

Common Cause Wisconsin: Republican war on voting is doomed to fail because it is profoundly un- American

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I grew up in the 1960's and 70's in the Midwest and East as the political junkie son of moderate Republican parents with a deep reverence and admiration for the country's first Republican President and arguably its greatest chief executive, Abraham Lincoln. One of the things I was most passionate and proud about was the leadership and dedication the Republican Party had played in promoting democracy and extending the right to vote to many Americans throughout much of American history.

It was Lincoln and the Republicans, of course, who led the effort to end slavery and extend voting rights to African Americans following the Civil War. Republicans, more than Democrats, led the way in the late 19th and early 20th century to extend the right to vote to women, culminating in the 1920 election for President when women, voting for the first time, overwhelmingly supported the G.O.P. candidate, Warren G. Harding of my native state of Ohio. Republicans provided significant and critical votes in Congress for passage of both the monumental Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. And virtually all Republicans joined Democrats to extend the vote to 18- to 21-year-olds in 1971, a measure signed into law by G.O.P. President Richard Nixon.

But then, in the late 1970's, the Republican Party began to significantly lose its way on voting rights. It was at that point that I abandoned the G.O.P. As the party strayed inexorably to the far right, it also moved into the darkness. It embraced the divisive and negative vision of Paul Weyrich of the ultra- conservative Heritage

Foundation who, in 1980 infamously declared:

"I don't want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of the people. They never have been from the beginning of our country, and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down."

Weyrich, a Wisconsin native sadly, was repudiating the very pro-voting, pro-democracy principles the Republican Party was founded on by abolitionists in Ripon Wisconsin in 1854. Instead of the open-armed, embracing political party of Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and, in Wisconsin of Robert M. La Follette, Warren Knowles and Lee Sherman Dreyfus - Republicans, instead, began to fear voters and voting and betraying their heritage and history, moved to make voting more difficult and restrictive. They began to target whole groups of citizens they viewed as not being politically supportive: urban dwellers, people of color, college, and university students and even people with disabilities.

In 2011 Republicans in the Wisconsin Legislature and their Ronald Reagan "wanna be" Governor, Scott Walker, rammed through and enacted into law the most extreme and restrictive voter photo ID law of any state in the country. Even states with long histories of voter suppression and disenfranchisement of people of color such as South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and others didn't limit as many types of photo ID that could be utilized to vote as much as Wisconsin did. We became the most challenging state in the nation for a college or university student without a Wisconsin driver's license in which to cast a vote.

Since the voter photo ID law went into effect in 2016, thousands of Wisconsinites who had been able to vote for many years have been unable to do so because of difficulties associated with having to obtain one of the required forms of photo ID to be able to vote. That's just wrong on every level. Some states like Michigan, which also has a photo ID law in place, permit voters unable to obtain a photo ID to still be able to vote by signing a sworn affidavit. But not so in Wisconsin, which is criminal.

Making it more challenging to vote here didn't end there. In 2016, Republican Donald Trump narrowly carried Wisconsin by 22,748 votes and won the Presidency. That was fair and fine according to Republicans. Four years later, Democrat Joe Biden narrowly carried Wisconsin by 20,682 votes and won the Presidency but suddenly, despite a statewide canvass and a recount confirming that margin, Republicans said the Biden victory was "in doubt" and there "may have been

widespread fraud” (there wasn’t) and illegal or inaccurate counting of absentee ballots (again, no proof or evidence). Conspiracy theories sprang up and despite the filing of numerous pro-Trump lawsuits to reverse the result in Wisconsin in state and federal courts (all failed), Biden won Wisconsin decisively.

To try to appease the rabid Trumpers, conservative radicals and Q-Anon wingnuts — Wisconsin Republicans have fertilized the “Big Lie” that the 2020 election was somehow fraudulent and that Biden’s more than 7 million popular vote margin nationally and 20,682 vote margin here was a fiction and that Wisconsin’s non-partisan state and local election clerks and officials diabolically cheated Trump out a second term as President. This was all patently untrue and Wisconsin Republican leaders know it.

This charade and clown show has continued throughout 2021 highlighted by the involvement of the ridiculous “Pillow Man” Trump conspiracy theorist, Mike Lindell of Minnesota and the sham, open-ended investigation into fraud authorized by Assembly Speaker Robin Vos and conducted by the least impartial and least respected former Wisconsin Supreme Court justice in state history, Michael Gableman, at a cost of nearly \$700,000 to Wisconsin taxpayers. And then there are the outlandish and baseless allegations made against the Wisconsin Elections Commission for nursing home voting fraud leveled by the partisan, Trump-supporting Sheriff of Racine County, and his deputy – accusations even the Racine County District Attorney won’t touch.

During 2021, numerous partisan voter suppression measures were introduced targeting absentee voting, and even voters with disabilities. Why? Because Republicans have cynically calculated that more Democrats than Republicans voted by absentee ballot in 2020 and by needlessly making it more difficult to vote that way, Republicans will outpoll Democrats in future elections. While all these outrageous and ill-conceived measures have passed in the Republican-controlled Legislature, with not a single Democratic vote, Gov. Tony Evers has wisely stepped forward and vetoed all of them. But while these anti-voter measures have absolutely no legitimacy, they serve as bait to ramp up the blood thirsty Trump base for the sole purpose of creating further false outrage for the upcoming 2022 election in Wisconsin and for the 2024 presidential election.

Will this cynical strategy of voter suppression, lying about the integrity of our elections and continuing to attempt to erode public confidence in our election officials succeed for the Republicans who continue to tread down this dangerous

path? It should not and, ultimately, will not. Why? Because it is so transparently undemocratic and so profoundly un-American.

This country needs to have two or more vibrant political parties contesting elections and trying to win the battle of ideas, persuading voters that their ideas are best for their state and country. But when one of the major political parties doesn't really believe in elections and in democracy then it follows that it can't possibly win the hearts and minds of citizens at the ballot box because the outcome of free and fair elections doesn't really matter to them. That sick mindset will in and of itself eventually destroy that party. If it ceases to believe in elections, then it will cease to be able to win them ever again.

The great majority of Wisconsinites and Americans will never adopt that cynical and destructive vision for this state and this country. It's up to Republicans to dramatically change direction and to again work to strengthen democracy instead of trying to destroy it.