

Defending the Right to Vote

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 1, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

U.S. District Judge Robert L. Hinkle yesterday struck down key provisions of Florida's new voting law, specifically targeting those provisions which put limits on the efforts of groups like the League of Women Voters to register people to vote.

The State of Florida has been systematically thumbing its nose at two of the most basic principles of democracy: the right to vote is inviolable and we should encourage citizens' participation in elections. The first principle, the right to vote, was at the heart of the civil rights movement. Am I the only one who gets choked up when I heard Cong. John Lewis speak about this issue with such fervor, having fought for the right to vote and been hit over the head and chased by dogs for it, and now, fifty years later, finding that right under assault again?

The second principle is also something most of us had assumed was behind us. The League of Women Voters is hardly a radical organization. In the town where I grew up, the League was led by those Richard Nixon claimed as his own: cloth coat Republican women. They have played a vital role in trying to strengthen democracy by conducting voter registration drives, educating high schools students in the importance of voting, and sponsoring candidate debates at all levels of government. They have been scrupulously non-partisan and, just so, represent a kind of political devotion that may escape the understanding of today's partisan zealanti.

In Florida, the Republican governor and legislature decided that the League should be kept on a short leash. So, they passed a law that gave the League 48 hours to submit registration forms to state officials. Consequently, a voter registration drive on Saturday morning had to be so timed as to get the names in first thing Monday morning and, as recently happened, when Monday was a holiday, the state refused to accept the voter registration forms on Tuesday, even though their offices had been closed on Monday. This is obstructionism pure and simple.

Another provision required all volunteers who conduct registration drives to sign a sworn statement that they will obey state laws while conducting the drives. The members of the League I have known were not anarchists, and there is no evidence of any systematic effort to break state laws, but signing such a sweeping statement is intimidating: Could there be some provision of state law with which a person is unfamiliar? Would a small, and inconsequential, mistake, say, signing the form below the line provided, or putting down the wrong date, would that make the volunteer liable to criminal prosecution. The purpose of such a law is precisely to intimidate, to drive people away from volunteering for such drives.

Unsurprisingly, the effort to restrict and intimidate worked. The League said it was not going to run any voter registration drives in Florida until the law was changed. This is happening in Florida. In Florida, the state which in 2002 was decided by a handful of votes. In Florida, a state which has long been a haven for immigrants from abroad and snowbirds from the North, a highly mobile electorate with many new residents. In Florida, a state in which five counties are still subject to oversight by the federal Department of Justice under the Voting Rights Act.

Where is the outrage? I do not object to nasty commercials or sharp elbows in political debates. I find it more amusing than threatening to democracy when politicians give a tendentious reading of history or economic data.

But, attacking the right to vote is unworthy of any decent American.

Judge Hinkle stated the obvious in his ruling. "An election code provision must serve a legitimate purpose that is sufficient to warrant the burden it imposes on the right to vote." He noted that the requirement that volunteers sign sworn statements about abiding by the state's election codes "could have no purpose other than to discourage voluntary participation in legitimate, indeed constitutionally protected, activities."

This is not the only egregious voter-suppression efforts being led by the Republican Party in Florida. Gov. Rick Scott has been busy looking over the voter rolls to purge those who should not be there because they are not U.S. citizens. The lists of those to be purged went out to local officials who, in turn, sent letters notifying those on the lists that they were ineligible to vote. "You are not a U.S. citizen," began one letter sent from election officials in Broward County, which went on to invite the recipient to schedule a hearing to prove he was a citizen. The recipient of the letter was Bill Internicola, a 91-year old man, born in Brooklyn, New York, a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge who received a Bronze Star for bravery in battle. Mr. Internicola is a U.S. citizen. So far, in Maimi-Dade County alone, some 300 people have received similar letters even though they are citizens and are eligible to vote. Yesterday, the Department of Justice ordered Gov. Scott to cease and desist from these "purgings."

Again, where is the outrage? I am especially disappointed in the almost absolute silence coming from my friends on the right. Public intellectuals have a special obligation to monitor and, when necessary, to call out those on their side of the political divides. Certainly, I have not been shy about chastising liberals who scoff at First Amendment concerns. Certainly, some conservative commentators can, if they wish, find the gumption to speak out against these attempts to suppress the vote. In "Faithful Citizenship" the U.S. bishops designate participation in democracy a "moral obligation." The USCCB website recommends that churches host voter registration drives. Certainly some of my conservative friends who hold themselves out as loyal Catholics might find the time to pen a column or write a blog post expressing their concern about such efforts to restrict the franchise.

These efforts to suppress the right to vote are shocking. When will Americans be shocked?

Source URL (retrieved on 12/06/2013 - 10:19): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/defending-right-vote>