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MAKING VOTES COUNT

The Poll Tax, Updated

When members of Mi Familia Vota, a Latino group, were registering voters recently on a Miami Beach sidewalk outside a building where new citizens were being sworn in, the Homeland Security Department ordered them to stop. The department gave all kinds of suspect reasons, which a federal court has since rejected, but it looked a lot as if someone at Homeland Security just didn't want thousands of new Latino voters on the Florida rolls.

The suppression of minority votes is alive and well in 2004, driven by the sharp partisan divide across the nation. Because many minority groups vote heavily Democratic, some Republicans view keeping them from registering and voting as a tactic for victory - one that has a long history in American politics. It is rarely talked about publicly, but John Pappageorge, a Republican state legislator from Michigan, recently broke the taboo. He was quoted in The Detroit Free Press as saying, "If we do not suppress the Detroit vote, we're going to have a tough time in this election cycle." Detroit's population is more than 80 percent black.

A recent report by the N.A.A.C.P. and People for the American Way includes page after page of examples of how this shabby business works. On Election Day, "ballot security" teams head for minority neighborhoods. They demand that voters produce identification when it is not required, take photographs of voters and single out immigrant voters for special scare tactics.

Two years ago in the governor's race in Maryland, leaflets appeared in Baltimore saying that before voters showed up at the polls, they had to pay off all parking tickets and overdue rent. The same year in Louisiana, fliers were distributed in African-American areas to tell voters, falsely, that if they did not want to vote on Election Day, they could still vote three days later.

What is particularly discouraging this year is the degree to which government officials have been involved in such efforts. In South Dakota's hard-fought statewide Congressional race, poll workers turned away Native American voters who could not provide photo identification, which many of them do not have, even though the law clearly says identification is not required. In one heavily Native American county, the top elections official, who is white, wrote out instructions saying no one could vote without photo identification. In Texas, a white district attorney threatened to prosecute students at Prairie View A&M, a large, predominantly African-American campus, if they registered to vote from

the school, even though they are entitled to by law.

And in Florida, the secretary of state, Glenda Hood, had a list prepared to purge felons from the voter rolls; the list had many errors and would have turned away an untold number of qualified black voters. She abandoned the list only when news organizations sued to make it public, then pointed out its many inaccuracies.

In addition to these blatant forms of vote suppression, elections officials have been adopting policies that appear neutral on their face but often have the effect, and perhaps the intent, of disproportionately disenfranchising minorities. With huge registration drives under way among minorities in swing states, some secretaries of state have adopted bizarrely rigid rules for new registrations.

In Florida, Ms. Hood is insisting that thousands of registration forms on which a citizenship box is not checked are invalid, even though elsewhere on the forms each applicant has sworn that he or she is a citizen. In Ohio, Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell was insisting until recently that any registration form that came in on anything less than 80-pound paper stock had to be rejected. The continued disenfranchisement of convicted felons in many states also has an unmistakable racial component.

The suppression of minority votes has continued because it is perceived as a winning tactic, and because it is rarely punished. This needs to change.

Trying to prevent members of minorities from voting can be a violation of federal and state law. Election officials, poll watchers and voters should be on the lookout for vote suppression, and should report it. And prosecutors should look for criminal cases to pursue. A few high-profile prosecutions of political operatives, and even elections officials, would go a long way toward ending a disgraceful American tradition.