

OPINION

A Travesty of Voter Suppression

Fighting back so everyone can vote

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Thanks to rising citizen outrage and efforts like the National Urban League's "Occupy the Vote" campaign, the voter suppression movement is facing mounting resistance.



As we reported several weeks ago, voter suppression laws in Florida designed to purge voter rolls and make it more difficult to register voters, have now been challenged by the Justice Department.

There is also a new bill in the U.S. House of Representatives which takes direct aim at some of the most egregious voter suppression tactics being employed or considered in dozens of states throughout the nation.

These tactics include elimination of Election Day and same-day registration, reduc-

tions in early voting periods and absentee voting opportunities, and new restrictions on voter registration drives. The measures could prevent millions of eligible voters from exercising their constitutional right to vote and they disproportionately affect our service members, people with disabilities, minorities, young people, seniors and low income Americans.

As we approach the 2012 presidential election, we should be encouraging more, not less voting by the American people.

In the 2008 presidential election about three million Americans were turned away from the polls due to voter registration problems. And an estimated 51 million Americans eligible to vote are not registered.

Still there are those who are determined to keep even more people from voting. This is a travesty, it's un-American and it dishonors the sacrifice of generations of voting rights foot soldiers who fought and died to guarantee every citizen the right to vote.

Sponsored by Representatives John Lewis

(GA), John Conyers (MI), Steny Hoyer (MD), James Clyburn (SC), and Robert Brady (PA), the Voter Empowerment Act (H.R. 5799), would fight back by ensuring equal access to the ballot box, protecting the integrity of voting systems and mandating accountability for fair elections.

Among its provisions, the bill calls for modernizing the voter registration system, including allowing for on-line registration. It would require universities that receive federal funds to encourage students to register; set standards for voting machines; simplifying the registration process for overseas military service men and women; and authorize same-day registration.

The legislation would also empower the Election Assistance Commission to ensure high standards and fair elections, and remove barriers for people with disabilities.

The Voter Empowerment Act is the most serious attempt to date by Congress to protect voters from the recent onslaught of restrictive voting measures that make it

harder for millions of eligible voters to register or vote.

In describing the bill in a recent op-ed in the Hill newspaper, Congressmen Conyers and Brady write, "The bill declares that a voter shall not be denied the right to vote unless the challenge is corroborated by independent evidence, and it also prohibits persons other than election officials from challenging a voter's eligibility based on voter caging and other questionable challenges."

John Lewis, a veteran of the civil rights movement, who was beaten during the 1965 "Bloody Sunday" voting rights march in Selma, Alabama, added, "The ability to vote should be easy, accessible and simple... We should be moving toward a more inclusive democracy, not one that locks people out." We agree.

Occupy the Vote. Pass the Voter Empowerment Act now.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Breathing a Sigh of Relief on Immigration

Obama's DREAM Gambit

BY MATIAS RAMOS

When Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano announced she was instructing all her agencies to stop automatically deporting young undocumented immigrants and grant them work permits, I breathed a sigh of relief.



The new policy closely resembles the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. It says that those undocumented immigrants who came to the United States before they turned 16 and have lived in this country for more than five straight years while staying in school and out of trouble may legally work.

It means that members of nationwide immigrant networks like United We Dream, the National Day Laborers Organizing Network, and the National Immigrant Youth Alliance could be applying for work permits as early as August.

The new policy was unveiled June 15 and took effect immediately. President Barack Obama himself affirmed it in a Rose Garden speech that afternoon, explaining that "it makes no sense to expel talented young people who, for all intents and purposes, are Americans."

This certainly applies to my brother, who will probably tap this new immigration policy. Facundo is a 23-year-old undocumented man with a computer science degree from the University of California, San Diego. He put himself through college with tremendous sacrifice and hard work. His programming skills are an asset for this country. How could the United States benefit from deporting him to Argentina, where we were born?

Clearly, this is a perfect issue for Obama to galvanize his reelection prospects and boost support for many Democratic congressional candidates in November.

The DREAMers, after all, offer an ideal way to highlight the real consequences of Republican obstruction in Congress. And stopping the senseless deportation of talented young people — including valedictorians — may deliver more Latino votes for Obama.

Much of his speech focused on the inability of Congress to reach consensus on the DREAM Act. Majorities in both the House and Senate supported the measure in 2010, but a minority in the Senate that included 36 Republicans and five Democrats blocked it.

Mitt Romney's muted response is a positive sign for DREAMers. It indicated that the new policy blindsided Republicans, even if the usual chorus of anti-immigrant politicians quickly denounced the move. Rep. Steve King (R-IA), for example, said he will sue the Obama administration. Sheriff Joe Arpaio said he was suspicious of the timing.

Romney, however, faces an uphill battle in garnering enough Latino votes in crucial battleground states. He stopped short of saying he'd reverse the policy if he were president. With support from the immigrant rights movement, hundreds of thousands of young people could benefit from it before the end of the year. By the time Romney might be sworn in and reverse the policy, it would mean taking on a highly networked community with the potential

to shift public opinion. And that wouldn't be advisable.

Despite this exciting news, the immigrant rights movement is taking a wait-and-see approach. Why are we skeptical? Last year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Director John Morton announced another "prosecutorial discretion" policy. That time around, there was little fanfare and the president never spoke about it publicly.

A year later, the government has dropped less than one percent of the relevant deportation cases. This new process will include the agency charged with processing people for naturalization and citizenship, along with ICE. Even those who aren't facing or fighting deportation will be able to present evidence documenting how long they've lived in the United States and get work permits.

Envision thousands of new Americans lining up to get recognized as such. If that actually happens, it will improve Obama's re-election chances and change thousands of lives in the process.

Matias Ramos is a former undocumented student and a co-founder of the United We Dream Network.

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