

Republican Campaign Against Likely Democratic Voters Begins

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The GOP's latest accusations are long on rhetoric but short on facts.

Across the country and on the Republican National Committee website, a handful of GOP office holders and party officers are trying to discredit recent voter registration drives and record-setting turnout by Democrats in 2008 primaries, saying efforts seen as benefiting Democrats are rife with "voter fraud."

Consider the following examples:

* The Louisiana Republican Party last month attacked Democrats for a "phony" registration drive because as many as 30 percent of applications were missing information - an industry norm - and called for an investigation. Louisiana Secretary of State Jay Dardenne, a Republican, launched that investigation; however, his office has since declined to comment.

* This past Sunday, Alabama Attorney General Troy King, a Republican, appeared on Fox News to complain that voter "fraud and systemic corruption" were rampant in a handful of mostly Democratic-majority counties. He said absentee ballots were being sold for \$40 or traded for driveway gravel, but he did not announce any prosecutions.

* In Indiana, after that state's presidential primary, the East Chicago Republican Party chairman claimed that record turnout by Democratic voters included people from nearby Illinois, a charge that the local county election director rejected as unfounded.

* Most notably, the Republican National Committee has a page on its website titled "'You Can't Make This Up!' It features an interactive map on which states are linked to a list of "voter fraud" stories. The reports are a grab bag of almost anything nefarious concerning the voting process or elections, including allegations that may never be prosecuted or tried in court.

Since the 1960s, the Republican Party has raised "ballot security" issues in campaigns to justify a range of activities that critics have said lead to voter suppression. In recent years, fears of voter fraud - which as defined by the GOP refers to people impersonating other voters - have led state legislators to pass additional voting regulations, such as tougher voter ID laws and stiff penalties for errors by registration groups. Critics say the laws often are intended to shape the electorate to benefit GOP candidates.

"As long as there are any expected close elections, and/or efforts on the ground to register and mobilize low-income voters, we should expect to see a propaganda campaign to blunt the effects," said Lorraine Minnite, a Barnard College political scientist who has written extensively on GOP claims of voter fraud since 2000.

Particularly notable to Minnite is the RNC web page, because it echoes an approach used by a Republican front group in 2005 and 2006, the American Center for Voting Rights, which made exaggerated claims of Democrat-related voter fraud as part of its strategy to lobby states and Congress to pass tougher voter ID and voter registration laws. The group claimed to be nonpartisan but was created in 2004 by a former top election lawyer from the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign, Mark "Thor" Hearne.

"The roundup of claims is effective precisely because it's a mountain of words," Minnite explained in an e-mail. "When you try to read it, you quickly find lots of junk in the file. There are lots of stories about corrupt politicians, stories about people simply accused of things, stories of registration workers making up a couple of names, stories about people who are confused about the rules (including some election workers), multiple stories about the same ambiguous incident, 'concerns' about absentee ballots, etc."

This approach was political propaganda, she said.

"The style is what we saw in the report issued by the American Center for Voting Rights: Compile any news article you can find that mentions anything related to election crime, whether the report is definitive or not, factual or on the level of gossip, and call it 'You Can't Make This Up!' The ACVR called their report 'the most comprehensive and authoritative review of the facts surrounding allegations of vote fraud, intimidation and suppression made during the 2004 presidential election.' Don't bother to investigate the report, verify the facts, or consider alternative explanations. Just compile the reports and point to the pile."

Minnite, who has found most GOP claims of "voter fraud" to be mistakes that did not include deliberately impersonating voters, predicted that an analysis of the incidents now on the RNC site would find "fewer people committing fraud than losing their right to vote for lack of proper documentation."

This does not mean that there are not instances of people who intentionally impersonate voters. However, those instances are rare - single incidents in states with millions of voters - and almost always are caught by local election and law enforcement officials.

Minnite also noted that some of the GOP's claims of voter fraud came from locales with histories of political corruption, which prompts some partisans to jump to conclusions.

"For example, there is a long history of both racial political conflict, as well as intra-black political conflict in the Black Belt counties of west Alabama, which are now the focus of voter fraud investigations by Republican state officials," she said.

In East Chicago, Ind., the state Supreme Court overturned the 2003 mayoral primary results after absentee ballots were found to have been altered, according to a report in the Post-Tribune newspaper.

When asked who these oversized claims of voter fraud were targeting, Minnite said it was likely people who did not pay attention to facts in campaigns.

"Probably the same people who think Obama is a Muslim," she said. "What I mean is that "voter fraud" is a form of racial coding for 'we must stop at least some black people (also known as Democrats in polite company) from voting or we are going to lose this election.' Commentators on the growing power of the internet to facilitate the spread of propaganda also like to talk about 'viral' messages. I would say this is one."