

Stop the Steal' Didn't Start With Trump

Mainstream Republicans and conservative commentators have been pushing the idea that Democrats can only win through fraud for decades.



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To explain the attack on the Capitol, you can't just turn your focus to Donald Trump and his enablers. You must also look at the individuals and institutions that fanned fears of "voter fraud" to the point of hysteria among conservative voters, long before Trump. Put another way, the difference between a riot seeking to overturn an election and an effort to suppress opposing votes is one of legality, not intent. And it doesn't take many steps to get from one to the other.

Conservative belief in pervasive Democratic Party voter fraud goes back decades — and rests on racist and nativist tropes that date back to Reconstruction in the South and Tammany Hall in the North — but the modern obsession with fraud dates back to the 2000 election. That year, Republicans blamed Democratic fraud for narrow defeats in New Mexico, which George W. Bush lost by just a few hundred votes, and Missouri, where the incumbent senator, John Ashcroft, lost his re-election battle to a dead man.

Ashcroft's opponent, Mel Carnahan, was killed three weeks earlier in a plane crash, but his name was still on the ballot, with his wife running in his stead. Shocked Republicans blamed Ashcroft's defeat on fraud. At Ashcroft's election-night party, the state's senior Republican senator, Kit Bond, said, "Democrats in the city of St. Louis are trying to steal this election."

In 2001, as the newly minted attorney general under President George W. Bush, Ashcroft announced a crackdown on voter fraud. "America has failed too often to uphold the right of every citizen's vote, once cast, to be counted fairly and equally," he said at a news conference that March:

Votes have been bought, voters intimidated and ballot boxes stuffed. The polling process has been disrupted or not completed. Voters have been duped into signing absentee ballots believing they were applications for public relief. And the residents of cemeteries have infamously shown up at the polls on Election Day.

The Republican National Committee supported this push, claiming to have evidence that thousands of voters had cast more than one ballot in the same election.

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Over the ensuing years, under pressure from the White House ahead of the presidential election in 2004, the Justice Department ramped up its crusade against voter fraud. Of particular interest was ACORN, a now-defunct advocacy organization that was working — as the presidential election got underway — to register hundreds of thousands of low-income voters. Swing-state Republicans accused the group of "manufacturing voters," and federal prosecutors looked, unsuccessfully, for evidence of wrongdoing. Later, Karl Rove would press President Bush's second attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, to fire a number of U.S. attorneys for failure to investigate voter fraud allegations, leading to a scandal that eventually led to Gonzales's resignation in 2007.

ACORN and voter fraud would remain a *bête noire* for Republicans for the rest of the decade. Conservative advocacy groups and media organizations produced a steady stream of anti-ACORN material and, as the 2008 election campaign heated up, did everything they could to tie Democratic candidates, and Barack Obama in particular, to a group they portrayed as radical

and dangerous. ACORN, Rush Limbaugh said in one characteristic segment, has “been training young Black kids to hate, hate, hate this country.”

During his second debate with Obama, a few weeks before the election, the Republican nominee, John McCain, charged that ACORN “is now on the verge of maybe perpetrating one of the greatest frauds in voter history in this country, maybe destroying the fabric of democracy.” And his campaign materials similarly accused Obama, Joe Biden and the Democratic Party of orchestrating a vast conspiracy of fraud. “We’ve always known the Obama-Biden Democrats will do anything to win this November, but we didn’t know how far their allies would go,” read one mailer. “The Obama-supported, far-left group, ACORN, has been accused of voter-registration fraud in a number of battleground states.”

McCain and the Republican Party devoted much of the last weeks of the election to a voter fraud scare campaign with ACORN as the villain. And while, in the wake of the election, these allegations of illegal voting never panned out, the conservative fixation with voter fraud would continue into the Obama years and beyond.

Not that this was a shock. As an accusation, “voter fraud” has been used historically to disparage the participation of Black voters and immigrants — to cast their votes as illegitimate. And Obama came to office on the strength of historic turnout among Black Americans and other nonwhite groups. To the conservative grass roots, Obama’s very presence in the White House was, on its face, evidence that fraud had overtaken American elections.

In 2011, Republicans in Alabama, Kansas, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin capitalized on their legislative gains to pass new voter restrictions under the guise of election protection. Other states slashed early voting and made it more difficult to run registration drives. One 2013 study found that in states with “unencumbered Republican majorities” and large Black populations, lawmakers were especially likely to pass new voter identification laws and other restrictions on the franchise.

The 2012 election saw more of the same accusations of voter fraud. Donald Trump, who had flirted with running for president that year, called the election a “total sham and a travesty” and claimed that Obama had “lost the popular vote by a lot.” According to one survey taken after the election, 49 percent of Republican voters said they thought ACORN had stolen the election for the president.

ACORN, however, no longer existed. It closed its doors in 2010 after Congress stripped it of federal funding in the aftermath of a scandal stoked by right-wing provocateurs, whose accusations have since been discredited.

The absence of any evidence for voter fraud was not, for Republicans, evidence of its absence. Freed by the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*, which ended federal “preclearance” of election laws in much of the South, Republican lawmakers passed still more voter restrictions, each justified as necessary measures in the war against fraud.

Prominent Republican voices continued to spread the myth. “I’ve always thought in this state, close elections, presidential elections, it means you probably have to win with at least 53 percent of the vote to account for fraud,” Scott Walker, then the governor of Wisconsin, said in a 2014 interview with *The Weekly Standard*. “One or two points, potentially.”

Rank-and-file Republicans had already been marinating in 16 years of concentrated propaganda about the prevalence of voter fraud by the time Donald Trump claimed, in 2016, that Hillary Clinton had won the popular vote with millions of illegal ballots. If Republican voters today are quick to believe baroque conspiracy theories about fabricated and stolen votes, then it has quite a lot to do with the words and actions of a generation of mainstream Republican politicians who refused to accept that a Democratic majority was a legitimate majority.

The narrative of fraud and election theft that spurred the mob that stormed the Capitol would be unintelligible without the work of the Republican Party, which inculcated this *idée fixe* in its voters. “Stop the Steal” wasn’t a Trump innovation as much as it was a new spin on an old product line that, even after the violence on Jan. 6, Republicans are still selling.



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