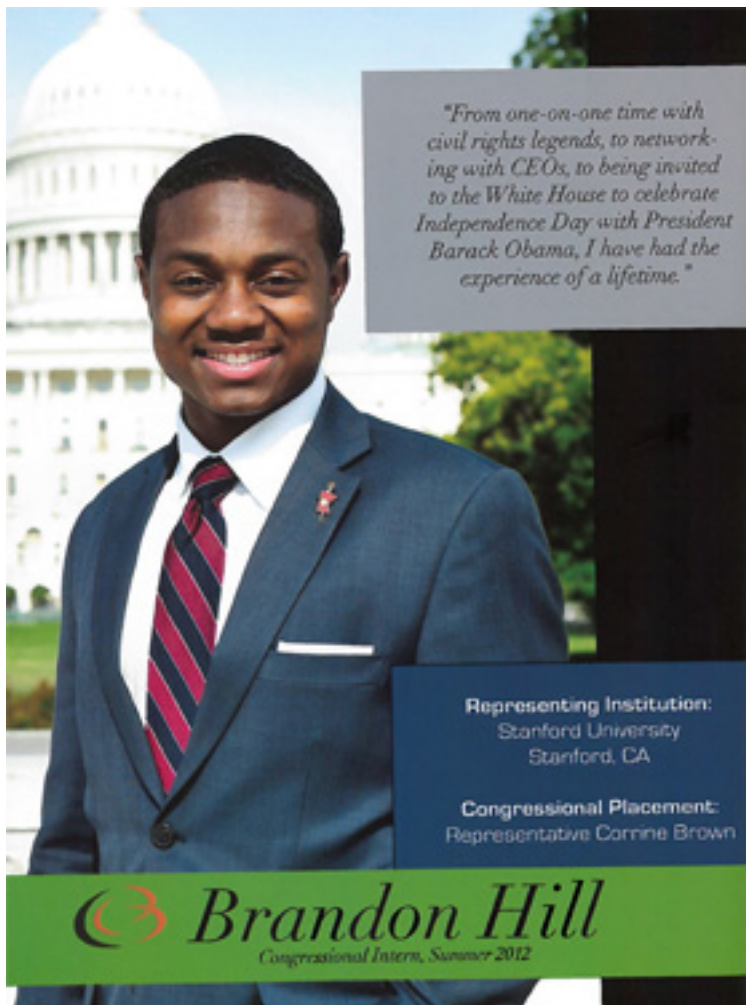


Voting wrongs vs. voting rights

Written by Brandon Hill

Monday, 05 November 2012 10:41



In the election of 1788, laws barred poor white men from voting.

In the election of 1864, laws blocked former slaves from voting. In the election of 1912, laws barred white women from voting. In the election of 1920, laws barred Native-Americans from voting. In the election of 1968, laws barred young people from voting. It is now the election of 2012. And on Nov. 6, America's long history of voter suppression laws continues, as new legislation will bar nearly 20 million Americans from the polls.

America, meet voter identification

Voter ID laws are threatening our democracy. A close relative to the poll tax, the grandfather clause, the white primary, and the literacy test, voter ID laws are the newest and nastiest generation of legalized voter suppression – voting wrongs, if you will. Republicans have [introduced new legislation](#) in over 30 states – from Indiana to Idaho – that would require every voter to present government-issued photo identification at the polls, a special provision for this election. The problem is that more than 11 percent of eligible American voters [do not possess a photo ID](#), such as a driver's license or passport, and that number is even higher for seniors, students, and minorities.

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There is a great American irony here. Why is it that in the world's epicenter of democracy, we have for the past two centuries spilled so much blood, shed so many tears, and spent so much time debating which Americans should and should not get the right to vote?

Why do voter ID laws exist to begin with? This year, in the midst of a global financial crisis, civil unrest erupting across the Middle East, and global warming endangering the health of our planet, Republican leaders have decided to crack down on an issue that really matters: voter fraud.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry [is serious about getting tough](#) on this problem.

"Today, federal judges subverted the will of the people of Texas and undermined our effort to ensure fair and accurate elections," said Perry.

Yeah, right.

That's why during a five-year investigation under the George W. Bush administration, voter fraud accounted for a grand total of .00004 percent of votes that were cast. In fact, according to New York University's Brennan Center for Justice, in-person voter fraud (the fraud ID laws combat) [is less common](#) than being struck by lightning. Obviously, these suspicious voter ID laws aren't a solution to voter fraud. Rather, they are a solution to a different "problem."

It's simple. Oftentimes, Republicans have difficulty winning votes from certain individuals. So, voter ID laws were engineered to prevent certain people from voting entirely. In a shocking moment of candor, Pennsylvania Republican House Leader Mike Turzai [confessed](#) to his state legislature that, "voter ID, which is (going to) allow Governor Romney to win the state of Pennsylvania" was "done."

The scary thing is he might be right.

According to Stanford University Law School professor and leading expert on voting rights, Pamela Karlan, "Voter ID laws specifically target minorities, elderly people, and students, groups that are less likely to support Republican candidates." The Department of Justice has confirmed that voter identification laws will hurt traditionally Democratic strongholds.

[Twenty-five percent](#)

of Blacks,

[19 percent](#)

of Latinos,

[18 percent](#)

of young voters, and 15 percent of low-income Americans do not own photo identification and will thus be expelled from the electorate and not be able to vote on Nov. 6. That's roughly 20 million eligible voters. There's no question that this will influence the upcoming election.

This brings us back to the great American irony – a democracy hypocrisy – where we cannot seem to practice the democratic ideals that we espouse to the world. Why is the law so brutal towards American voters? How are voter ID laws any different than property requirements and

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poll taxes and gender exclusions that strategically disenfranchised millions of voters throughout history? After five constitutional amendments, following women's suffrage and civil rights movements, in a land where we all pledge allegiance to the same flag, how is it that we are still wondering which Americans should and should not be given the right to vote? There are more significant problems that demand our attention. So why are we meditating on minutia when we need to be moving mountains? Let's be real. America's big crisis isn't voter fraud, but rather voter turnout, of which the U.S. has the lowest of any industrialized nation. With their new restrictive voter identification laws, it is evident that certain Republicans are committed to maintaining that embarrassing status.

It doesn't make any sense.

Why? Why is because voting is a sacred American tradition. It's something more guaranteed and protected than a right. It's nature. Voting is as essential to democracy as breathing is to living. If we suppress the vote, we suffocate democracy. The GOP's war on voting is a stranglehold on the fundamentals of our democratic process. And if we don't stop it here, where will it go? One day will women only count for 3/5 of a vote? Not if I can help it. I for one want our democracy to live on. So in the same way we conquered suppression tactics like poll taxes and literacy tests and other Jim Crow methods, we will, too, conquer voter ID; once again turning voting wrongs into voting rights.

Brandon Hill is a freshman at Stanford University and is a visiting scholar at Morehouse College. At Stanford, Hill is studying economics and public policy, and is particularly interested in education policy and civil rights. He has given talks for TEDx and recently finished an internship in the U.S. House of Representatives. Hill – who speaks English, Spanish, and is learning Mandarin – has also recently completed a Semester at Sea for which he earned full scholarship to travel to several nations in South America, Africa, and Asia.