

There's a fetid stench emanating from Ohio

SINCE when did election fraud become a partisan issue? Certainly we're divided over issues like abortion rights, gay rights, labor rights, the minimum wage and so on. But the struggle against election fraud, I'd think, would be a matter we could all agree upon. It's un-American to steal an election. It's the ultimate crime against democracy. Why then, is the Republican Party mobilizing nationwide to stymie recounts and thwart dozens of investigations looking into election fraud?

Look at the U.S. Congress' House Judiciary Committee. The ranking member, John Conyers, convened hearings to "thoroughly review" documented allegations of election irregularities. The idea isn't radical by any means. The federal Government Accountability Office is also conducting a nationwide investigation into possible election fraud. Republican Judiciary Committee members, however, all boycotted the hearings, ultimately denying subpoena powers to the investigation. Without the Republicans, the hearing was reduced to "ad hoc" status. Even with these limits, they uncovered evidence of election fraud and called for an F.B.I. investigation.

For starters, the Ohio vote tally was problematic. For example, the number of votes cast commonly exceeded the number of voters voting. The most extreme and easy to spot case was in Franklin County, where a polling station in the New Life Church reported 638 voters casting 260 votes for Kerry and 4,258 for Bush. This huge margin stood out and was later corrected by election officials who retested the counting equipment and found "no problems." Smaller overages occurred all over Ohio, however, but were not initially noticed.

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In one Perry County district cited by Conyers, for example, 393 voters cast 489 votes. Similarly, in another Perry County precinct, 266 voters cast just shy of 400 votes. Turnout was also high. In another Perry County precinct, 125 percent of the registered voters cast votes for president. Perry County also has a remarkably high voter registration rate of 91 percent. Many voters, however, never voted and have no signature cards on file. Furthermore, thousands of these ghost voters all coincidentally registered in 1977, with 3,100 registering on one day alone. Certainly this can all be explained. Conyers' point, however, is that it must all be explained now, and to the satisfaction of the American people.

Strange Candidates

Perry County didn't corner the market on Election Day weirdness. They just have the most visible anomalies, possibly resulting from bad math making potential tally manipulation more obvious. In Cuyahoga County, skewed counts seemed to favor bottom-of-the-ballot minor party candidates at John Kerry's expense. In one African-American precinct, for example, Kerry got 290 votes while Michael Peroutka, running as the candidate for the xenophobic right-wing Constitution Party, scored an extremely unlikely 215 votes—without having campaigned there. Four years ago, all third-party candidates, including Ralph Nader, earned a grand total of eight votes in this precinct. In another precinct located in the same polling station, Libertarian Party candidate Michael Badnarik tallied a whopping 163 votes.

There was also a problem with undervotes—instances where voters wait on line but fail to cast a vote for president. In one Mercer County precinct where 289 people voted, all but 51 seemingly declined to select a presidential candidate. Overall, tally equipment failed to register a presidential vote for nearly seven percent of Mercer County voters. In two Montgomery County precincts, a prodigious 25 percent of the electorate ostensibly failed to choose a presidential candidate—a strange voting trait that is twice as likely to occur in Democratic strongholds as opposed to Republican areas. Similar undervotes caused nearly 6,000 presidential votes to disappear or "spoil" in that county. Statewide, 93,000 such votes disappeared. Again, there might be an explanation. After the 2000 election in Florida, Bush supporters offered the racist argument that people in Black Democratic precincts were just too ignorant to master the ballot process. Subsequent investigations, however, found old malfunctioning equipment and improperly designed ballots were actually the culprits.

Waiting to wait to vote

Then there were the voting lines in Ohio, where, according to testimony presented to

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members of the Judiciary Committee, voters waited up to ten hours to vote, often standing in the cold rain. When people offered them warm drinks, Republican observers demanded they stop. Ultimately, the last Ohioans voted at 3 am, after the media declared Bush the winner.

These lines didn't form haphazardly. Extremely long lines were exclusive to Democratic districts. Again, it's not because inner-city people can't vote efficiently—it's because they didn't have the machines to vote on. Ohio's voting is supervised by Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, who Like Florida's Katherine Harris in 2000, also co-chaired his state's Bush campaign. Under Blackwell's direction, election authorities systematically relocated voting machines from primarily Black Democratic-leaning inner-city communities, into white Republican-leaning suburbs. They also relocated polling stations from spacious indoor areas such as school gymnasiums, to smaller locations where voters would be forced to line up outside in the November weather.

One Ohio judge testified that there were only three machines in one Columbus polling station serving 1,500 voters. By contrast, she noted, there were three machines serving 730 voters in her own suburban home district. In Columbus, where some of Ohio's longest voting lines occurred, election officials held 125 voting machines in storage. Voting was also slowed down, according to witness testimony, by Republican vote challengers gumming up the process in African-American precincts .

The Wal-Mart Factor

One survey of inner-city voters found that when faced with hours-long lines, approximately 25 percent either gave up waiting or were forced by other obligations to retreat. Ohio's largest employer, Wal-Mart, for example (and also one of the largest corporate supporters of the Bush ticket), doesn't give its employees days off to wait in voting lines. Waiting just isn't an option. No number of recounts will ever measure these votes since they were never cast.

At one Democratic-leaning precinct with a heavily college-age population, Blackwell's minions provided only two voting machines for approximately 1,300 voters. The machines can process 20 votes per hour. One of the machines went out of service for over 90 minutes. Do the math.

There were also numerous voter suppression regimens in play in inner-city areas leading up to the election. Conyers' office documented stories of bogus letters on counterfeit Election Commission stationery warning voters that It was illegal to vote if they had outstanding parking tickets. A similar scheme reported that people in arrears with their utility bills also couldn't vote. Yet another letter explained that due to expected

heavy turnout, election officials would be imposing a sort of odd-even system whereby Republicans would vote on election day and Democrats and others would vote on the following day. Other voters received official-looking letters telling them that their precinct had been moved to another polling station, where they would ultimately wait for hours before casting a provisional ballot. Ken Blackwell then hit them with the kayo, ruling that provisional paper ballots cast by eligible voters at the wrong polling stations wouldn't be counted.

Bush still won

Don't expect the Ohio recount to change history, however. This is not a hand count. Ohio recount law requires a hand count of only a three-percent sample of the vote. If that sample matches the original machine count, then the rest of the recount can be performed on the same machines that conducted the original count.

And here's where it also gets weird. One company, Triad Systems, has the contract to electronically tally punch card votes in 41 Ohio counties. Triad is owned by Todd Rapp, who, like the CEO of his competitor, Diebold Inc., is a financial supporter of the Bush campaign. Ohio election workers testified last week that a Triad official, in the run-up to the current recount, visited county elections offices asking which precinct's votes would be hand tallied for the required three percent sample. The Triad worker then tinkered with the computers used in the original tally. Ostensibly arriving to fix computers that weren't reported broken, he swapped cards and other components, while explaining to workers the importance of having the hand recount numbers match the original machine count—lest they have to hand count the remaining 97 percent of the votes. In at least two counties, according to testimony, Triad encouraged election officials to post the original counts inconspicuously on the wall so that workers would know what tally to report, no matter how the hand recount panned out. Again, there might be a very logical explanation for this behavior, but we need to hear it.

Meanwhile in Volusia County Florida, investigative reporter Bev Harris has been requesting to see the paper tally "tapes" generated by optical scan counting machines. Florida law mandates that poll workers sign these tapes on election night. When Harris went to view the tapes, however, they were unsigned and apparently generated on November 15th, nearly two weeks after the presidential election. Harris found the original signed tapes in a trash bag put out with the office garbage. And lo and behold, the numbers didn't match the official unsigned tallies generated on November 15th. Again, there very well may be an explanation for this, but we need to hear it.

What we're seeing is a pattern of alarming anomalies, inexcusable errors, and bizarre

behavior on the part of Republican election officials and private contractors who count our votes. If the election was closer, some of these errors could have affected the outcome. Either way, they're inexcusable. Every damned vote must be counted — and counted accurately.

Jim Crow helped

What has emerged from these investigations is ample evidence of a coordinated nationwide Jim Crow style effort to suppress the African-American and inner-city vote. Both the Democrats and Republicans share a history here. The mechanics of disenfranchisement employed by Republicans in Florida in 2000 and 2004 were developed by Democrats to suppress minority power within their own party primaries. And for years, as long as it was just Black folks getting shafted, liberal Americans looked the other way. In 2000 when Republicans used these tactics to steal the presidency, voter disenfranchisement suddenly became a national concern.

Voter disenfranchisement, practiced by any party, is intolerable. We need to have open and accountable investigations with teeth that look at the entire electoral process, ranging from who gets access to the media, how elections are funded, who can and cannot vote, how votes are cast, and ultimately how they are counted. Lately our tainted electoral mechanics have been working to the benefit of Republicans, hence they don't want to see the system, dysfunctional as it is, fixed. Ultimately, however, it's the Republicans who are the losers. They've lost their soul — emerging as the "democracy-be-damned" win by "any means necessary" party.

Government documents cited in this column are available at www.mediastudy.com/election.html.