

GOP going all out to suppress African-American Vote

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Elections “Will Be Worse Than in 2000” “It Will Be Worse Than in 2000”

NAACP head Julian Bond says the GOP is going all out to suppress the black vote. Can his “Election Protection” offensive stop them?

Julian Bond, chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, has devoted his life to civil rights and voting rights issues. After a group of black college students refused to leave a whites-only lunch counter at a Woolworth’s store in Greensboro, N.C., in 1960, Bond — then a student at Atlanta’s Morehouse College — helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Famous for its “Freedom Rides” challenging segregation, SNCC also worked to register black voters in rural areas of the deep South in the early 1960s, with Bond serving as the organization’s communications director.

Elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1965, the 25-year-old Bond was denied his seat by legislators angry about his opposition to the Vietnam War; he was seated after three elections and a unanimous decision of the Supreme Court. Chairman of the NAACP since 1998, Bond is now a distinguished professor at American University in Washington and a professor of history at the University of Virginia. He narrated the prize-winning documentaries “A Time for Justice” and “Eyes on the Prize.”

Salon spoke to Bond on Wednesday by telephone about Republican attempts to suppress the black vote in next Tuesday’s election, including the placing of 3,600 election “challengers” at the polls in Ohio. The Republican secretary of state in Ohio, a crucial swing state with 20 electoral votes, asserts the challengers are needed to prevent voting fraud. But Bond countered that if fraud is really the issue, why are the GOP challengers focusing on cities like Cleveland, which have large Democratic-leaning African-American and Hispanic populations?

Nearly 40 years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, dirty tricks and intimidation tactics against black voters are alive and well, Bond said. In Louisiana in 2002, he said, fliers were passed out in African-American neighborhoods advertising the wrong date for a U.S. Senate runoff election. In the 2003 mayoral election in Philadelphia, he added, men wielding clipboards and official-looking law enforcement insignia paroled African-American neighborhoods asking voters for identification.

The NAACP and the People for the American Way Foundation have issued a report titled “The Long Shadow of Jim Crow: Voter Intimidation and Suppression in America Today.” Your organization will also be staffing an Election Day war room with a toll-free telephone number for voters to report irregularities or intimidation at the polls. Obviously, you think the risk of

minority voters being denied their rights is serious.

I do. I think it's going to be a major factor in either delaying, knowing or deciding who won. In Ohio for example, Republicans have targeted 35,000 voters [for election challenges], most of them registered in cities with large minority populations. And they do this based either on the racist assumption that minorities are inveterate cheaters or because they know that these are voters who are likely to vote against them. Either way, it's a dirty tactic, and only can be thought to slow up, gum up, mess up the whole process. And this is something they [Republicans] have consistently done in every election since the middle to late 1960s — underhanded, tricky, illegal and immoral tactics.

Are you saying that the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 has not been particularly effective in ensuring the enfranchisement of minorities?

Curiously, the Voting Rights Act shifted the partisan direction of these tactics. Before the Voting Rights Act was passed, this [black-voter suppression] was the exclusive province of Democrats. But the Voting Rights Act made two things happen. First, Democrats who were resistant to equality migrated in large numbers to the Republican Party. And the Democratic Party, which had been hostile to black voters, became welcoming. When LBJ signed the law, he said to an aide, "We're giving the South to the Republican Party for a generation." The parties traded places.

Do you expect the tactics to be any heavier-handed this year than in the past?

Oh, yeah. I think it will be worse than in 2000. For one thing, in 2000 you did not have the law-enforcement apparatus of the government engaged on one side of the contest, as you do now. Attorney General [John] Ashcroft has instituted this so-called ballot integrity program. Yes, despite appeals to him to issue statements saying we're interested in protecting the voters' right to cast their votes, he's focused entirely on suspicions and allegations of fraud. I don't think anyone thinks that fraud is a widespread problem in the American electoral system. Instead, he's instructed his attorneys general across the United States to be on the alert for fraud, rather than be on the alert for people who are likely to stymie voters and keep them from casting their votes. The two parties are much more aware, taking a lesson from 2000, that every vote counts, and the Democrats take the lesson to mean we need to get all our people to the polls, while the Republicans take the lesson to mean we have to keep as many people as we can away.

Have you ever heard of thousands of people being employed to challenge voters before, as is happening in Ohio?

I don't know how old this practice is, but it's a fairly standard option in most jurisdictions that one voter is able to challenge the legitimacy of another. But it has never been a widespread practice until this year, and that's what makes it so significant. Typically, in small local races where most voters know each other, the right to challenge means that if I see John Smith coming, and I know that John doesn't live in this precinct, I'm going to challenge him. In the South before the Voting Rights Act, it was typically done by white Democrats against blacks. Now, things are reversed, and this Ohio thing is just unprecedented. Just the sheer number — never before in American political history have 35,000 voters been challenged at one time.

What can the NAACP do about it?

Unfortunately, all you can do in the absence of any intervening authority is to say these are harassment tactics and will not be tolerated. All you can do is have your own people at the polls. In Ohio, you have a partisan secretary of state, Ken Blackwell, whose hopes for achieving the governorship next year rest on his ability to win this election for George W. Bush. He's done everything he can to make the process of casting votes difficult, and he's tolerating this massive challenge, which at best will gum things up.

And you can't really counter these tactics?

You can give instructions to the poll managers to say these things won't be tolerated. You can try to educate them about the standards under which challenges are conducted. But as I understand it, Blackwell hasn't set any standards or issued any warnings. You hope that the poll managers will do it, but they're likely to be overwhelmed by the enormous numbers of people. This is an invitation to chaos.

As far as the hard-won right to vote is concerned — and to have that vote count — what's at stake for African-Americans in this election?

If one person is denied the right to vote, that's a tragedy. If one is turned away for a phony reason, that's a little chink in our democracy. When it happens to thousands, and when their votes are disallowed, as happened in Florida in 2000, then citizens' confidence in the process is weakened.

The result will always be open to challenge and dispute. As you know, there are many, many people, myself among them, who are convinced that President Bush has been an illegitimate president for four years. He didn't win the popular vote; he won the Florida vote by 527 votes, when thousands of black votes were cast aside. If the president doesn't have legitimacy, it makes the process of governing less legitimate.

And yet some polls suggest that Bush is not doing so badly among black voters, at least compared with the single digits he pulled in the 2000 election.

It's because after years of trying to suppress and nullify black voters, they've [Republicans] now tried to slice away a wedge of black voters. And in 11 states, [they] have these so-called marriage amendments on the ballot [to prevent gay marriage] and have begun an aggressive campaign to solicit the support of conservative black clergy. And in some respects, they've succeeded. Now, the NAACP opposed the federal amendments, which failed, and opposed these state-level amendments. And Kweisi Mfume, the president and chief executive officer of the NAACP, and I as the chairman, have written letters to ministers in these 11 states, telling them of our opposition and saying that these state-level amendments are simply devices to split the progressive coalition.

Why don't you ever hear about intimidation tactics being used in predominantly white precincts?

You never hear about it because if you're walking down the street and you see a black face and a white face, you can make an informed guess that that black face is going to vote for the Democrats, and so minorities are the targets of people who want to suppress Democratic votes. That's true — you never hear about this occurring in white precincts. And it's evidence of the partisan and pernicious nature of these practices.

Tell me about the "Election Protection" project that the NAACP has set up with People for

the American Way. You've got a toll-free hot-line number for people to call on Election Day to report irregularities and intimidation tactics?

Yes, but I hope we don't just get overwhelmed. Ideally, if you see a practice you think is questionable, you call and somebody nearby you will be dispatched to take care of it. We also have this cadre of lawyers who will be on the ready in places where, based on past experience, we expect trouble, chiefly in Florida. It's basically a dispatch system to ensure that every complaint is attended to.

Do you do this every election year?

Yes. We've done it in the last two presidential elections, but it really didn't seem to be something needed much until 2000. In 2000, we were just flooded with all kinds of calls all over the country.

So you do or do not think you have the resources to counter any Republican tactics?

I'm sure [the Republicans' efforts] are going to be successful. The only question is to what degree will they be successful. With the resources available, the only way this can be countered is by overwhelming the polls with a record turnout of voters.

We've focused on intimidation of African-American voters. But this is an issue that is important beyond the minority community, isn't it?

Yes. We're talking about things that are beyond the pale of normal politics. It's normal politics for candidates to run negative ads in the hope that they suppress their opponent's votes. But we're talking about things that border on the illegal, or which are illegal. And it ought to be an issue for everyone. How can you wake up the next morning and say Joe Blow has been elected when you know that Joe's election has been tainted by suppressed votes, nullified votes and voters frightened away? How can that election have any credibility? The issue is confidence in the democratic system.

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