

Civil Rights

Deliberate Disenfranchisement of Communities of Color

by Dr. Reverend Rodney Sadler

This summer, something miraculous happened:

Judges in Republican-led states from Texas to Wisconsin, Kansas and North Carolina recognized the irrefutable truth that voting rights are sacred, overturning a series of cynical, discriminatory, anti-democratic laws. Such laws were found to have intentionally sought to undermine the rights of blacks and poor people, demonstrating an effort to diminish the voices of the marginalized in the public square.

These rulings underscore a crucial point: People around the country, across the political spectrum, are waking up to the injustice of modern voter suppression. While young folks in the Black Lives Matter movement are taking to the streets to demand racial justice, we should note that the deliberate disenfranchisement of black and brown peoples is just another mode of denigrating and devaluing the same people who have been the victims of police violence.

This recent awakening is a collective response to a concerted effort by extremists to limit the potential political power of black and brown peoples. This has been clear in my home state of North Carolina where, since 2011, the state has spent half of the \$9.3 million in external legal fees to defend such egregious laws as our monster voter disenfranchisement law that was crafted to eliminate modes of voting — same day registration, Sunday "Souls to the Polls" voting, and early voting — that were most popular among African Americans.

This election — the very first since the Supreme Court's rollback of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in *Shelby County v Holder (2013)*— has already been marked by serious efforts to suppress democratic rights. The obvious and egregious forms of voter suppression are just the surface of this civil rights challenge. We also need to address systemic and discriminatory threats that go under the radar; like the technologies that count our votes.

Across the nation, election authorities are using out-of-date voting machines and antiquated software platforms. NYU's Brennan Center for Justice notes that 43 states use machines 10-15 years old. Last year, Virginia de-certified 3,000 voting machines used after security vulnerabilities, like unsafe Wi-Fi, created the possibility of unnoticed tampering. Such antiquated, insecure, and crash-prone machines are disproportionately concentrated in communities of color.

Equipment problems are an intended impediment that, like other forms of voter



Actress, singer and talk show host Keke Palmer announced as spokesperson for the hip hop caucus respect my vote! Campaign

suppression, keep black, brown, and poor people from fully participating in the democratic process. As disturbed as we were to learn that the Russians had hacked the Democratic National Committee to interfere with the US presidential election, we should be equally concerned that poorly-secured, Wi-Fi-connected voting machines could be another readily accessible target.

A decade ago, US Senators Feinstein, Obama, Clinton, and Sanders co-sponsored important legislation to phase out insecure electronic voting machines. This legislation is as valid and necessary today as it was then. Our nation's voting equipment needs to be upgraded and proper security and transparency standards must be utilized across the nation, particularly in marginalized neighborhoods.

The summer of 2016 has been an awakening: judges around the country are standing up to defend the sacredness of voting rights. But, to repair the integrity of the election system by ensuring safe and equal voting equipment, Congress and state legislatures must pass legislation to restore the (e)quality of voting technologies.

Voting in our system is not just a right, it is our obligation to participate in our governance as a people. In this regard, the way that we evaluate votes must take the gravity of each vote seriously to ensure that our results reflect the true will of the governed.

When machines in inner-city communities fail to work and we fail to do anything about it, it is tantamount to ignoring the humanity and dignity of people whose voice and participation in the overall system has been compromised. Knowing that there are still groups actively working to prevent voting should make us even more vigilant of the way technological "malfunctions" at the voting booth maintains the status quo power relationships. This isn't just about prudent standards — it's about civil rights.

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