

The Resurgence of Voter Suppres

No photo ID, no vote. That's the law in Kansas.

In 2011, the state passed one of the most restrictive voter ID laws in the country, requiring voters to show a photo ID at the polls.

The new law is part of a wave of legislation aimed at tightening access to the voting booth that has swept across the country over the past two years. At least 33 states are considering bills to restrict balloting – or have already passed them.

Coincidence? Unfortunately, no.

The proliferation of laws that will make it more difficult to vote is part of a systematic attempt in Republican-controlled state legislatures to discourage elderly voters, young voters, students, minorities, and low-income voters from exercising their constitutional right to engage in the democratic process. Under a new Texas law, voters can use gun licenses to cast a ballot, but student ID cards are not accepted.

The effort to suppress the vote is being organized by the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which develops model bills to promote its favorite causes – including restricting access to the polls.

Paul Weyrich, the group's influential co-founder, said as far back as 1980, "I don't want everybody to vote... As a

matter of fact, our leverage in the elections goes up as the voting populace goes down."

Bills in Kansas, Wisconsin, Ohio and Maine are based on model legislation known as the Voter ID Act, which ALEC developed.

The GOP strategy is simple: Suppress the vote, win the election.

Tilting the Terrain

The new voting laws could sharply tilt the political terrain for the 2012 election.

The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University estimates such laws could disenfranchise 11 percent of voters nationwide who do not have official IDs.

The repressive tactics aren't limited to requiring photo IDs at the polls. Florida recently enacted a law making it more difficult for voter registration organizations to operate.

The law requires groups that sign-up new voters to pre-register with the state before engaging in any voter registration activity. It also requires all employees and volunteers to sign a sworn affidavit that outlines criminal penalties for false registration. And every registration form collected by voter registration groups must be received by county officials within 48 hours of signature or

Remembering Bloody Sunday

On March 7, 1965, while attempting to march peacefully from the small town of Selma, AL, to Montgomery, the state capital, to protest the denial of their constitutional right to vote, 600 protesters were attacked by state troopers and mounted deputies dressed in full riot gear. Rep. John Lewis (D-MD), who was a member of the Student

Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at the time, suffered a skull fracture, and was one of 58 people treated for injuries at a local hospital. This tragic event became known as "Bloody Sunday."

Eight days later, President Lyndon Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Speaking to a joint session of Congress,



Civil rights protesters marching from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery on March 25, 1965. Protesters attacked by Alabama state troopers on March 7, 1965 in Selma.

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voter registration workers could face stiff civil penalties and fines of up to \$1,000.

The rules are so restrictive that the non-partisan League of Women Voters and Rock the Vote, which focuses on registering young people, plan to move their operations out of the state.

The Story of Ruthelle Frank

Ruthelle Frank, 84, of Brokaw, WI, has been voting since 1948, but under Wisconsin's new voter suppression law, Ms. Frank was prevented from voting in the Feb. 21 primary election. It marked the first time in 63 years that she was unable to fulfill her duty as a citizen and participate in democracy.

Ms. Frank was unable to obtain an ID to vote because she doesn't have a birth certificate.

State officials have informed Frank that, because the state Register of Deeds does not have a record of her birth, they can issue her a new birth certificate – for a fee. And because of a spelling error, that fee may be as high as \$200.

"It's just stupid," Frank said of the situation. In Wisconsin, one study noted that an estimated 177,399 Wisconsin



Ruthelle Frank

residents 65 and older do not have a driver's license or state photo ID – 23 percent of that population.

Fortunately, for Ms. Frank and other Wisconsin residents, a judge issued a temporary injunction banning the voter ID law in the state. The case is pending.

The Myth of Voter Fraud

Proponents of the new laws say they are necessary because fraud is rampant. But according to observers such as the Institute for Southern Studies, there is no evidence to support this claim.

In 2002, during the administration of President George W. Bush, the Department of Justice announced it was launching a crackdown on voter fraud. But five years later, it had won just 86 convictions to show for the effort.

That's .00007 percent of the 122 million people who voted in the 2004 presidential election.

But activists are fighting back against these repressive laws. Grassroots political activists plan to educate voters targeted for suppression about their rights and assist them in registering before the election, then watch polling places during both administrative preparations as well as on Election Day. Unions are working on the campaign with civil rights groups, including the NAACP, La Raza, and Center for Community Change. ■

Johnson called the events in Selma a turning point in man's unending search for freedom.

Six days later, on March 25, more than 1,000 people from all over the United States again left Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Selma and set out for Montgomery. This time they were watched over by the U.S. Army and Alabama National Guard units, who had been ordered by President Johnson to protect the marchers against further violence.

After the march, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a crowd estimated at 25,000 in front of the Alabama State Capitol. He looked out at the thousands of people and said that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave African-Americans "some part of their rightful dignity, but without the vote, it was dignity without strength."

Five months later, on August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, which is considered one of the most effective civil rights laws in the nation's history.

47 YEARS LATER, WE'RE STILL FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE

On March 9, 2012, members of the Birmingham AL Area Local joined labor activists and civil rights leaders on the steps of the state capital to commemorate the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, to remember Bloody Sunday, and to honor those who put their lives at risk to peacefully protest for access to the ballot.

