

Voter Apartheid: ALEC's laws against poor, non-white America

by Lisa Graves

Lincoln's statement, in the depths of the Civil War, that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth," is the strongest declaration for our democracy. An assassin's bullet kept America's first Republican president from seeing the day that black men had the right to vote. And it took more than 50 years beyond that for the Constitution to recognize women's right to vote.

For a century after Lincoln freed the slaves, southern states imposed various tactics to block black Americans from their right to vote. It took an act of Congress to stop states from obstructing that right. A higher percentage of Republicans voted for the 1964 Voting Rights Act than Democrats, who were saddled with a bunch of racist "Dixiecrats" back then.

In the ensuing 50 years, the Democratic Party has shed the Dixiecrats, and the "modern" Republican Party has absorbed their hostility to expanded voting rights. Indeed, 21st century Republicans have betrayed Lincoln's vow at Gettysburg to protect the core element of government of, by and for the people. A central part of their effort is a multi-year campaign to establish restrictive voter ID requirements that disproportionately disenfranchise poor and non-white voters.

After a majority of the American people—with unprecedentedly high turnout by black Americans and college students — elected Barack Obama to be the first black president of the United States in 2008, these restrictions became a priority to Republicans in the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Over at ALEC, corporate lobbyists voted as equals with state legislators behind closed doors on a "model" bill that used "Voter ID" restrictions to make it harder for Americans to vote. The National Rifle Association co-chaired the ALEC task force where this bill was approved as a national model in 2009, and the bill was ratified as part of the ALEC agenda shortly thereafter.

After extraordinary vilification of Obama and his effort to increase access to more affordable health insurance to help save the lives of millions of Americans, the Republicans gained control of several states and ALEC's voter restrictions started steaming through those legislatures.

Charlatans like Donald Trump—arousing white racist sentiment — attacked the legitimacy of President Obama's election by claiming he was not a citizen — an absurd claim. Do they think that, in the segregated America of 1961, his white grandparents foresaw the future presidential run of their biracial grandson and put birth announcements into Hawai'i state newspapers to hide his purported foreign birth?

For those legislators less comfortable with the kind of racist, dog-whistle politics Trump is using, the ALEC bill provided a way for Republicans to suppress voting without invoking the racist rationales of Jim Crow era restrictions.

The pretext for the bill was the specter of "voter fraud" — people using the names of other registered voters to vote multiple times — as well as illegal immigrant voting. This kind of fraud is incredibly rare. The George W. Bush administration was so obsessed with hyping "voter fraud" that their Attorney General fired several Republican US Attorneys who were not doing enough to investigate and showboat "voter fraud" that was not a major problem and rarely occurred.

Yet, the actions of ALEC legislators in state after state have disenfranchised countless poor and non-white Americans, denying them their right to vote, to be represented in a representative democracy, of the people, by the people, for the people.

Restrictive voter ID laws are shameful. They must be repudiated and reversed.

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graphic: Occupy.com

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Law and Order

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Republican legislators who backed voter ID restrictions have been bragging about how effective voter ID restrictions are in disenfranchising people. In a trial in Wisconsin this spring, a Republican aide testified that ALEC's board chair, Senator Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa) and then-Senator Randy Hopper, (R-Fond du Lac), were 'giddy' and 'politically frothing at the mouth' at the prospect of the law's passage.

Another ALEC legislator said that state senate elections committee Chair, Mary Lazich, "told the public it was all about preventing voter fraud ... [b]ut behind closed doors at a GOP caucus meeting ... Lazich and other GOP senators were excited at the prospect that Voter ID could prevent some Democratic populations from voting. She got up out of her chair hitting her finger on the table and said, 'Hey, we've got to think about what this could mean for the neighborhoods around Milwaukee and the college campuses around the state..'" Many of the neighborhoods around Milwaukee are predominately black.

Federal courts are divided about striking down these measures, with some judges finding them unconstitutional and unreasonable due to their disproportionate impact on minority communities. The Texas law was struck down, but the Wisconsin law was upheld.

In all, more than a dozen states have passed Voter ID restrictions that echo ALEC's law. According to the Brennan Center, this year "17 states will have new voting restrictions in place for the first time in a presidential election." These include restrictive ID requirements and limits on early voting, as Americans face one of the most pivotal and divisive presidential elections in US history.