

Claims of voter fraud often manufactured, exaggerated for political purposes

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Widespread "voter fraud" is a myth promulgated to suppress voter participation, according to a new Project Vote report released today. "The Politics of Voter Fraud" finds that fraudulent voting, or the intentional corruption of the voting process by voters, is extremely rare. Yet, false or exaggerated claims of fraudulent voting are commonly made in close electoral contests, and later cited by proponents of laws that restrict voting. The report is authored by Lorraine Minnite, Ph.D., Barnard College, Columbia University.

"I set out to study what situations generated incidents of voter fraud and, after researching the laws and examining the existing evidence, I found that voter fraud did not occur with enough frequency or was enough of a significant factor in elections to model or study," Minnite said. "Instead, in this report, I examined circumstances in which claims of voter fraud were made and how they came to receive widespread public attention."

Analysis of federal government records concludes that only 24 people were convicted of or pleaded guilty to illegal voting between 2002 and 2005, an average of eight people a year. The available state-level evidence of fraudulent voting, culled from interviews, reviews of newspaper coverage and court proceedings paints a similar picture.

"We shouldn't base public policy on urban legends but on sound facts. It's clear from this report that fraudulent voting isn't threatening the integrity of our elections; we do know that erecting additional bureaucratic obstacles to voting discourages legitimate voters," said Project Vote Deputy Director Michael Slater.

The report includes case studies in which accusations of "voter fraud" received widespread media attention. Each one demonstrates the way in which partisan politics exploit administrative errors or minor problems to create the illusion of systemic fraud.

While there is little evidence of fraudulent voting, the case is clear that voting rules restrict voter turnout. A recent study by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University found that laws requiring voters to show a document establishing identity reduce minority voter turnout. Researchers found that in the 2004 election, all voters, in states requiring voters to present documentation establishing their identity at the polls, were 2.7 percent less likely to vote than voters in states where no documentation was required. Latinos were 10 percent less likely to vote, Asian-Americans 8.5 percent less likely to vote and African Americans 5.7 percent less likely to vote.

A survey by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law found that 11 percent of Americans, more than 21 million citizens, did not have a current government-issued photo ID. Low-income, minority and elderly Americans disproportionately lack current government-issued photo ID.

To help improve public understanding and make the electoral system as efficient as possible, the report recommends: better voter fraud data collection and dissemination by states' chief elections officers, maintenance of accurate voter registration databases, cooperative relationships between non-partisan civic groups engaged in voter registration and elections officials, education of the media, and the institution of automatic universal voter registration.

Project Vote is the leading technical assistance and direct service provider to the civic participation community. Since its founding in 1982, Project Vote has provided professional training, management, evaluation and technical services on a broad continuum of key issues related to voter engagement and participation in low-income and minority communities.

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