

ACCESS TO THE BALLOT

GOP rallies behind voting limits in the states

BY NICHOLAS RICCARDI AND MICHAEL BIESECKER

Associated Press

On an invitation-only call this month, Sen. Ted Cruz huddled with Republican state lawmakers to call them to battle on the issue of voting rights.

Democrats are trying to expand voting rights to “illegal aliens” and “child molesters,” he claimed, and Republicans must do all they can to stop them. If they push through far-reaching election legislation now before the Senate, the GOP won’t win elections again for generations, he said.

Asked if there was room to compromise, Cruz was blunt: “No.”

“H.R. 1’s only objective is to ensure that Democrats can never again lose another election, that they will win and maintain control of the House of Representatives and the Senate and of the state legislatures for the next century,” Cruz said told the group organized by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate-backed, conservative group that provides model legislation to state legislators.

Cruz’s statements, recorded by a person on the call and obtained by The Associated Press, capture the building intensity behind Republicans’ nationwide campaign to restrict access to the ballot. From statehouses to Washington, the fight over who can vote and how — often cast as “voting integrity” — has galvanized a Republican Party in search of unifying mission in the post-Trump era. For a powerful network of conservatives, voting restrictions are now viewed as a political life-or-death debate, and the fight has all-but eclipsed traditional Republican issues like abortion, gun rights and tax cuts as an organizing tool.

That potency is drawing influential figures and money from across the right, ensuring that the clash over the legislation in Washington will be partisan and expensive.

“It kind of feels like an all-hands-on-deck moment for the conservative movement, when the movement writ large realizes the sanctity of our elections is paramount and voter distrust is at an all-time high,” said Jessica Anderson, executive director of Heritage Action, an influential conservative advocacy group in Washington. “We’ve had a bit of a battle cry from the grassroots, urging us to pick this fight.”

Several prominent groups have recently entered the fray: Anti-abortion rights group, the Susan B. Anthony List, has partnered with another conservative Christian group to fund a new organization, the Election Transparency Initiative. FreedomWorks, a group formed to push for smaller government, has initiated a \$10 million calling for tighter voting laws in the states. It will be run by Cleta Mitchell, a prominent Republican attorney who advised former President Donald Trump.

Meanwhile, Heritage Action has announced a new effort also focused on changes in state voting laws. It included a \$700,000 ad campaign to back GOP-written bills in Georgia, the group’s first foray into advocating for state policy.

States at heart of debate

So far, the states have been the center of the debate. More than 250 bills have been introduced in 43 states that would change how Americans vote, according to a tally by the Brennan Center for Justice, which backs expanded voting access. That includes measures that would limit mail voting, cut hours that polling places are open and impose restrictions that Democrats argue amount to the greatest assault on voting rights since Jim Crow.

That push was triggered by Trump’s lies that he lost the presidential election due to fraud — claims rejected by the courts and by prominent Republicans — and the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol that those groundless claims sparked.



Greg Nash/Pool via AP, file

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, speaks during a Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs hearing March 3. Cruz is among Republicans who oppose Democratic efforts to expand voting rights.

But the fight over voting laws now extends far beyond Trump and is shifting to Washington, where the Democratic-led Senate will soon consider an array of voting changes. The package, known as H.R. 1, would require states to automatically register eligible voters, as well as offer same-day registration. It would limit states’ ability to purge registered voters from their rolls and restore former felons’ voting rights. Among dozens of other provisions, it would also require states to offer 15 days of early voting and allow no-excuse absentee balloting. Democrats, who are marshaling their own resources behind the bill, argue it is necessary to block what they describe as voter suppression efforts in the states.

Republicans contend it’s a grab bag of long-sought Democratic goals aimed at tilting elections in their favor. Cruz claimed it would lead to voting by millions of “criminals and illegal aliens.”

The bill “says America would be better off if more murderers were voting, America would be better off if more rapists and child molesters were voting,” Cruz said.

He added that he had recently participated in an all-day strategy call with national conservative leaders to coordinate opposition. The leaders agreed that Republicans would seek to rebrand the Democratic-backed bill as the “Corrupt Politicians Act,” he said.

Conservative focus

The focus on voting is visible across the conservative movement, even among groups with no clear interest in the voting debate. At a televised town hall in February, leading Christian conservative Tony Perkins fielded several questions about voting before tackling topics on the social issues his Family Research Council typically focuses on.

Perkins answered the question by recalling how voting laws were made stricter in his native Louisiana after a close 1996 Senate race won by Democrats. He noted that the state now votes solidly Republican.

“When you have free, fair elections, you’re going to have outcomes that are positive,” Perkins said before urging viewers to push state lawmakers to “restore election integrity.”

Stronger voting regulations have long been a conservative goal, driven by old — and some say outdated — conventional wisdom that Republicans thrive in elections with lower turnout, and Democrats in ones with more voters. That has translated to GOP efforts to tighten voter identification laws and require more frequent voter roll purges. Both efforts tend to disproportionately exclude Black and Latino voters, groups that lean Democratic.

In a sign of the increasing attention to the issue last year, Leonard Leo, a Trump advisor and one of the strategists behind the conservative focus on the federal judiciary, formed The Honest Elections Project to push for voting restrictions and coordinate GOP effort to monitor the 2020 vote.

But the issue expanded beyond what many conservatives expected. As Trump groundlessly blamed fraud for his loss, and he and his allies lost more than 50 court cases trying to overturn the election, his conservative base became convinced of vague “irregularities” and holes in the voting system.

While Leo’s group, like other parts of the establishment GOP, kept a distance from such claims, state lawmakers stepped in quickly with bills aimed at fixing phantom problems and restoring confidence in the system.

“We’re certain our vote will count, we’re certain our vote is secure, we’re certain our system is fair and not having any sort of nefarious activities,” said Iowa Rep. Bobby Kaufmann, a Republican who authored a wide-ranging election bill that shortened the state’s early voting period.

Leo’s group has since released a list of its preferred voting law changes.

Similarly, other outside groups soon jumped into the debate that’s roiling their activists who write the letters, make phone calls and send the small donations that keep the groups relevant.

“It’s gone up the chain of priority,” said Noah Wall, executive vice president of FreedomWorks, which trained 60 top activists in Orlando last weekend on voting issues. “If you were to poll our activists right now, election integrity is going to be near the top of the list. Twelve months ago, that wasn’t the case.”



An elections worker sorts secrecy sleeves at the Multnomah County Elections Division in Portland for the 2020 Oregon primary election in May. Oregon elections are held entirely by mail. In dozens of other states, more than 250 bills have recently been introduced either to limit mail voting or otherwise change how elections are conducted.

Bradley W. Parks/OPB file



ELEANOR MURPHEY



“Art is never finished, only abandoned.”
- Leonardo Da Vinci

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ESTATE PLANNING



John D. Sorlie
Attorney at Law

Question: I want to make gifts to my grandchildren. How much can I give to them without paying tax?

Answer: The IRS imposes a gift tax on gifts made to others during your life. However, there are a number of exclusions and exemptions available to allow you to make gifts without having to pay any gift tax. The gift tax annual exclusion available in 2021 allows you to make annual gifts of up to \$15,000 to as many people as you would like each year. If you stay below this level of gift you do not need to file a gift tax return or report the gift to the IRS. You also currently have a lifetime gift tax exemption of \$11.7 million. If your gift exceeds the \$15,000 annual exclusion, you can utilize your lifetime exemption to avoid paying gift tax. To do so, you must file a gift tax return with the IRS to report how much of the exemption you are utilizing. But, if you limit your total lifetime gifts to less than the \$11.7 million exemption, neither you nor the recipient of the gift will need to pay any tax on the gift.

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REAL ESTATE



Craig Edwards
Attorney at Law

Question: What is title insurance, and why do I need it?

Answer: Title insurance protects owners and lenders from financial loss arising from defects in the title to real estate, liens of record, and other matters of public record that threaten an owner’s interest. In exchange for the payment of a premium, a title insurance company researches public records to determine who owns the property, what liens are claimed, and what rights or interests others may claim — such as easements. All clouds on the title are disclosed in a “Preliminary Title Report,” alerting a prospective buyer and its lender to the title defects and claims that exist, and which may cause the buyer to lose its interest and entire investment if not removed before or at closing. Never purchase real estate without considering the need for title insurance.

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LONG-TERM CARE



Will Dennis
Attorney at Law

Question: Why do I need to plan ahead in case I need long-term care?

Answer: The focus on planning for the future has been “Estate Planning,” where you plan in the event of your incompetency or worse, death. We are living longer today and with the realities of poor health, Alzheimer’s, dementia, and just getting old, many of the most serious issues we face happen in the last 20 years of life, before we die. With this reality it becomes readily apparent that any planning we now do must include planning for long-term care. We must include provisions in our Durable Powers of Attorney, Advance Directives, as well as our Trusts, that the contingencies we suffer during the last 20 years of life will be met. We must give our agents, we designate to make our decisions, the power to do all that is necessary, including carrying out long-term care objectives that meet our needs and the needs of our families. It is always best to plan before a crisis occurs. Planning ahead almost always provides more options. I provide a no-charge review to get you headed in the right direction.

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