**Topic One – Voter Fraud in American Elections**

**Republicans are right; election fraud is real. They are perpetrating it.**

Republican fraud is focused not on adding fake voters but subtracting real ones

As a nation, we’re not thinking nearly enough about the ways that fraud could affect or even swing the 2020 elections. No, I’m not talking about ballot-box-stuffing fantasies of President Trump, who told Fox News on Sunday that “mail-in voting is going to rig the election.” There remains no evidence that absentee ballots are the cause of mass voter fraud.

Nor do we have much to fear from in-person voter fraud, which tarnishes about two out of every 35 million ballots cast. And one-off cases of potential absentee ballot fraud — such as the time Trump attempted to register in Florida while claiming that his official residence was in D.C., or White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany voting in Florida despite having a New Jersey driver’s license available only to Garden State residents — are vanishingly unlikely to swing an election.

In truth, the real fraud occurring around the 2020 election is being committed by Trump and his allies, not through individual acts of malfeasance but on a nationwide scale. This type of election fraud is not about adding fake voters. Rather, it’s about subtracting real voters by using false claims of voter fraud to bar millions of eligible voters from the polls. And unlike the types of election misconduct the president likes to tweet about, the type of election misconduct he and members of his party engage in really do affect the vote tallies in — and at times, the outcomes of — our elections.

While the specter of sinister agents flooding post offices with fake ballots is a new and particularly feverish claim, crying wolf over voter fraud has a long history in American politics. President Ronald Reagan claimed that allowing Americans to register to vote by mail would lead to a fraud epidemic. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said the same about allowing Americans to register at the Department of Motor Vehicles, even going so far as to dub the motor-voter bill “auto-fraudo.” In both cases, the predictions proved inaccurate. More Americans registered to vote, and the total number of elections stolen as a result stands at zero.

Yet the fact that the GOP’s warnings of fraud proved inaccurate did nothing to decrease their stated concern. Quite the opposite. In the 21st century, Republican politicians have vastly expanded the scope of their “fraud-fighting” measures. No longer content with trying to make it harder to register, McConnell and his allies are eagerly invalidating the ballots of eligible, registered voters as well.

One of the most effective tools for affecting election outcomes in the name of fighting fraud has been the voter purge. A purge is essentially a voter-registration drive in reverse: where the former adds people to the voter rolls, the latter removes them. Proponents of purges argue that they’re removing the names of dead or relocated voters, thus making voter impersonation more difficult. In fact, while there’s no evidence of elections being swung by untidy lists, there is clear evidence that eligible voters are being deregistered at alarming rates, with evidence-free worry over voter fraud being used as a pretext.

Recently, Ohio took the unusual step of allowing voters to cross-check its purge lists and found that 1 in 6 deregistered voters was in fact eligible to vote. The Brennan Center for Justice found that in the 2014 and 2016 election cycles alone, 16 million Americans were taken off voter rolls. (This doesn’t even count the recent effort to bar 1 million felons from voting in Florida, even after a 2018 constitutional amendment there said they should be permitted.) If Ohio’s findings are true nationwide — and there’s no reason to believe they aren’t, since many of the most aggressive states’ purges are, if anything, far more broad — 2.7 million eligible Americans were taken off the voter rolls in just four years.

Even registered eligible voters are at risk of being barred from the polls because of false voter-fraud claims. At the beginning of this century, not one state required photo ID to cast a ballot. Today, 17 states do. While certain types of particularly aggressive voter ID laws have been successfully challenged in court, the trend has clearly been toward ever more onerous requirements. In many states, for example, even an ID card from a public university — that is, a form of documentation issued by the state — is not sufficient to vote.

In a growing number of states, “fraud-fighting” even allows valid votes to be easily discarded after they’re cast. Arizona and Florida, for example, employ something called “signature matching” when reviewing mail-in ballots. Combined with an “exact match” standard, this allows a single poll worker to discard a ballot if she decides a voter’s name on an outer envelope doesn’t match the name on a registration form — a standard that would be considered inadmissible by forensic handwriting analysts in court. In 2018, insufficiently matching signatures resulted in thousands of rejected ballots in Florida alone.

Finally, while these fraudulent anti-fraud measures remove millions of eligible American citizens from the electorate, they don’t stop there. When a voter arrives at a polling place and finds her name isn’t on the list or discovers her photo ID card isn’t, it extends the amount of time it takes her to vote. Multiply this by millions of interactions between voters and poll workers on Election Day, and aggressive anti-voting laws create confusion at polling places. This leads directly to long lines, which studies have shown reduce turnout even further.

Yet the impact of these long lines — and of “fraud-fighting” more broadly — is not felt equally everywhere. Black, brown, lower-income and younger voters are far more likely to lose their voting rights because of laws putatively meant to fight fraud. To put it slightly more bluntly: Thanks to completely baseless voter-fraud accusations from GOP politicians, likely Democrats now face far more barriers to voting than likely Republicans do. This is not just a theoretical matter. Were it not for a purge in Florida, for example, which removed more than 12,000 disproportionately black voters from the rolls, Al Gore probably could have been elected president.

These actions put into context the statements made recently by Attorney General William P. Barr, and echoed by Trump, that mail-in voting will lead to foreign countries flooding our postal system with counterfeit ballots. These are not serious or good faith claims. Nor are they solely designed to cast doubt on the November elections. They are an attempt to win that election under false pretenses, by subtracting valid votes and barring eligible Americans from the electorate.

False claims of voter fraud like the ones coming from the White House are, sadly, legal. But they are nonetheless a form of election fraud. Unlike voter impersonation or mail-in ballot malfeasance, this kind of fraud is real, it’s common, and it can change the course of our country. We should stop treating these outlandish claims as mere bluster or conspiracy theory, and start treating them as the threats to democracy they are.