

Massive Voter Suppression and Corruption in Ohio

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Hundreds of angry Ohio residents marched through the streets of Columbus, Ohio's Capital, this evening [November 3], and stormed the Ohio State House, defying orders and arrest threats from Ohio State Troopers. "O-H-I-O, Suppressed democracy has got to go," they chanted. After troopers pushed and scuffled with people, nearly a hundred people took over the steps and entrance to the State's giant white column capital building and refused repeated orders to disperse or face arrest. People prepared for arrests, ready to face jail, writing lawyers phone numbers on their arms, signing jail support lists and discussing non-cooperation and active resistance (linking arms, but not fighting back).

A freshly painted banner held on the steps read,

"ONE VOTE DENIED = DEMOCRACY IN TROUBLE!
100'S OF 1000'S OF VOTES SUPPRESSED =
DEMOCRACY FAILED.

An unprecedented massive grassroots voter registration and get out the vote effort and widespread opposition to Bush went up against the massive coordinated Republican effort to suppress, intimidate and possibly steal millions of votes. In addition to the voter suppression and intimidation is the fact that Bush campaign co-chair Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell is in charge of the election and vote counting. But much deeper questions about fundamental flaws in the system hang in the air.

STOLEN ELECTION?

CNN's exit poll showed Kerry beating Bush among Ohio women by 53 percent to 47 percent. Kerry also defeated Bush among Ohio's male voters 51 percent to 49 percent. Investigative reporter [Greg Palast in an article today](#) details how the deciding states, Ohio and New Mexico, if all votes were actually counted, should have gone to Kerry. Palast explains, "Although the exit polls show that most voters in Ohio punched cards for Kerry-Edwards, thousands of these votes were simply not recorded. The election in Ohio was not decided by the voters but by something called "spoilage." Typically in the United States, about 3 percent of the vote is voided, just thrown away, not recorded."

TESTIMONIES OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT

The Ohio State House takeover was the culmination of an eight-hour long afternoon of protest at the state capital by Ohio student and youth groups, including the Columbus and Toledo Leagues of Pissed Off Voters, Reach Out-Bowling Green, and the Central Ohio Peace Network. The earlier speak-out featured a litany of people who experienced or witnessed voter suppression, intimidation and disenfranchisement before and during the election. Thousand

of Ohio voters had been disenfranchised by partisan poll challengers, intimidation incidents, voters polling places opening late, lines up to four and five hours long—often in the rain.

Here are a few of their stories:

Holly Roach of Toledo, Ohio spoke of her 74-year-old father, Frank Roach and her 89-year-old grandmother; Hazel Thompson requested absentee ballots in early October. Hazel Thompson is homebound and Frank Roach has been scheduled for heart surgery on November 2. Absentee ballots never arrived. They were told by the County Voting Commission that they could not vote with either regular or provisional ballots, because they had already requested absentee ballots and Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell has issued a directive forbidding provisional ballots by people who have applied for absentee ballots for them and not received (including some US service people who returned from Iraq). A lawsuit late in the afternoon of November 2 by a voter in Lucas County led to a late afternoon order by Judge David Katz of the Northern District of Ohio instructing the Ohio Secretary of State to immediately advise all county boards of election to advise polling precincts in their counties to issue provisional ballots to voters in this situation.

Evan Morrison, a young get out the vote volunteer, told of polls opening late. One poll at Glenwood Elementary in Toledo, OH opened more than half an hour late.. During that time, from 6:30 to after 7AM, more than 50 people left without having voted. An hour and a half after the polling site opened, the Republican election official said they had run out of pencils, bringing voting to a halt. Evan ran to the store and bought a bunch of number 2 pencils out of his own pocket so voting could resume. Voting continued until 11AM, by which time up to 100 more people had walked away.

Suzie Husami, a University of Toledo student said in a press conference that her voter registration challenged by Republicans along with 35,000 other mostly newer registrants. She received a letter from the Board of Elections reading NOTICE OF HEARING Pursuant to Ohio Revised Code Section 3503.24: your registration is being challenged. The reason stated as the basis for this challenge is that you are unqualified to vote because you are not a resident of the precinct where you can vote. A hearing has been set at the above stated place and time. You have the right to appear, testify and call witnesses and to be represented by an attorney. The letter was addressed from Paula Hicks-Hudson, Director of the Toledo Board of Elections. Although the challenges to her were thrown out in court the day before her hearing<three days before the election, many people who received such letters were likely discouraged from voting.

Alli Starr, also being a get out the vote volunteer told about how 25 minutes before polls closed in Toledo, Ohio, Republican challengers were witnessed harassing voters at the Mott Library, Central City polling station, a low-income African-American community. Observers said that they believed these challengers had repeatedly called the police producing absurd stories in order to intimidate voters. One of the Republican challengers was recognized as Dennis Lange, a prominent local business owner who owns Pumpnickels.[???] Mr. Lange aggressively tried to

push back African-American community members who were poll watching and voting at the site. At one point more than four police and sheriffs officers, including undercover officers, were witnessed at the site for no apparent reason. For a photo go to <http://michiganimc.org/newswire/display/7580/index.php>

PRE-ELECTION VOTER SUPPRESSION

But even before election day, the Baltimore Chronicle reported November 1 that “Through a combination of sophisticated vote rustling, ethnic cleansing of voter rolls, absentee ballots gone AWOL, machines that ‘spoil’ votes—John Kerry begins with a nationwide deficit that could easily exceed one million votes.”

Troy, Michigan Republican State Rep. John Pappageorge, a Michigan Bush campaign Co-Chair, was quoted in July 16 edition of 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.” Blacks comprise 83 percent of Detroit’s population, and the city routinely elects Democratic candidates by substantial margins. The British Broadcasting Company has also disclosed a memo to top Republican officials in Florida identifying voters in predominantly black precincts for possible challenge.

The secretaries of state, usually the chief election official at the state level, in four battleground states—Michigan, Missouri, Florida, and Ohio have all taken top campaign posts for Bush and have been accused of manipulating state election laws to restrict voter access on behalf of Republicans. Ultra-right Ohio Secretary of State, J. Kenneth Blackwell, the co-chair of the Ohio Bush campaign, together with the Ohio Republican Party are at the center of this nationwide effort to steal the election through voter suppression, intimidation and corruption. In the months leading up to the election, Blackwell attempted to require that registration applications that were not posted on the correct weight paper be cancelled. His efforts to suppress the vote have continued. Blackwell sought to restrict access to provisional ballots: he challenged the validity of over 35,000 new voter registrations in the state (recently thrown out by a Federal Judge): he issued unclear directives regarding the right of ex-felons to vote.

“In state after state, Republican officials and operatives are working to deny American citizens the right to vote,” charges Wade Henderson, executive director of Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (the country’s largest civil and human-rights coalition). Miles Rapoport, former Secretary of the State of Connecticut and President of the nonpartisan public policy organization Demos, says “As the election approaches, chilling reports continue to surface of major efforts to prevent people from voting. Legions of partisan challengers’ are being readied for the polls on Election Day; Latino registrants in rural Georgia are being targeted; and tens of thousands of new Ohio registrants have been challenged. All appear to be organized campaigns. These anti-democratic activities must be stopped.”

TOUCH-SCREEN VOTING

Additionally, the new touch voting machines being used in 29 states and the District of Columbia, have been widely criticized by elections officials and computer scientists and as susceptible to hacking and malfunction. Election Data Services, a consulting firm, predicted 29 percent of voters would use touch-screen machines on voting day.

According to the November 3 Globe and Mail, “several dozen voters in six states — particularly Democrats in Florida — said the wrong candidates

appeared on their touch-screen machine's checkout screen, the coalition said. In many cases, voters said they intended to select John Kerry but when the computer asked them to verify the choice it showed them instead opting for President Bush, the group said. Roberta Harvey, 57, of Clearwater, Fla., said she had tried at least a half dozen times to select Kerry-Edwards when she voted Tuesday at Northwood Presbyterian Church. After 10 minutes trying to change her selection, the Pinellas County resident said she called a poll worker and got a wet-wipe napkin to clean the touch screen as well as a pencil so she could use its eraser-end instead of her finger. Ms. Harvey said it took about 10 attempts to select Mr. Kerry before and a summary screen confirmed her intended selection."

On November 9, 2003, the New York Times reported: "In mid-August, Walden W. O'Dell, the chief executive of Diebold Inc., sat down at his computer to compose a letter inviting 100 wealthy and politically inclined friends to a Republican Party fund-raiser, to be held at his home in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. 'I am committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president next year,' wrote Mr. O'Dell, whose company is based in Canton, Ohio. That is hardly unusual for Mr. O'Dell. A longtime Republican, he is a member of President Bush's 'Rangers and Pioneers,' an elite group of loyalists who have raised at least \$100,000 each for the 2004 race. But it is not the only way that Mr. O'Dell is involved in the election process. Through Diebold Election Systems, a subsidiary in McKinney, Tex., his company is among the country's biggest suppliers of paperless, touch-screen voting machines. Judging from Federal Election Commission data, at least 8 million people will cast their ballots using Diebold machines next November. ... Some people find Mr. O'Dell's pairing of interests — as voting-machine magnate and devoted Republican fund-raiser — troubling." <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/09/business/yourmoney/09vote.htm>

*Co-founder of the Citizens Alliance for Secure Elections, Susan Truitt said today:

"Seven counties in Ohio have electronic voting machines and none of them have paper trails. That alone raises issues of accuracy and integrity as to how we can verify the count. A recount without a paper trail is meaningless; you just get a regurgitation of the data. Last year, Blackwell tried to get the entire state to buy new machines without a paper trail. The exit polls, virtually the only check we have against tampering with a vote without a paper trail, had shown Kerry with a lead. ... A poll worker told me this morning that there were no tapes of the results posted on some machines; on other machines the posted count was zero, which obviously shouldn't be the case." (Institute for Public Accuracy <http://accuracy.org>)

NATIONWIDE RESPONSE

Across Ohio other demonstrations were held in Toledo, Cleveland, Oxford, Athens and Cincinnati. Across the United States on both elections night and November 3 people erupted in protest—some involving 1000s of people— with marches, direct actions, civil disobedience, vigils, breaking of bank windows in San Francisco and rallies were held in at least 40 cities and likely many, many more. Many of the outreach flyers for November 3 actions were headlined,

"NOV 2: VOTE! NOV 3: MAKE IT
COUNT!"

Most of the actions planned by groups were planned to take place regardless of the election outcome and were focused more on the deeper issues of democracy not empire, healthcare, not warfare and education not occupation.

The day of action was initially called for by the Beyond Voting network, whose call for actions read in part, "When your government has troops stationed around the world, lets big corporations write the rules of the global economy and pushes racist policies that promote fear, undermines civil liberties, and rips off working people, you are living in an EMPIRE! Empire is as system of global control that combines international aggression with domestic repression to create a deeply undemocratic world. REAL DEMOCRACY means we the people have direct control over the decisions and resources that matter in our lives. Real democracy means that we make the decisions that impact our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools and the state of the world we hand off to our children. This year the world is counting on us to expand the election year debate beyond Democrats versus Republicans to the larger issue of whether the U.S. will be a Democracy or an Empire."

Two other networks, This Time We Are Watching (a project of the League of Pissed Off Voters, the Truthforce Training Center and the Ruckus Society with many other groups) and No Stolen Elections (Global Exchange, Code Pink, United for Peace and Justice, labor organizers and others) had also begun to prepare a people power response for November 3. No Stolen Elections publicized a pledge of action to stop a stolen election, but on election night they chose not to call on people to take to the streets. The Election Protection Coalition an umbrella group of volunteer poll monitors that set up a hotline and planned to monitor and make public voting irregularities. They may have missed one opportunity to make a difference when Ralph G. Neas, president of the People for the American Way which helped form the coalition, said to the media, "Overall, the problems of outright voter intimidation and suppression have not been as great as in the past."

The massive grassroots participation and activism — the highest levels of activism since before the Iraq invasion- are hopeful. But electoral work and single-issue campaigns without a broader systemic analysis are a recipe for disappointment or failure. Moveon.org has reportedly not returned press calls for two days after the election, perhaps because they had naively thrown all their hopes with Kerry and lacked a deeper vision or longer-term strategy.

The League of Pissed Off Voters was one of the most hopeful efforts within the massive grassroots efforts to unelect Bush. Catalyzing activism around the election among youth, especially youth of color, they had a vision of building power and organization beyond the elections using creative tactics and rooting themselves in hip hop and youth culture. Other local grassroots efforts like Ithaca, New York's Bush Must Go Coalition, used the energy of anti-Bush election build their organization and campaigns that started before and will continue after the election and after Bush is gone. <http://indyvoter.org>

Let's be honest. Kerry would have been an improvement to Bush and sent a much better signal to the world, but he is more reactionary than Nixon; a pro-war, pro-corporate capitalism millionaire who wants a more multi-lateral approach to wars and U.S. empire building. It's also an important to remember what makes deeper changes in the world is movements and communities and people power, not politicians. And if we step back and look at things globally, Bush and his gang are fringe extremists whose empire is overextended, and lacks any global legitimacy. While we are part of a global majority, an ever growing movement of movements that is creating common sense alternatives that will undermine the empire from below.

David Solnit volunteered with the Mobilization for Democracy Not Disenfranchisement and local anti-bush groups in NW Ohio in late

October/early November and is the editor of Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World <http://www.globalizeliberation.org>

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