

Voter Intimidation Efforts Still in Play

Written by Maya Rhodan, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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Although President Obama and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney have duked it out in three televised debates and are running opposing ads in the waning days of the election, a nastier fight to intimidate Black voters is taking place away from the limelight.

“It has taken many disguises,” says Chanelle Hardy, senior vice president of policy at the National Urban League’s Policy Institute. “Robo calls, telling people the date has changed, telling people that there are criminal penalties for showing up without an ID or that if you haven’t paid your child support, you’ll be arrested are some of them.”

Last week, anonymous billboards popped up across Black and Latino neighborhoods in Ohio and Wisconsin, two battleground states. “Voter Fraud is a Felony! Up to 3 ½ years in jail and a \$10,000 fine,” read the signs.

Although the nearly 200 signs have been taken down, Debbie Hines, an attorney and the blogger behind LegalSpeaks.com, says the efforts to intimidate are just pieces of a larger scheme to keep Democratic voters from the polls.

“It’s as if they said, ‘If the voter ID laws don’t work that well, let’s make telephone calls, let’s follow them around, let’s put up billboards to intimidate them,’” says Hines.

Since 2010, state legislatures have been passing laws that make it more difficult to vote, such

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as requiring government-issued photo IDs and cutting back on the number of days citizens can vote.

But the latest efforts go far beyond that.

A Tea Party organization, True the Vote, and its Ohio affiliate, the Voter Integrity Project, have been urging conservatives to become poll watchers to make voting feel like “driving and seeing the police following you.”

They have also sought to remove 2,100 names from polling rosters in Ohio, many in counties President Obama won in 2008, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

In fact, a number of instances have come to light recently, as reported by The Nation magazine’s Voting Rights Watch 2012, that prove there have been a number of efforts to blatantly discourage voters from getting to the polls, aside from the billboards in Ohio.

In Virginia, another battleground state, a contract employee of the Republican Party of Virginia was arrested recently for dumping voter registration cards. Voter information fliers in Arizona were printed in Spanish with the wrong election date.

Hardy of the National Urban League said such actions are part of a larger effort to keep people of color from helping to re-elect President Obama.

“In ‘08 we saw what we were able to accomplish – the Black vote was outstanding and similar to the White vote for once in our history,” Hardy says. “It’s clear from the timing of when the ID action were introduced that there were bad actors in our society who sought to keep that from happening again.”

Although supporters of the tougher voter requirements say it is an effort to reduce fraud, others said it is a solution in search of a problem.

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“There’s been no data that shows that in person voter fraud exists,” says Hines, the attorney who is fighting increased voter restrictions. “It happens but you have a greater chance of being stricken by lightning than there being a person involved in voter fraud.”

According to a study by a Knight Foundation funded project called News21, there were a total of 2,068 alleged election-fraud cases since 2000, only 10 of which involved voter impersonation—the very issue that led states across the country to enact strict voter identification laws.

“The intention of the suppressors is to shave off a small percentage of the Black vote to help Gov. Romney secure the win,” says Rashad Robinson, executive director of ColorofChange.org, that organization that led the campaign to remove the intimidating billboards in Ohio. “But Black folks are used to feeling this kind of oppression and we aren’t afraid to fight back. And we know that it could have an opposite effect and end up getting people more mobilized.”

In an effort to prevent these voter suppression and intimidation practices from being successful, organizations from National Council of La Raza to the NAACP and even members of Congress are fighting back to make sure every American’s voice is heard on Election Day.

The National Urban League has been involved with getting voters educated about their rights and empowering citizens with the information that will ensure that their voice is heard on Tuesday.

“We’re hoping they don’t have as much of an effect,” Hardy says. “The folks who came up with the bad laws have generated more attention than they intended getting people more encouraged to vote early and absentee.”

Throughout the election season, Robison and Color of Change have also been working to stop attempts to end early voting in Ohio, petitioning the Secretary of State and making sure members of the community stay informed about their rights.

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“There are millions of dollars being spent by forces that do not share our values, that want to make our communities less safe, make our young people have a rougher time getting ahead by ignoring public education,” says Robinson. “We want to ensure that people know their rights and make their voices heard.”

In addition, members of the UN affiliated Organization for Security and Cooperation will be bringing in members from the international community to monitor the election.

Debbie Hines will be one of many attorneys on hand to monitor polls in states like Virginia, where she’ll be, to make sure “voters rights aren’t under attack.”

She says the most important note Blacks and other minorities should take away from the intimidation schemes is that their votes matter.

“I don’t think Blacks should take for granted the value of their vote,” Hines says.

“Because for Republicans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to get the laws passed, to do all of the things that they’re doing, our vote is valuable.”

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