

Racism, Voter Intimidation and Faulty Poll Machines

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BLACK people intimidated at the polling booth. Voting machines that register ballots wrongly. Welcome to the disaster-waiting-to-happen that is the US presidential election of November 2004.

An investigation by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) into voter intimidation recounts a catalogue of incidents designed to suppress the black vote.

In Kentucky, county Republican party chairman Jack Richardson said he wanted to put “voter challengers” — people who check that voters are who they say they are and are eligible to vote — in predominantly Democratic precincts which have a large African-American population. Other Republicans called the plan “rogue and racist behaviour”.

In Detroit, John Pappageorge, a Republican member of the House of Representatives, said: “If we do not suppress the Detroit vote, we’re going to have a tough time in this election.” Black people make up 83% of Detroit’s population.

In Texas, students at a mainly black college called Prairie View A&M University were told by the district attorney that they were not allowed to vote as the college wasn’t a voting address.

According to the NAACP, in 2003, in Philadelphia, “men with clipboards bearing official-looking insignias” were reportedly dispatched to African-American neighbourhoods.

“There were 300 cars with the decals [logos] resembling those of federal agencies and the men were asking prospective voters for identification. In a post-election poll of 1000 African-American voters, 7% had encountered such efforts.”

In Louisiana flyers were distributed in black neighbourhoods telling voters that if it was rainy they could vote the day after the election. In Maryland, flyers went up listing the wrong date for the election.

Other irregularities noted by the NAACP included Son Kinon, a South Carolina Republican in the House of Representatives, issuing a brochure to black voters which said the FBI would be checking to see if wanted felons were among voters. Kinon wrote: “This election is not worth going to jail [for].”

The NAACP also says that poll workers have been seen “helping” voters fill in their ballots and telling them how to vote.

There are other concerns in addition to those raised by the NAACP. Most worrying is the fact that Palm Beach County in Florida — the state at the centre of the 2000 voting debacle — has spent £8 million on electronic touchscreen voting machines that don't work.

It is all horribly reminiscent of the 2000 vote — with its endless recounts because of “hanging chad” votes — which eventually had to be decided by the supreme court. Bush was handed the presidency even though he lost the popular vote.

In local elections in March 2002, former mayor of Boca Raton, Emil Danciu, finished third in the vote for a seat on the city council. He had led the poll by 17 points before the election. It turned out that when his supporters tried to vote for Danciu using the touchscreen, the machine registered a vote for an opponent. Cartridges containing vote totals from machines in his own precinct disappeared. Danciu sued for access to the machine's source code but was told it was a secret.

Two weeks after this, a mayoral election in the town of Wellington was decided by four votes. However, 78 votes hadn't registered on the computer. Then in January 2004, in Palm Beach during another election, 137 votes didn't register. The vote was won by just 12 votes.

The electronic voting machines were bought by Theresa LePore, who oversaw the Palm Beach election count in 2000. She did not lose her job after that disastrous count, even though she chose the “butterfly ballot” which led to Jewish Democratic voters accidentally voting for an anti-Jewish candidate. LePore will still be in charge in November.

Questions have also been raised about LePore's independence. A Democratic congressman in Palm Beach is suing LePore to get her to adopt a papertrail for vote recounts. He also paid for a college professor to run against LePore for election for her job as elections supervisor. LePore was championed by the Republican Party.

LePore ended up overseeing an election for her own job. On polling day, police surrounded the election centre saying there was a terrorist threat. Sarah Steiner, of the Palm Beach Coalition for Election Reform, said it was difficult for voters to find the alternative entrance.

Absentee ballots had their party affiliation printed on the return envelope, which could have allowed poll workers or postal staff to interfere with votes. LePore's opponent won by just 2%, even though LePore has been described as “one of the most hated politicians in the country”.

In the Miami-Dade area of Florida, another electronic voting system, created by a firm linked to the Republicans, was equally disastrous. One precinct reported a 900% turnout and another showed just one ballot cast out of 1637 registered voters. The machines need to be left on all night to have any hope of working, creating an opportunity for voter fraud.

In Florida — as in six other states — prisoners do not have voting rights restored on leaving prison. The American Civil Liberties Union says 600,000 people, many black, in Florida are disenfranchised in this way.

In other cases, 20% of people who registered to vote with the department of motor vehicles didn't get their voting card. There have also been reports of absentee ballots being sold among Florida's Cuban community for £10, and voter registration forms from black people have turned up in rubbish bins.

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