

## WHERE ARE WE HEADED AS A NATION? PART IV - EXPANDING VOTING RIGHTS TODAY

What can activists do in the coming months before the November election to renew the democratic process and to encourage citizens that taking part in this process and voting will make a difference. In Part III of this series, I said that protecting voting rights is the most immediate reform activity that should occupy activists and groups such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters. Doing something effective about the impact of "big money" on politics must remain a critical goal, but in the short term, voting rights is the reform that can make a difference this year.

One of the concerns that voting rights advocates need to address is the ongoing decline of voting in the U.S. This alarming decline stems in part from the belief by many people that gerrymandering and "big money" donations make their votes irrelevant. Possibly, by constantly exposing the current efforts of "big money" interests to elect candidates who will do their bidding, activists can convince citizens that voting is essential for saving democracy. For instance, the Koch brothers through their various Super PACs are planning to spend \$400-million to influence various midterm campaigns this fall, including the Senate race in Ohio. Further, Trump's campaign committee and fund raising operations also plan to utilize part of the \$53.6-million they have collected on the

midterms. In judicial elections alone, the PAC, the Judicial Crisis Network, will donate \$3.8-million to campaigns.

What are some specific voting rights efforts going forward? Besides the well known reform organizations such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters, a relatively new outfit focusing on voting rights is the Voter Participation Center. VPC is a non-profit and nonpartisan corporation dedicated to increasing the participation of unmarried women and other historically underrepresented groups in the democratic process. Emphasizing research in identifying who is underrepresented and why, the Center has compiled a lot of critical information.

VPC projects that approximately 40-million Americans who voted in 2016 will sit out the 2018 election. Breaking down that larger number, two-thirds of it is comprised of young voters, people of color, and unmarried women. Further, to understand the significance of that projected number of non-voters in 2018, the Center notes that the groups that make up that total currently comprise 62-percent of the eligible voters in the U.S. The estimated number of dropout voters in Ohio alone is 880,000.

A major factor shared by the groups that concern the VPC is their mobility. Forty-two percent of these people have moved at least once during the last four years. This fact alone would require them to change their voting registration. Add to that all the new laws that have made it

harder for people to vote. More complex registration requirements, inflexible voter-ID laws, and the curtailment by some states of additional days for voting are some of the impediments to voting that many states have imposed during the last decade. Often justified as ways to prevent voter fraud, these restrictions were primarily aimed at making it more difficult for young adults, people of color, and low-income residents to cast ballots.

Ohio provides a good place to organize a voting rights campaign. Not only does the state have a stringent voter-ID law, but its Secretary of State has implemented a policy of purging the voter rolls of people who have not voted in four years. The Supreme Court recently upheld the state's voter purges as an acceptable administrative method. The number of people removed from the lists of Ohio's three largest counties added up to 144,000 by 2016.

Besides worrying about people who have been removed from the voter rolls without their knowledge, activists in Ohio need to focus on the high number of eligible voters who simply haven't bothered to register. According to VPC's research, 26.1-percent of African-Americans, 38.6-percent of young adult, 32.7-percent of unmarried women, and 31.1-percent of Latinos living in Ohio are not registered.

What is required is a major effort at the state and local levels to register eligible voters and to insure that people

check with their boards of election that they are in fact registered. A coalition approach for this operation is needed, and diverse organizations must make it a priority to reach people of color, millennials, and unmarried women. Reform groups that have expertise and knowledge about voter ID laws and other restrictions should also take leadership roles in these grassroots campaigns to renew voting.

Already at work in Ohio, the Voter Participation Center is busy registering people with the message that voting is the basis of a healthy democracy. As a voting rights campaign builds in August and September, StreetVibes will provide updates for readers who want to get involved.