For starters, it would have more polling places, more early-voting days and shorter voting lines. Since the Supreme Court gutted the heart of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, almost 1,700 polling places have been shut down, most of them in the states that had been under federal supervision for their past discriminatory voting practices. It’s no surprise that voters in predominantly Black neighborhoods wait 29 percent longer to cast ballots than voters in white neighborhoods.

A fair election would mean giving all states the necessary funds to implement automatic voter registration and to upgrade old voting machines. It would mean allowing people with criminal records to vote as soon as they have completed the terms of their sentences.

Many of these reforms have already been adopted in some states, and they have enjoyed bipartisan support. In the case of early voting, some Republican-led states are ahead of their Democratic counterparts. Georgia, for example, has long offered many weeks of

early voting — far better than New York, which began the practice only last year, and for only 10 days. (It's worth noting that Georgia once had even more early-voting days. Republican lawmakers cut them back by more than half after Black voters started taking advantage of early voting in 2008.)

To help ensure that voting is easier for everybody, the federal government needs to take action. Currently, there are two comprehensive voting-rights bills in Congress, the Voting Rights Amendment Act and H.R. 1, also known as the For the People Act. The first bill would update the old map the Supreme Court invalidated in 2013 and would identify the states and localities that are racially discriminating against their voters today, requiring them to seek federal court approval before changing any election laws.

The second bill would, among other things, create a national voter-registration program; make it harder for states to purge voting rolls; and take gerrymandering away from self-interested state legislatures, putting the redistricting process in the hands of nonpartisan commissions.

The House of Representatives passed both of these bills in 2019, with all Democrats voting in favor both times. The Voting Rights Amendment Act got the vote of a single House Republican. H.R. 1 got none. The Republican-led Senate has refused to act on either. Mitch McConnell, the majority leader, mocked H.R. 1 by referring to it as the “Democrat Politician Protection Act.” Listen to him closely. He is only repeating what most Republicans have believed for decades: When more people vote, Republicans lose.

That's why, if either of these laws is going to pass, it will require, at a minimum, voting out Republicans at every level who insist on suppressing the vote. Only then can those who believe in representative democracy for all Americans reset the rules and help ensure that everyone's vote counts.

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