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MAKING VOTES COUNT

Election Day Misdeeds

The Republican Party has announced plans to place thousands of election challengers in Ohio polling places next week. It says it is only trying to prevent fraud. But there is a real danger that these challengers could be used to block eligible voters from casting their ballots or, just as bad, to drastically slow down voting in some parts of the state. Election officials must be vigilant about ensuring that partisan challengers do not disrupt the voting.

Republicans have been raising a lot of charges of fraud lately. Fraud is a danger in any election, and neither party has a monopoly on it. But the Republicans have come up with little in the way of specifics. They have pointed to a few instances in which paid canvassers apparently submitted registrations with phony names. But it is highly unlikely that anyone will show up on Election Day claiming to be Mary Poppins or Dick Tracy. The Republicans have made much of the fact that some jurisdictions have more names on their rolls than they have eligible voters. But that is generally because election offices are slow to remove the names of people who move away or die.

In the name of fraud prevention, the Republicans plan to use 3,600 challengers in Ohio, a pivotal state where the race is dead even and there has been a big surge in first-time registrations for Democratic voters. There is no telling how many partisan challengers there will be nationwide next week because many states do not require them to be identified in advance. If challengers behave properly, they can help make elections better. But partisan challengers acting in bad faith can do considerable damage. Aggressive challengers have been known to bully poll workers, many of whom are elderly and have only limited knowledge of election law.

It is likely that some voters will be challenged next week not because they appear to be ineligible, but because partisan challengers think that they will vote for the other side. There is a long history of challengers' targeting minority precincts and minority voters. It is troubling that in Ohio this year, the Republicans appear to be focusing much of their effort on Cleveland, Dayton and other cities with large African-American and Latino populations.

One of the gravest dangers is that partisan teams will challenge many, if not all, voters in selected precincts, with the goal of slowing voting to a standstill. In Ohio, every challenge will require a deliberation over whether the person in question should be allowed to vote. In presidential elections,

lines in urban polling places are often hours long under normal conditions. If the challengers can add 10 minutes per voter, waiting times may become so long that thousands of voters will simply give up.

Ohio law gives election officials broad authority to keep order at the polls and to make sure that voting is "unobstructed." Poll workers should be quick to dismiss baseless challenges, and if they see challengers acting in bad faith, they should not hesitate to have them removed from the polling place. Election Day voting is far more fragile than most people realize. A small number of challengers, strategically placed and up to no good, could disenfranchise thousands of voters, and even change the outcome of a presidential election. Having been put on notice, election officials in Ohio - and around the country - must make sure that this does not happen.

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