

April 18, 2004

Bad New Days for Voting Rights

It has been years since the bad old days when Southern blacks were given "literacy tests," and voting rights activists were beaten and killed. But blacks, Hispanics and Indians are still regularly discouraged from voting, often under the guise of "ballot integrity" programs that are supposed to be aimed at deterring fraud at the polls.

Minority vote suppression tears at the fabric of American democracy. It persists, however, for a simple reason: in close elections, when some minority groups are strongly identified with a single party, it can be the difference between winning and losing. In 2002, the Indian vote in South Dakota helped Senator Tim Johnson win by just 528 votes.

Today, in Bennett County, S.D., Indians say they have to contend with poll workers who make fun of their names, election officials who make it hard for them to register and — most ominously — a wave of false voter fraud charges that have been made against them, which they regard as harassment. Jo Colombe, a Rosebud Sioux tribal council member, said that when she worked as a poll watcher in a recent election she was accused of fraud simply for taking a bathroom break. When she returned, she said, white poll watchers charged her with copying the names of Indians who had not yet voted, and taking them out to Indians waiting in the parking lot. In January, prosecutors dropped a highly publicized case against another Indian woman, Rebecca Red Earth-Villeda.

With South Dakota's senior senator, Tom Daschle, running in another hotly contested race this year, Indians are bracing for more trouble at the polls. Many Indians feel their situation is similar to other so-called ballot integrity efforts over the last few decades. In the 1986 Louisiana Senate race, for instance, Republicans began a purge of tens of thousands of voters. An internal party document made clear that the goal was to "keep the black vote down." In North Carolina's 1990 Senate race, Jesse Helms supporters mailed 125,000 postcards to predominantly black voting precincts, misleading voters about residency requirements and warning that misstatements to voting officials could mean five years in prison.

More recently, Republican poll watchers in the 2002 Arkansas Senate election took photos of blacks as they voted, an intimidation tactic that has been used in other parts of the country. In last fall's Kentucky governor's race, Republicans announced plans to challenge voters in 59 predominantly black precincts. After the N.A.A.C.P. objected, the program was scaled back. And this year, a local Texas prosecutor threatened to arrest students at historically black Prairie View A&M if they tried to vote from their

campus addresses, which the law allows them to do. He backed down when he was sued.

Intimidation of Hispanic voters has often focused on immigration matters. In one case that caused an uproar in California in 1988, Republicans hired uniformed security officers to serve as "poll guards" in Latino precincts in Orange County.

Federal and state officials, party leaders and voters themselves should act now to ensure that this loathsome and undemocratic trend stops. To achieve this:

¶The Republican and Democratic party chairmen should publicly commit not to single out minority voters for intimidation, and to get this message out to party workers at every level.

¶The National Association of Secretaries of State, and individual secretaries of state and state election officers, should state publicly that they will be on the lookout for minority vote suppression, and that they will deal with it strictly.

¶The Department of Justice, which has lately seemed more focused on voter fraud than minority voter intimidation, should explain how it intends to discharge its legal duty to protect minorities from discrimination in voting.

¶Prosecutors should vigorously pursue anyone involved in vote suppression; this is rarely done now. And its victims should bring civil lawsuits, to make those who engage in it pay.

Experts are predicting that this year's election will be among the most hard fought in decades. The people who play a leadership role in it should be making clear, well in advance of Election Day, that minority vote suppression will not be tolerated.

[Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)