

7-31-2014

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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Evan, "Democracy a Casualty of Voter-Suppression Politics" (2014). *Highlands College*. 27.
http://digitalcommons.mtech.edu/lib_studies/27

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Democracy a Casualty of Voter-Suppression Politics

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

July 31, 2014

If there's one thing that Americans and Montanans are proud of it's the fact that our form of government is a democracy.

We brag about that around the world and to ourselves. Our whole belief in American exceptionalism is based substantially upon the fact that we are the oldest continually functioning democratic constitutional governmental structure in the world.

The fact that we have those free elections in our country is something we hold up as a model for the rest of the world to emulate.

A look to the root meaning of the word "democracy" is instructive. "Democracy" combines the elements of *demos* (which means "people") and *kratos* (which means "power"). Thus, democracy means the power being exercised by the people, and in our case it is principally through voting.

It's fair to say that anything that constrains the right or ability of all of the people to vote actually is a weakening of our democracy.

That is what makes the current political effort to constrain voting through voter suppression such an obvious affront to the very nature of our Democratic republic and our American system of values.

For nearly 200 years the United States consistently broadened the ability of its citizens to vote. But in recent years voter suppression efforts in the US are being put in place for purely partisan political reasons in dozens of states.

It's a dark day for democracy when that happens.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, "new voting restrictions developed since 2010 are slated to be in place in 22 states this November. In 15 of these states, 2014 will be the first federal election with new restrictions in effect."

As it currently stands, "eligible voters in nearly half the country could find it harder to cast a ballot in the 2014 midterm elections."

The new restrictive laws range from very difficult photo ID requirements to restrictions on early voting to voter registration restrictions. This effort is so distasteful that it pains me to say that it is primarily the product of one political party. But that is the sad fact. The obvious targets for reduced voting are primarily on voter groups (blacks, Hispanics, and young people) who are likely to vote for candidates and ideas that are against the political preferences of the Republicans. The Legislatures that are enacting the changes are all Republican. The changes are being advanced in an effort to solve a

fabricated problem – voter fraud – that is publicly advanced by the Republican Party against all evidence that such voter fraud exists at all.

When a state passes a law that stops Sunday voting when one of the major traditions of black voting in that state is the bussing of people from black churches to the polling place on the Sunday before election, is it any wonder that black voters see themselves as the targets of voter suppression?

When a state passes a law that says a photo ID from a public university is not sufficient for a student to use at the polling place while a gun registration photo card is acceptable, is it any wonder that the student feels he's being stepped on for political purposes?

When a Hispanic area with an increasing number of new voters has the number of polling places reduced and the number of polling machines reduced even more, making lines longer and much more difficult and time-consuming on election day, is it any wonder that the Hispanic feels that someone doesn't want him or her to be able to vote?

When same-day registration and voting is being cut back, as has been suggested in a referendum put on the ballot by the Republican majority in the Montana Legislature, and most evidence points to the fact that the majority of late registrants do not vote the Republican way, is it any wonder that many Montanans think someone is trying to stop them from voting because of where they stand philosophically?

The vote of the people is the bedrock of our Democracy. Making it easy for more people to vote is the obvious way to strengthen that Democracy.

So when a political party determines that the policies they advance cannot command the vote of the electorate, the logical thing for that political party to do is modify their ideas to make them palatable to the majority of the electorate.

When a political party feels the demographic changes in the emerging new electorate work against them winning elections, the logical thing for them to do and still be true to the ideals of our democracy, is to find ways to address that changing demographic.

But democracy itself becomes a casualty when that political party instead tries to find ways to stop people who might disagree with them from voting.

It is time for the Republican Party to look into the mirror, examine its soul, consider its commitment to the principles of our Democracy, and stop all these voter suppression tactics that put politics above policy ... partisanship above principle.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking about ways to return our nation to its traditional approach to broaden rather than restrict voter participation.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.