

GOP: If We Can't Win, We'll Cheat. If We Can't Cheat, We'll Intimidate

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Thom Hartmann/

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HONESTY!

Last week in Texas, Attorney General Ken Paxton unleashed police raids of the homes of Hispanic voting activists. Get ready for more of this.

The Republican attorney general of Texas sent armed police officers after Hispanic voters—some in their 80s—to intimidate, threaten, and destroy them financially by forcing them to hire lawyers to defend themselves, even though they are perfectly legal voters.

It's a manifestation of the new unofficial Republican slogan: "If you can't win on the issues, cheat. And if cheating doesn't get you over the top, intimidate!"

As is the case with so many bad Republican ideas (outlawing labor unions, ending welfare programs, banning abortion, gutting women's voting and economic rights, etc.), this one started during the failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s. White supremacists had taken over the federal government and, in the states, Black voters were routinely threatened with violence and imprisonment when they tried to vote.

We thought those days were over. But in August of 2022, three months before he would face voters for reelection, Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis reprised the neo-Confederate strategy of using the levers of official state power to intimidate Black voters.

DeSantis put together a special police force to go after "voter fraud," and they executed a number of arrest warrants against Black voters who'd been told by various state officials that they could vote even though they had a felony conviction. They all believed they were eligible, and apparently most were. There was absolutely no effort to commit voter fraud involved.

(With 64 percent support, Florida's voters had approved a ballot measure in the 2018 election giving voting rights back to the roughly 20 percent of Florida's Black citizens—1.5 million potential voters—who'd had a felony conviction. The Republican-controlled state legislature then—quietly—essentially overturned the ballot measure in 2020, although many Black voters never got the memo.)

With cameras rolling, around 20 Black former felon voters were arrested for “illegal voting” and paraded before the media in shackles. As a result, many Black voters that November concluded showing up at the polls just wasn’t worth the risk. As the *Palm Beach Daily News* noted shortly after the 2022 election: “In 2018, before the new voting laws were enacted, the state had a 63 percent turnout among registered voters in the midterms. This year, turnout dropped to 54 percent....”

What starts in Florida rarely stays in Florida, particularly if it helps a white Republican administration stay in power in a state with a large minority population.

Now Ken Paxton, the “notoriously corrupt” Republican attorney general of Texas, desperate to hang onto his party’s majority in this 2024 election, has picked up on DeSantis’s strategy of intimidating minority voters in August to keep them away from the November polls.

After putting 2 million people on the “suspense” list—forcing those mostly urban voters into provisional ballots which won’t be counted unless they take time off work to show up at a county office to confirm their identities in the week after the election—Paxton is now sending police officers into Hispanic neighborhoods to kick in doors and arrest Latino voters.

In 2021, Paxton bragged to right-wing hate purveyor and now-imprisoned criminal Steve Bannon that he’d successfully prevented Harris County—home to Houston and its 2.4 million mostly Democratic voters—from voting by mail in 2020, thus keeping Republicans in charge of the state.

That’s right. The Texas attorney general bragged that Republicans only held power in Texas as a result of voter suppression, and added that if voter suppression were to end, Republicans would never again seize power in that state.

His effort forced the few willing brave souls among Houston’s citizens—fully 14.5 percent of the entire state’s registered voters—to navigate crowded polling places in person during a deadly pandemic before vaccines were available.

“If we’d lost Harris County” by allowing people to vote by mail, Paxton crowed, “Harris County mail-in ballots that they wanted to send out were 2.5 million ... and we were able to stop every one of them. Had we not done that, we ... would’ve been one of those battleground states ... and Donald Trump would’ve lost the election.”

After purging millions of Texas voters, most from big cities, off the voting rolls over the past few years, putting two million on the “suspense” list, and then preventing Houstonians from voting by mail in 2020, Paxton’s newest trick to keep the GOP in charge of Texas is a naked rip-off of DeSantis’s minority voter intimidation strategy.

One of the members of Texas LULAC, or the League of United Latin American Citizens (one of the oldest Latino voting and civil rights groups in the country), retired schoolteacher 87-year-old Lidia Martinez, had publicly spoken out against Paxton when he forbade Texans from getting mail-in ballots in 2020.

He got his revenge this past week.

At six in the morning on August 20, according to The New York Times, nine officers, some with guns, showed up at her home after having broken down a door to raid the home of Manuel Medina, the chair of the Tejano Democrats. Martinez asked who was at the door and, the *Times* noted, the officers “then pushed open the door” and invaded her home.

All across the state, apparently, police were raiding the homes of Hispanic voters. The head of Texas LULAC, Gabriel Rosales, who was on my radio/TV program Monday, told me and the *Times*, “It’s pure intimidation.”

When asked for an explanation, Attorney General Paxton told the *Times*, without a trace of irony: “Secure elections are the cornerstone of our republic.”

Reporter Greg Palast, who’ll be premiering his new movie, *Vigilantes, Inc: America’s New Vote Suppression Hitmen*, on Sunday, September 8, in Los Angeles (I’ll be there, too), has pointed out that the former Confederate slave states of Texas, Georgia, and Florida would all be blue were it not for voter suppression, voter purges, and the intimidation of Black and Hispanic voters.

“There is no doubt about it,” Palast told me recently on the air. “It’s just demographics.”

Voter suppression is now a primary political tool for Republicans, which is why when Arizona’s Democratic Governor Katie Hobbs signed an executive order last week expanding locations across the state where people can vote, the Arizona Republican Party sued to prevent them from opening to voters.

Republicans have come to genuinely believe that they cannot retain political power without resorting to morally criminal, nakedly unethical voter suppression tactics.

As Donald Trump told Fox “News” about unsuccessful Democratic efforts to offer mail-in ballots to registered voters nationwide during the 2020 pandemic: “They had things, levels of voting that if you’d ever agreed to it, you’d never have a Republican elected in this country again....”

Because of a series of bizarre rulings by five Republicans on the Supreme Court over the past two-plus decades, America is the only country in the world where a state must go to court to take away your gun but doesn’t even need to inform you if it prevents you from voting or keeps your vote from being counted.

Vice President Kamala Harris has promised to make voting rights a top priority if she's elected president and Democrats take both houses of Congress. This is part of what Democrats mean when they say that democracy itself is on the ballot this fall.