

Is Team Bush suppressing the vote?

By Bill Berkowitz

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These days, schemes to suppress the vote are coming down the pike at a NASCAR-like clip: In July, Michigan State Rep. John Pappageorge told a gathering of party officials at an election strategy meeting of the Oakland County Republican Party that “If we do not suppress the Detroit vote, we’re going to have a tough time in this election cycle.” In Orlando, Fla., members of the Orlando League of Voters – an African-American civic group made up of mostly elderly women that has helped turn out large numbers of Democratic voters in the city – were the subject of an intimidating house-to-house investigation by Governor Jeb Bush’s state police, who were supposedly checking out charges of electoral irregularities. The Rev. Jesse Jackson recently charged Republican Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell with “trying to reverse gains made by the civil rights movement by limiting where some Ohioans can cast their ballots,” the Palm Beach Post recently reported.

Now, a new voter suppression scheme has been uncovered: One that thwarts the democratic process before voters even exercise their franchise. A voter registration outfit largely funded by the Republican National Committee is being accused of destroying the registration forms of hundreds of newly registered Democratic voters in Nevada.

On Tuesday, November 2, when hundreds and perhaps thousands of registered Democrats enter their polling places in Nevada, they will be in for a rude surprise: They won’t be allowed to vote. Even though they filled out their registration forms properly and they did it way ahead of the deadline, there will be no record of their being registered to vote. That’s because, according to an investigation by Las Vegas television station KLAS, a private voter registration company called Voters Outreach of America – an outfit largely funded by the Republican National Committee – has trashed hundreds of registration forms of registered Democrats.

“Anyone who has recently registered or re-registered to vote outside a mall or grocery store or even government building may be affected,” George Knapp, an investigative reporter for the television station’s Eyewitness News I-Team, reported. Knapp was able to

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obtain information about an “alleged widespread pattern of potential registration fraud aimed at Democrats,” from former employees of the company.

Over the past few months, Voters Outreach of America has been working the Las Vegas area, sending more than 300 part-time workers to shopping malls, grocery stores, government buildings and busy street corners throughout the city to register voters. The kicker, according to the former workers: Apparently, the company was only interested in Republican registrations.

Knapp reported that two former employees claimed that they had “personally witnessed company supervisors rip up and trash registration forms signed by Democrats.”

“We caught her taking Democrats out of my pile, handed them to her assistant and he ripped them up right in front of us. I grabbed some of them out of the garbage and she tells her assistant to get those from me,” said Eric Russell, a former Voters Outreach employee.

According to Knapp, Russell said he was able “to retrieve a pile of shredded paperwork including signed voter registration forms, all from Democrats” and he “took them to the Clark County Election Department and confirmed that they had not, in fact, been filed with the county as required by law.”

When the I-Team went to talk with Voters Outreach, the company had abandoned its offices and they were rented by someone else. According to the Voters Outreach landlord, the outfit was “evicted for non-payment of rent.”

Recently, the Reno Gazette Journal ran the following ad for “Canvassing Neighborhoods in Support of the GOP”: Voter’s Outreach of America is hiring door-to-door canvassers asking people to register to vote. Must be at least 18 yrs of age, no felonies, registered to vote and have own transportation. Need good communication skills and professional appearance. . . Paid for by the Republican National Committee.”

According to a web site called TOPDOG04.COM, Voters Outreach “has set up registration drives in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Florida and Nevada and is accused of the same things [as KLAS-TV reported] in most if not all of these states.”

TOPDOG04.COM also reports that in a separate incident, Sproul & Associates, a Phoenix, Arizona-based Republican consulting firm run by Nathan Sproul, former head of the Arizona Republican party and Arizona Christian Coalition, which has hired Voters Outreach, tried to pass itself off as America Votes, a truly non-partisan voter registration drive.

Sproul & Associates has received nearly \$500,000 from the Republican Party this year for “political consulting” according to OpenSecrets.org, and received another \$125,000 for voter registration.

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In Arizona, Sproul paid Aaron "A.J." James, the director of Voters Outreach of America, "to get as many signatures as possible for [Independent presidential candidate Ralph] Nader," Arizona indymedia.org reported. "Aaron [James] told me he was out here getting signatures for Nader. So I can only assume that Diane [Burns] was too," said Derek Lee, who, as owner of Lee Petitions, was part of the traveling petition carnival that descended on Arizona this spring."

On Wednesday, October 13, the Associated Press reported that Sproul "denied... that a group he hired to register Republicans in Nevada deliberately tore up Democratic voter registration forms." Sproul blamed the controversy on a disgruntled former employee.

A recent report issued by the People for the American Way Foundation and the NAACP documented numerous incidents of voter intimidation and suppression over the past 39 years. The report notes that, as we might expect, the tactics have become "more subtle and subterranean" over time. But it also demonstrates that attempts to suppress the vote persist to this day.

According to the report, "Robbing voters of their right to vote and to have their vote counted undermines the very foundations of our democratic society. Politicians, political strategists, and party officials who may consider voter intimidation and suppression efforts as part of their tactical arsenal should prepare to be exposed and prosecuted."

The report concludes by saying: "State and federal officials, including Justice Department and national political party officials, should publicly repudiate such tactics and make clear that those who engage in them will face severe punishment."

Newly registered Nevada voters are being urged to call the Clark County Election Department at 455-VOTE or go to the County's web site to see if they are registered.

Across the country, a coalition of liberal, nonpartisan groups – including People for the American Way, the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law – will be sending lawyers and law students to key precincts in unprecedented numbers – 2,000 in Florida alone. Their T-shirts and signs will bear the message "Having trouble voting? Call us." They will carry disposable cameras to record infractions.

And, according to the Newhouse News Service, The Kerry campaign and the Democratic National Committee are going to "dispatch as many as 10,000 lawyers across America on Election Day and have established five post-election 'SWAT teams' to hit the ground running wherever they might be needed."