The Changing Methods of Voter Disenfranchisement

Voting for the lesser of two evils isn’t always enough to get people out to the polls, but maybe voting to reverse a trend sending us toward some version of an American apartheid is.

by Rann Miller November 3, 2018

New U.S. Census data projects that in 2045 the United States will be “minority white,” with nonwhites making up 50.3 percent of the population. Currently, whites are the minority across all public schools. The implications are simple: In thirty years, more potential voters will be non-white.

Donald Trump continues to prime audiences with his racial fear-mongering and rhetoric of white nationalism. And nationwide, the Republicans have gone out of their way to prevent non-white people from voting. According to the Pew Research Center fewer than 3 percent of black people are registered as a Republican and fewer than 15 percent of Latinos register as a Republican.

Voter suppression, it’s totally clear, is about racial politics more than party politics.

Just ask Bessie Hamilton.

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“This man came to my job with a gun, and on top of that, he told me I could have went to jail,” Hamilton said on the witness stand during the trial of Lula Smart, who faced more than 100 years in prison for voter fraud.
Smart’s crime was that she carried absentee ballots to the mailbox on behalf of voters. An investigator acting on behalf of Georgia’s Republican secretary of state, Brian Kemp, had visited Hamilton at her place of work and coerced her into signing a false statement. (Smart was acquitted on all charges and later won election to local office.)

Kemp, currently running for governor of Georgia, has a history of voter suppression. Kemp has intimidated organizations that register racial minorities to vote. Kemp also managed to purge 1.5 million voters between 2012 and 2016—the majority of them black. Currently, Kemp is being sued by the ACLU for a signature-match law that has previously been struck down by the courts.

But Brian Kemp is hardly a lone boogieman.

In October, a new North Dakota law changed identification requirements, disproportionately affecting Native American voters. In North Carolina, voter ID laws target black people “with almost surgical precision,” according to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Diana Gribbon Motz.

A 2018 study of voter ID laws in Texas found that, had it not been for a federal court ruling allowing alternative forms of identification, 16,000 people wouldn’t have been able to vote in 2016. That matters in Texas, where black and Latinx voters who vote without an ID outnumber black and Latinx voters who do vote with an ID.

In Michigan, a 2018 study emphasizes the importance of alternative identification, revealing that 28,000 people voted without a photo ID in 2016 by signing an affidavit, as allowed under state law. The study showed that non-white voters are between two-and-a-half and six times more likely than white voters to lack photo ID.
All this, and yet only twenty-seven percent of white Americans believe eligible voters being denied the right to vote is a major problem.

Despite the wealth of evidence of racially-motivated voter suppression only twenty-seven percent of white Americans believe it’s a major problem.

Republican legislators are more likely than Democrats to back voter ID laws. The Voting Rights Act protected against such laws, but the 2013 v. Shelby v. Holder ruling determined that federal oversight to ensure fairness in voting rights was unnecessary due to the “strides” we’ve made as a nation with respect to race and political engagement. Subsequently, Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia have all enacted voter ID laws of some sort.

And while it’s not against the law for state legislatures to redistrict or redraw its electoral maps, the Republicans have taken partisan redistricting to a new level. According to an estimate by the Brennan Center for Justice, Republican gerrymandering accounts for sixteen or seventeen GOP seats in the current Congress that the party might not otherwise control.

The Supreme Court has weighed in on gerrymandering. For example, in North Carolina (Cooper v. Harris 2016), the Court examined North Carolina’s decision to redraw two particular districts that gave Republicans an electoral advantage. The court upheld the decision of the lower court, agreeing that the redrawing of the districts in question harmed black voters.

The Cooper decision is clear. But, Aidan, the last year and that in...
The Cooper decision is only a Band-Aid over the large wound that is Shelby, however, and cases will continue to come before the courts.

The sad truth is that even when voters of color are successfully registered, there are no guarantees they will be able to cast ballots.

An investigation by Vice News details how the Pascua-Yaqui Native American reservation outside Tucson, Arizona, lost an early voting site on the reservation; reservation residents must now drive one hour to cast a vote. And in a predominantly black neighborhood in Manatee County, Florida, a convenient walk to the polls is now a thirty-minute march on foot for those without transportation.

These trips are getting longer because state officials, many of them Republican, closed 868 polling places across the country in the three years after the Supreme Court’s 2013 Shelby ruling. And those closings aren’t just happening anywhere.

Texas, Arizona, and Louisiana all closed hundreds of polling sites, including 403 in Texas, according to a 2016 report. Arizona’s Pima County—which is 35 percent Latinx and leans Democratic—“is the nation’s biggest closer of polling places,” losing from 280 in 2012 to 218 in 2016, the report found. Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson, a Republican, removed 170 polling places, mostly Democratic voting precincts from Lake County—home to the state’s largest Latinx and second-largest black communities.

This year alone, ten counties with large black populations in Georgia closed polling spots after a white elections consultant recommended that this be done to save money.

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to the polls, but maybe voting to reverse a trend sending us toward some version of an American apartheid is. The elections of 2018 and 2020 may decide whether we, as a nation, will reverse course. I fear for my family, my people, and country, if we do not.

Rann Miller directs the 21st Century Community Learning Center, a federally funded after-school program located in southern New Jersey. He spent 6 years teaching in charter schools in Camden, New Jersey.

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