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Patrick's Politics:

Why voter suppression is all the rage on the right

by Patrick Minnerly
HE/HIM/HIS
ASSOCIATE OPINION EDITOR
patrick.minnerly@uconn.edu

Have you ever disliked the outcome of something? Don't you wish you could change it? Of course, you can't. The lesson has been drilled into us since childhood: You get what you get, and you don't get upset. Unfortunately, it appears that Donald Trump and the Republican Party never received that helpful memo. Trump constantly complains about the "stolen" 2020 election to this day, even though it was quite fair. Like a child throwing a temper tantrum, he can't resist bringing it up. But Trump's whims are far more dangerous than child's play, because he just might try to destroy the democratic experiment while he's whining – and string Republicans along with him.

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This past week, on a podcast with rightwing personality Dan Bongino, Trump called for the federal government to "nationalize" elections in several Democratic strongholds. He later claimed, "Look at some of the places – that horrible corruption on elections – and the federal government should not allow that." Regardless of Trump's fantasies about rigged elections, the Constitution is clear: administering elections is a power given to the states, and the federal government cannot take over voting.

We have yet to see how serious Trump is about his comments, but even the mere floating of this idea should not be taken lightly. Nationalizing our elections is both illegal and a massive conflict of interest, especially for an administration so bent on repeating falsehoods about the voting process. Trump's FBI is still focused on searching for nonexistent evidence that the 2020 election had massive fraud. On January 28, federal agents raided the elections office for Fulton County in Georgia and took hundreds of boxes of election material with them. If you recall, Georgia was a major hotspot for election fraud claims; Trump pressed Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find 11,780 votes" in a phone call shortly after he lost.

The Republican Party, as ever, seems willing to dance for their ruler. In Congress, Republicans are busy sating Trump's desire to shift how elections are run. As I'm writing this column, the SAVE America Act is coming up for a vote in the U.S. House. This act would make it significantly harder to vote, making potential voters explicitly prove their citizenship before they cast their ballots. On the surface, this might not seem like a bad idea. Why not ensure our elections are safe and secure? The bill, however, ignores that many Americans don't carry proof of citizenship on them, such as a passport or birth certificate. It also solves a nonexistent problem; despite false claims of mass illegal voting, it is extremely rare for noncitizens to vote.

So then why try to pass this bill? The answer is, Republicans don't actually want to stop voter fraud. They want to stop people from casting their ballots. They want voter suppression.

Research has shown that voter ID and election integrity laws, which the SAVE America Act would add to, disproportionately affect minorities. This includes Georgia's state law S.B. 202, which was enacted by a Republican legislature shortly after the 2020 election and put several new restrictions on how Georgians could vote. These restrictions, such as limiting access to ballot drop boxes, only serve to suppress the vote of historically disenfranchised communities. As the Brennan Center for Justice points out, racially diverse states led by Republicans have been "far more likely" to introduce voter suppression bills than more majority-white Republican states. It might not surprise you to then learn that minorities vote for Democrats more often.

With the upcoming midterm elections, Republicans have been working to up the ante on voter suppression. It's no secret that Trump is unpopular. According to a recent NPR poll, Trump's approval rating is 39%, with 56% disapproving of his performance. Out of that number, 51% strongly disapprove. The right knows that his administration's actions are anathema to the majority of the American public. Trump himself said in early January that if Democrats take back Congress, he'll be impeached.

In response to fear over losing the midterms, the right is lashing out with voter suppression ideas that make discriminatory laws seem downright benign. Steve Bannon, former White House adviser, said in a Feb. 4 interview that "We're going to have ICE surround the polls come November." Given the well-publicized terror Immigration and Customs Enforcement has spread across the country, which includes the fatal shootings of two U.S. citizens this year, the impact of this statement is clear. We have seen ICE arrest anyone for any reason. Threatening to send militarized agents to polling places is a vicious attack on voting rights. The Trump administration was given a chance to distance themselves from this position, but Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt only said, "I can't guarantee an ICE agent won't be around a polling location in November." In other words, if you show up to vote, there's a chance you might be taken away and shipped to a detention center. That is not how a functioning democracy should operate.

All of this attempted voter suppression is clearly aimed at preventing a Republican loss in the midterms and beyond. Trump has already laid the groundwork by continuing to protest the 2020 election results, priming his supporters to be concerned about so-called "election integrity." Regardless of whether bills like the SAVE America Act end up getting passed, we must still be vigilant about how our rights can be restricted. Regardless of whether ICE is deployed to polling stations or not, we must remember that the threat was made. And regardless of whether Trump does attempt to nationalize elections, we know the effort to suppress voting is born out of the desire to subvert democracy and cheat the system.