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Is Ensuring Election Integrity Anti-Democratic?

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The following is adapted from a talk delivered at Hillsdale College on September 20, 2021, during a Center for Constructive Alternatives conference on “Critical American Elections.”

Sixteen years ago, in 2005, the Carter-Baker Commission on Federal Election Reform issued a report that proposed a uniform system of requiring a photo ID in order to vote in U.S. elections. The report also pointed out that widespread absentee voting makes vote fraud more likely. Voter files contain ineligible, duplicate, fictional, and deceased voters, a fact easily exploited using absentee ballots to commit fraud. Citizens who vote absentee are more susceptible to pressure and intimidation. And vote-buying schemes are far easier when citizens vote by mail.

Who was behind the Carter-Baker Commission? Donald Trump? No. The Commission’s two ranking members were former President Jimmy Carter, a

Democrat, and former Secretary of State James Baker III, a Republican. Other Democrats on the Commission were former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and former Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton. It was a truly bipartisan commission that made what seemed at the time to be common sense proposals.

How things have changed. Some of the Commission’s members, Jimmy Carter among them, came out last year to disavow the Commission’s work. And despite surveys showing that Americans overwhelmingly support measures to ensure election integrity—a recent Rasmussen survey found that 80 percent of Americans support a voter ID requirement—Democratic leaders across the board oppose such measures in the strongest terms.

Here, for instance, is President Biden speaking recently in Philadelphia, condemning the idea of voter IDs: “There is an unfolding assault taking place in America today—an attempt to suppress and subvert the right to vote in fair and free elections, an assault on democracy, an assault on liberty, an assault on who we are—who we are as Americans. For, make no mistake, bullies and merchants of fear and peddlers of lies are threatening the very foundation of our country.” Sadly but predicably, he went on to suggest that requiring voter IDs would mean returning people to slavery.

But the fact is that the U.S. is an outlier among the world’s democracies in *not* requiring voter ID. Of the 47 countries in Europe today, 46 of them currently require government-issued photo IDs to vote. The odd man out is the United Kingdom, in which Northern Ireland and many localities require voter IDs, but the requirement is not nationwide. The British Parliament, however, is considering a nationwide requirement, so

very soon all 47 European countries will likely have adopted this common-sense policy.

When it comes to absentee voting, we Americans, accustomed as we are to very loose rules, are often shocked to learn that 35 of the 47 European countries—including France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden—don’t allow absentee voting for citizens living in country. Another ten European countries—including England, Ireland, Denmark, Portugal, and Spain—allow absentee voting, but require voters to show up in person and present a photo ID to pick up their ballots. It isn’t like in the U.S., where a person can say he’s going to be out of town and have a ballot mailed to him.

England used to have absentee voting rules similar to ours in the U.S. But in 2004, in the city of Birmingham, officials uncovered a massive vote fraud scheme in the city council races. The six winning Labor candidates had fraudulently acquired about 40,000 absentee votes, mainly from Muslim areas of the city. As a result, England ended the practice of mailing out absentee ballots and required voters to pick up their ballots in person with a photo ID.

Up until 1975, France also had loose absentee voting rules. But when massive vote fraud was discovered on the island of Corsica—where hundreds of thousands of dead people were found to be voting and even larger-scale vote-buying operations were occurring—France banned absentee voting altogether.

On the topic of buying votes, I should point out that we in the U.S. did not always have secret ballots. It wasn’t until 1880 that the first state adopted the secret ballot, and the last state to adopt it was South Carolina in 1950. Perhaps surprisingly, when secret ballots were adopted,

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the percentage of people voting fell by about twelve percent. Why was that? Prior to the adoption of the secret ballot, lots of people would get paid for voting. In those days, people voted by placing pieces of colored paper in the ballot box, with different colors representing different parties. Party officials would be present to observe what color paper each voter put into the box, and depending on the color, the voter would often get paid. Secret ballots put an end to this practice.

France learned in 1975 that the use of absentee ballots led to the same practice—it allowed third parties to know how people voted and pay them for voting a certain way. This same problem is now proliferating in the U.S. in the form of “ballot harvesting,” the increasingly common practice where party functionaries distribute and collect ballots.

Defenders of our current voting rules point out that in lieu of absentee voting, some European countries allow “proxy voting,” whereby one person can designate another to vote for him. And while it is true that eight of the 47 European countries allow proxy voting—meaning that 39 do not—there are strict requirements. In five of the eight countries—Belgium, England, Monaco, Poland, and Sweden—proxy voting is limited to those with a disability or an illness or who are out of the country. In Poland, it also requires the approval of the local mayor, and in Monaco the approval of the general secretariat. In France and the Netherlands, proxy voting has to be arranged through a notary public. Switzerland is the only country in Europe with a relatively liberal proxy voting policy, requiring only a signature match.

How about our neighbors, Canada and Mexico? Canada requires a photo ID to vote. If a voter shows up at the polls without an ID, he is allowed to vote only if he declares who he is in writing and if there is someone working at the polling station who can personally verify his identity.

Mexico has had a long history of election fraud. Partly because its leaders were concerned about a drop in foreign investment if it wasn't perceived to be a legitimate democracy, Mexico recently instituted strict reforms. Voters must present a biometric ID—an ID with not only a photo, but also a thumb print. Voters also have indelible ink applied to their thumbs, preventing them from voting more than once. And absentee voting is prohibited, even for people living outside the country.

Those who oppose election integrity reform here in the U.S. often condemn it as a means of “voter suppression.” But in Mexico, the percent of people voting rose from 59 percent before the reforms to 68 percent after. It turned out that Mexicans were more, not less, likely to vote when they had confidence that their votes mattered.

H.R. 1, the radical bill Democratic Party leaders have been pushing to adopt this year, would prohibit states from requiring voter ID and require states to allow permanent mail-in voting. And mail-in voting, I hardly need to point out, is even worse, in terms of vote fraud, than absentee voting. With absentee voting, a person at least has to request a ballot. With mail-in voting—as we saw in too many places in the 2020 election—ballots are simply mailed out to everyone. With loose absentee voting rules, a country is making itself vulnerable to vote fraud. With mail-in voting, a country is almost begging for vote fraud.

If the rhetoric we hear from the Left today is correct—if voter ID requirements and restrictions on absentee (or even mail-in) voting are un-democratic—then so are the countries of Europe and the rest of the developed world. But this is utter nonsense.

Those opposing common sense measures to ensure integrity in U.S. elections—measures such as those recommended by the bipartisan Carter-Baker Commission in 2005—are not motivated by a concern for democracy, but by partisan interests. ■

“Zuckerbucks” and the 2020 Election

Mollie Hemingway

Author, *Rigged: How the Media, Big Tech, and the Democrats Seized Our Elections*



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The following is adapted from Chapter 7 of Rigged: How the Media, Big Tech, and the Democrats Seized Our Elections.

In the 2020 presidential election, for the first time ever, partisan groups were allowed—on a widespread basis—to cross the bright red line separating government officials who administer elections from political operatives who work to win them. It is important to understand how this happened in order to prevent it in the future.

Months after the election, *Time* magazine published a triumphant story of how the election was won by “a well-funded cabal of powerful people, ranging across industries and ideologies, working together behind the scenes to influence perceptions, change rules and laws, steer media coverage and control the flow of information.” Written by Molly Ball, a journalist with close ties to Democratic leaders, it told a cheerful story of a “conspiracy unfolding behind the scenes,” the “result of an informal alliance between left-wing activists and business titans.”

A major part of this “conspiracy” to “save the 2020 election” was to use COVID as a pretext to maximize absentee and early voting. This effort was enormously successful. Nearly half of voters ended up voting by mail, and another quarter voted early. It was, Ball wrote, “practically a revolution in how people vote.” Another major part was

to raise an army of progressive activists to administer the election at the ground level. Here, one billionaire in particular took a leading role: Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Zuckerberg’s help to Democrats is well known when it comes to censoring their political opponents in the name of preventing “misinformation.” Less well known is the fact that he directly funded liberal groups running partisan get-out-the-vote operations. In fact, he helped those groups infiltrate election offices in key swing states by doling out large grants to crucial districts.

The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, an organization led by Zuckerberg’s wife Priscilla, gave more than \$400 million to nonprofit groups involved in “securing” the 2020 election. Most of those funds—colloquially called “Zuckerbucks”—were funneled through the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL), a voter outreach organization founded by Tiana Epps-Johnson, Whitney May, and Donny Bridges. All three had previously worked on activism relating to election rules for the New Organizing Institute, once described by *The Washington Post* as “the Democratic Party’s Hogwarts for digital wizardry.”

Flush with \$350 million in Zuckerbucks, the CTCL proceeded to disburse

large grants to election officials and local governments across the country. These disbursements were billed publicly as “COVID-19 response grants,” ostensibly to help municipalities acquire protective gear for poll workers or otherwise help protect election officials and volunteers against the virus. In practice, relatively little money was spent for this. Here, as in other cases, COVID simply provided cover.

According to the Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA), Georgia received more than \$31 million in Zuckerbucks, one of the highest amounts in the country. The three Georgia counties that received the most money spent only 1.3 percent of it on personal protective equipment. The rest was spent on salaries, laptops, vehicle rentals, attorney fees for public records requests, mail-in balloting, and other measures that allowed elections offices to hire activists to work the election. Not all Georgia counties received CTCL funding. And of those that did, Trump-voting counties received an average of \$1.91 per registered voter, compared to \$7.13 per registered voter in Biden-voting counties.

The FGA looked at this funding another way, too. Trump won Georgia by more than five points in 2016. He lost it by three-tenths of a point in 2020. On average, as a share of the two-party vote, most counties moved Democratic by less than one percentage point in that time. Counties that didn’t receive Zuckerbucks showed hardly any movement, but counties that did moved an average of 2.3 percentage points Democratic. In counties that did not receive Zuckerbucks, “roughly half saw an increase in Democrat votes that offset the increase in Republican votes, while roughly half saw the opposite trend.” In counties that did receive Zuckerbucks, by contrast, three quarters “saw a significant uptick in Democrat votes that offset any upward change in Republican votes,” including highly populated Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb, and DeKalb counties.

Of all the 2020 battleground states, it is probably in Wisconsin where the

most has been brought to light about how Zuckerbucks worked.

CTCL distributed \$6.3 million to the Wisconsin cities of Racine, Green Bay, Madison, Milwaukee, and Kenosha—purportedly to ensure that voting could take place “in accordance with prevailing [anti-COVID] public health requirements.”

Wisconsin law says voting is a right, but that “voting by absentee ballot must be carefully regulated to prevent the potential for fraud or abuse; to prevent overzealous solicitation of absent electors who may prefer not to participate in an election.” Wisconsin law also says that elections are to be run by clerks or other government officials. But the five cities that received Zuckerbucks outsourced much of their election operation to private liberal groups, in one case so extensively that a sidelined government official quit in frustration.

This was by design. Cities that received grants were not allowed to use the money to fund outside help unless CTCL specifically approved their plans in writing. CTCL kept tight control of how money was spent, and it had an abundance of “partners” to help with anything the cities needed.

Some government officials were willing to do whatever CTCL recommended. “As far as I’m concerned I am taking all of my cues from CTCL and work with those you recommend,” Celestine Jeffreys, the chief of staff to Democratic Green Bay Mayor Eric Genrich, wrote in an email. CTCL not only had plenty of recommendations, but made available a “network of current and former election administrators and election experts” to scale up “your vote by mail processes” and “ensure forms, envelopes, and other materials are understood and completed correctly by voters.”

Power the Polls, a liberal group recruiting poll workers, promised to help with ballot curing. The liberal Mikva Challenge worked to recruit high school-age poll workers. And the left-wing Brennan Center offered help with

“election integrity,” including “post-election audits” and “cybersecurity.”

The Center for Civic Design, an election administration policy organization that frequently partners with groups such as liberal billionaire Pierre Omidyar’s Democracy Fund, designed absentee ballots and voting instructions, often working directly with an election commission to design envelopes and create advertising and targeting campaigns. The Elections Group, also linked to the Democracy Fund, provided technical assistance in handling drop boxes and conducted voter outreach. The communications director for the Center for Secure and Modern Elections, an organization that advocates sweeping changes to the elections process, ran a conference call to help Green Bay develop Spanish-language radio ads and geofencing to target voters in a predefined area.

Digital Response, a nonprofit launched in 2020, offered to “bring voters an updated elections website,” “run a website health check,” “set up communications channels,” “bring poll worker application and management online,” “track and respond to polling location wait times,” “set up voter support and email response tools,” “bring vote-by-mail applications online,” “process incoming [vote-by-mail] applications,” and help with “ballot curing process tooling and voter notification.”

The National Vote at Home Institute was presented as a “technical assistance partner” that could “support outreach around absentee voting,” provide and oversee voting machines, consult on methods to cure absentee ballots, and even assume the duty of curing ballots.

A few weeks after the five Wisconsin cities received their grants, CTCL emailed Claire Woodall-Vogg, the executive director of the Milwaukee Election Commission, to offer “an experienced elections staffer that could potentially embed with your staff in Milwaukee in a matter of days.” The staffer leading Wisconsin’s portion of the National Vote at Home Institute was an out-of-state Democratic activist named Michael

Spitzer-Rubenstein. As soon as he met with Woodall-Vogg, he asked for contacts in other cities and at the Wisconsin Elections Commission.

Spitzer-Rubenstein would eventually take over much of Green Bay’s election planning from the official charged with running the election, Green Bay Clerk Kris Teske. This made Teske so unhappy that she took Family and Medical Leave prior to the election and quit shortly thereafter.

Emails from Spitzer-Rubenstein show the extent to which he was managing the election process. To one government official he wrote, “By Monday, I’ll have our edits on the absentee voting instructions. We’re pushing Quickbase to get their system up and running and I’ll keep you updated. I’ll revise the planning tool to accurately reflect the process. I’ll create a flowchart for the vote-by-mail processing that we will be able to share with both inspectors and also observers.”

Once early voting started, Woodall-Vogg would provide Spitzer-Rubenstein with daily updates on the numbers of absentee ballots returned and still outstanding in each ward—prized information for a political operative.

Amazingly, Spitzer-Rubenstein even asked for direct access to the Milwaukee Election Commission’s voter database: “Would you or someone else on your team be able to do a screen-share so we can see the process for an export?” he wrote. “Do you know if WisVote has an [application programming interface] or anything similar so that it can connect with other software apps? That would be the holy grail.” Even for Woodall-Vogg, that was too much. “While I completely understand and appreciate the assistance that is trying to be provided,” she replied, “I am definitely not comfortable having a non-staff member involved in the function of our voter database, much less recording it.”

When these emails were released in 2021, they stunned Wisconsin observers. “What exactly was the National Vote at Home Institute doing with its daily reports? Was it making sure that

people were actually voting from home by going door-to-door to collect ballots from voters who had not yet turned theirs in? Was this data sharing a condition of the CTCL grant? And who was really running Milwaukee's election?" asked Dan O'Donnell, whose election analysis appeared at Wisconsin's conservative MacIver Institute.

Kris Teske, the sidelined Green Bay city clerk—in whose office Wisconsin law actually places the responsibility to conduct elections—had of course seen what was happening early on. "I just don't know where the Clerk's Office fits in anymore," she wrote in early July. By August, she was worried about legal exposure: "I don't understand how people who don't have the knowledge of the process can tell us how to manage the election," she wrote on August 28.

Green Bay Mayor Eric Genrich simply handed over Teske's authority to agents from outside groups and gave them leadership roles in collecting absentee ballots, fixing ballots that would otherwise be voided for failure to follow the law, and even supervising the counting of ballots. "The grant mentors would like to meet with you to discuss, further, the ballot curing process. Please let them know when you're available," Genrich's chief of staff told Teske.

Spitzer-Rubenstein explained that the National Vote at Home Institute had done the same for other cities in Wisconsin. "We have a process map that we've worked out with Milwaukee for their process. We can also adapt the letter we're sending out with rejected absentee ballots along with a call script alerting voters. (We can also get people to make the calls, too, so you don't need to worry about it.)"

Other emails show that Spitzer-Rubenstein had keys to the central counting facility and access to all the machines before election night. His name was on contracts with the hotel hosting the ballot counting.

Sandy Juno, who was clerk of Brown County, where Green Bay is located, later testified about the problems in a legislative hearing. "He was advising them on things.

He was touching the ballots. He had access to see how the votes were counted," Juno said of Spitzer-Rubenstein. Others testified that he was giving orders to poll workers and seemed to be the person running the election night count operation.

"I would really like to think that when we talk about security of elections, we're talking about more than just the security of the internet," Juno said. "You know, it has to be security of the physical location, where you're not giving a third party keys to where you have your election equipment."

Juno noted that there were irregularities in the counting, too, with no consistency between the various tables. Some had absentee ballots face-up, so anyone could see how they were marked. Poll workers were seen reviewing ballots not just to see that they'd been appropriately checked by the clerk, but "reviewing how they were marked." And poll workers fixing ballots used the same color pens as the ones ballots had been filled out in, contrary to established procedures designed to make sure observers could differentiate between voters' marks and poll workers' marks.

The plan by Democratic strategists to bring activist groups into election offices worked in part because no legislature had ever imagined that a nonprofit could take over so many election offices so easily. "If it can happen to Green Bay, Wisconsin, sweet little old Green Bay, Wisconsin, these people can coordinate any place," said Janel Brandtjen, a state representative in Wisconsin.

She was right. What happened in Green Bay happened in Democrat-run cities and counties across the country. Four hundred million Zuckerbucks were distributed with strings attached. Officials were required to work with "partner organizations" to massively expand mail-in voting and staff their election operations with partisan activists. The plan was genius. And because no one ever imagined that the election system could be privatized in this way, there were no laws to prevent it.

Such laws should now be a priority. ■