



Everything Jersey

Working to stack the deck for 2012 presidential election

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Despite their landslide victory in 2010, Republican politicians across the country are running scared for 2012.

And with good reason. The presidential electorate is quite different from that of midterm elections — a difference of some 42 million, or almost one-third. In the 2008 presidential contest, 132 million votes were cast across the country, compared with 90 million in 2010.

The difference is largely made up of young and nonwhite voters who did not bother to vote in the midterm years. Republicans are going to try to make sure these same groups don't vote in 2012 either — by tactics that will keep them off the rolls.

Those tactics range from legislation that will prohibit college students from voting in their campus districts, to requiring voters produce photo IDs at the polls, to outright intimidation — and, in at least one case, Wisconsin, repealing a state law that allows new voters to register and vote on Election Day itself.

This new movement runs exactly contrary to national policy proclaimed in the Help America Vote Act, adopted by Congress in the aftermath of the disputed 2000 presidential election in order to avoid butterfly ballots, hanging chads and other voting devices that nullified the votes of millions of citizens.

The photo-ID requirement appears, at the moment, to be the instrument of choice for those who are out to reduce “the Obama electorate.”

Variations already exist in eight states, and even more restrictive legislation is pending in some 30 more. Opponents point out that it is the young and the poor who are more likely not to possess photo IDs, especially in states that require official government-issued documents.

Even the conservative Cato Institute has referred to these voter ID laws as being “a handy solution to address a



Patti Sapone/The Star-Ledger

The 2012 presidential election may not only be a contest between candidates, but also a battle over who will be allowed to vote, says professor Frank Askin, of Rutgers Law School-Newark.

nonproblem,” noting that such legislation would have no impact on those areas most vulnerable to fraud, such as absentee or mail-in voting. Cato’s real concern is that voter ID is a step toward a national identification card, an idea the libertarian think tank opposes.

So far as the effort to interfere with college students voting, we can at least be sure that will not happen in New Jersey. It was 39 years ago that our state Supreme Court condemned the Mercer County Board of Elections for refusing to allow students at county colleges to choose to register from their campus addresses, rather than their parents’ homes.

The other anti-voting device being pressed by right-wing organizations is what is pejoratively known as “caging.” That involves challenging the credentials of those who come to vote, hoping to scare off some voters, or to at least slow down the process in hopes that others will give up and go home. It was a process first perfected in Newark by the Imperiale machine during the historic 1970 campaign, when Kenneth Gibson was elected the city’s first black mayor.

The practice was brought to national attention again in the 1980s, also in New Jersey, when a federal judge in Newark enjoined the national Republican Party from engaging in such tactics.

The latest version of this tactic will be rolled out in Houston on Friday under the auspices of a Texas tea party group called “True the Vote” at a national summit to train hundreds of volunteers to act as poll watchers equipped to challenge voters at precincts around the country in 2012.

So already the 2012 presidential election is shaping up not only as a contest between candidates, but as a real fight over who will be allowed to vote.

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