

# THE WESTERN NEWS

## Bits 'n pieces from east, west and beyond

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East, west or beyond, sooner or later events elsewhere may have a local impact. A recent sampling:

New Zealand has had one of the world's most successful COVID-19 pandemic responses. Under 40-year-old Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the nation of five million has had fewer than 2,000 COVID-19 cases and just 25 deaths. Ardern orchestrated early hospital preparation, border control policies, stringent lockdowns and seven-weeks of stay-at-home orders, according to The New England Journal of Medicine.

The stock market is doing well. But 100,000 U.S. restaurants closed in the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, putting three million people out of work, Time magazine reported. As well, some 100,000 airline workers are now furloughed. Disney recently laid off 28,000 employees. While the House of Representatives passed a \$2.2 trillion COVID-19 relief package, Senate Leader Mitch McConnell has chosen to ignore it, rendering it dead for now, to focus instead on the Supreme Court confirmation hearings.

On Oct. 14, the U.S. saw a record of almost 60,000 new COVID-19 cases confirmed, the highest since August. Close to 1,000 people died that day. As well, The Washington Post and The New York Times reported that the Trump Administration now favors adopting a policy of "herd immunity." Health experts say that approach could lead to more than two million U.S. deaths.

The Great Barrington Declaration, an approach to addressing COVID-19, came into the public spotlight last week. It calls for isolating those most vulnerable and the elderly (who are willing) and would dispense with lockdowns in favor of "focused protection." Talking on Democracy Now radio, a signer said the plan does not seek to get people infected, but does call for the most vulnerable to have access to protective devices, paid leave and safer working conditions. The document claims to have 9,000 signatures, but some have been called into question, such as "Dr. Johnny Bananas."

The Declaration grew out of a meeting of the Libertarian-leaning American Institute for Economic Research, which draws funding from corporations including Phillip Morris International, ExxonMobil and Chevron, and partners with Koch International, the Ayn Rand Institute and the Cato Institute. AIER publications, include "Brazilians Should Keep Slashing Their Rainforests" and "The Real Reason Nobody Takes Environmentalists Seriously."

The World Health Organization objects to some elements in the document, such as the lack of any reference to how those that initially recover from COVID-19, including the young, but suffer long-term health consequences.

"I don't want everybody to vote ... [O]ur leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down," Paul Weyrich, a theocracy-inclined political tactician, and co-founder of the influential American Legislative Exchange Council said in 1980. For Republicans

to gain election advantage, several voter suppression efforts have been adopted (as reported on frequently by NPR, The Guardian, TIME, the Brennan Center for Justice, the ACLU and many others). They include: purging voters who have not voted in several election cycles, purging voters whose registration cards do not have exact spellings or addresses (like signatures missing a middle initial), or falsely claiming a voter is not a citizen. In 2016, states removed 17 million voters from the rolls.

They also eliminate polling places. Being crowded into long lines while waiting to vote, especially during a pandemic, can discourage voters. Encouraging threatening-looking “poll watchers” to intimidate voters at the polls is another method. In 2018, legal restrictions on that activity were lifted. There also have been accusations regarding the slowing of the U.S. Postal Service to create havoc with the vote-by-mail process. Under President Donald Trump’s new postmaster general, workers hours have been cut, street-side letter boxes removed and mail-sorting machines taken out.

Then there are the courts. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts advocated muffling minority votes when serving under Ronald Reagan, and then in 2013 got his chance as a justice when he said there is no longer “racial disparity,” so the Voting Rights Act of 1965 could be lifted. That opened the gates — for states inclined to do so — to create roadblocks for minority voters (including the closure of 1,688 polling places).

Legal efforts to suppress voters have also included suing to stop postage-paid return voting envelopes, suing counties that allow out-of-county poll watchers and suing to stop states from mailing ballots to eligible voters. Trump told Politico, “We have many lawsuits going all over. And if we don’t win [them] ... I think it puts the election at risk.”

To make sure your vote counts, the organization Democracy Docket urges voters to vote early in person, which is allowed in 41 states, use a ballot drop box (call your county elections office to locate a box) or take your signed and sealed ballot directly to your county elections office or polling location.

Blast from the past: “There are men in government who shouldn’t be allowed to play with matches,” said Will Rogers, 1879-1935, an American actor and humorist.