



## States double down on conspiracy theories waged by anti-democracy movement

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It's critical to remember American bipartisanship is not an act of virtue. In recent history, Democrats and Republicans have locked arms to usher in disastrous domestic and foreign policies that exacerbated economic inequality (see financial deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s, Bush Era Tax Cuts in 2000s/their extension during Obama Era and rolling back Dodd-Frank provisions in 2018), dismantled anti-poverty programs (see 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation), and advanced a bloated military industrial complex through the invasion of Iraq and conflict in Afghanistan. Yet, when it comes to election administration and security, bipartisanship is vital to the survival of American democracy.

The heroic work state election workers have played in defending democracy cannot be overstated. In an unprecedented environment of implementing nuanced plans during a pandemic with historic voter turnout, these under-resourced technocrats administered the most secure election in American history in 2020. However, praise and adoration from a majority has coincided with a rise of conspiracy theorists armed with a political vendetta – similar to other modern heroes (healthcare workers and teachers) championed by society. This anti-democracy, conspiracy theory movement aims to polarize and politicize everything, everywhere all at once – consumed by a frenzy for attaining political power.

Born out of President Trumps' Big Lie Theory, the movement has flooded good faith election officials with death threats and mis-and-disinformation, causing an exodus that threatens the future of election administration. Despite monumental achievements safeguarding elections, voter fraud and election denialism conspiracy theories have been a constant drumbeat from a large faction of the Republican Party. Of the 552 statewide nominees (governor, senator, secretary of state and attorney general) running in 2022, only 78 candidates fully accepted the results of the 2020 election, according to a FiveThirtyEight analysis. While election deniers overwhelmingly lost – especially in critical battleground states that have decided the past two presidential elections – their threats to undermine the integrity of elections are alive and well.

Their next target is the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), a multi-state organization created by state election officials that works to ensure accurate voter lists and

increases access to voter registration for all eligible citizens. In short, ERIC examines voter registration and motor vehicle department data – provided voluntarily by states through secure channels – along with federal death data and change of address data, to offer various analyses to enhance election administration. State election officials use these analyses to update their voter rolls, make inquiries into potential illegal voting, and remove ineligible voters who have moved or died.

The non-profit organization is governed and managed by members who join, which at its peak, included 34 states, a rare example of bipartisanship that has actually produced positive results:

*“Maintaining accurate voter rolls protects the integrity of our elections. Systems like ERIC are an important tool for election administrators and help prevent people from being registered in and trying to vote in multiple states. States that prioritize best practices and actual election integrity over politics are going to stay in ERIC and have clearer and more accurate voter rolls than those that choose to leave.” – Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger (R)*

*“Joining ERIC is a powerful step to strengthen New Jersey’s elections by increasing our ability to support eligible voters while also improving the accuracy of our voting rolls. This partnership will help more New Jerseyans participate in democracy while giving all our voters greater confidence in the integrity of our elections.” – New Jersey Secretary of State Tahesha Way (D)*

Support for ERIC also comes from a wide range of groups, rarely ever in alignment. They include The Heritage Foundation, CATO Institute, R Street Institute, John Locke Foundation, the Council on State Governments, Bipartisan Policy Center, National Association of Secretaries of State, Issue One, Secure Democracy USA, Verified Voting, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, and the Brennan Center for Justice.

Now, hyper-partisan, right-wing actors are plotting to lead a revolt against the strongest tool that maintains healthy election administration.

One day after the 58th anniversary of Selma’s Bloody Sunday, Republican-led states of Florida, Missouri, and West Virginia announced they were withdrawing from ERIC, following Louisiana and Alabama last year. Over a week later, Ohio and Iowa exited, despite both Secretaries of State recently praising the work of ERIC.

From an interview with *The Statehouse Bureau*, March 7, 2023:

*“[ERIC] is one of the best fraud-fighting tools that we have when it comes to actually catching people that try to vote in multiple states, when it comes to maintaining the accuracy of our voter rolls by removing those that move out of state.” – Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose (R)*

In an open letter, March 17, 2023:

*“I cannot justify the use of Ohio’s tax dollars for an organization that seems intent on rejecting meaningful accountability, publicly maligning my motives, and waging a relentless campaign of misinformation about this effort,” – Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose (R)*

Secretary LaRose is considering a run for U.S. Senate in 2024.

States that have left ERIC have repeated a common refrain of baseless attacks (George Soros) that have been hurled like mud to undermine confidence and discredit non-partisan institutions. Do not dismiss them as fringe actors; this is a well-funded movement with billionaire-backers and institutional support from the GOP. Last January, a leaked internal report to the *Washington Post* revealed a plan by the Republican National Committee to build a large-scale organization dedicated to furthering election denial claims of former President Trump. Then, on March 6, President Trump went to his bullhorn on Truth Social to denounce ERIC, calling for all Republican governors to leave.

But where would they go?

Like too many destinations in our modern political era, roads lead to Mike The Pillow Guy and a partisan, privatization version. However, the creation of partisan systems to uphold the health of voter rolls have failed abysmally before. It's imperative to reject the extreme attempts to play politics with election administration and prioritize the needs of local election officials and voters ahead of 2024. Since there is no appetite for bipartisan legislation that enhances voting rights at the federal level, civil society groups must be vigorously protected and improved, to stave off domestic threats from extremists looking to enhance their self-interests and achieve political power by any means necessary – democracy be damned.