News Item

How claims of voter fraud were supercharged by bad science | MIT Technology Review

By Spenser Mestel

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During the 2016 primary season, Trump campaign staffer Matt Braynard had an unusual political strategy. Instead of targeting Republican base voters—the ones who show up for every election—he focused on the intersection of two other groups: people who knew of Donald Trump, and people who had never voted in a primary before. These were both large groups.

Because of his TV career and ability to court controversy, Trump was already a household name. Meanwhile, about half America's potential voters, nearly 100 million people, don't vote in presidential elections, let alone primaries. The overlap between the groups was significant. If Trump could mobilize even a small percentage of those people, he could clinch the nomination, and Braynard was willing to put in the work.

His strategy, built from polls, research, and studies of voting behavior, focused on two goals in particular. The first was registering, engaging, educating, and turning out non-voters, the largest electoral bloc in the country and one that's regularly ignored. One recent survey of 12,000 "chronic non-voters" suggests they receive "little to no attention in national political conversations" and remain "a mystery to many institutions."

One way to turn out potentially sympathetic voters would be to use a call center to remind them, which would also help with his second goal: to investigate and expose voter fraud.

"If you're trying to do systematic voter fraud, you're going to look for people who haven't or are not going to cast their ballot," he told me in a recent interview, "because if you do cast a ballot for them and they do show up at the polling place, that's going to set up a red flag."

So the plan was that after the election, the call centers would contact a sample of

the people in the state who had voted for the first time to confirm that they had actually cast a ballot.

Not only was pursuing voter fraud popular with prospective donors, Braynard says, but it was also an endeavor supported by the academic literature. "I believe it's been documented, at least scientifically in some peer-reviewed studies, that at least one senator in the last 10 years was elected by votes that aren't legal ballots," he says.

This single voter fraud study has become canonical among conservative, and many of today's other claims of fraud—such as through mail-in voting—also trace back to it.

A study like this does in fact exist, and it and is peer-reviewed. In fact, it goes even further than Braynard remembers. Published in 2014 by Jesse Richman, a political science professor at Old Dominion University, it argues that illegal votes have played a major role in recent political outcomes. In 2008, Richman argued, "non-citizen votes" for Senate candidate Al Franken "likely gave Senate Democrats the pivotal 60th vote needed to overcome filibusters in order to pass health care reform."

The paper has become canonical among conservatives. Whenever you hear that 14% of non-citizens are registered to vote, this is where it came from. Many of today's other claims of voter fraud—such as through mail-in voting—also trace back to this study. And it's easy to see why it has taken root on the right: higher turnout in elections generally increases the number of Democratic voters, and so proof of massive voter fraud justifies voting restrictions that disproportionately affect them.

Academic research on voting behavior is often narrowly focused and heavily qualified, so Richman's claim offered something exceedingly rare: near certainty that fraud was happening at a significant rate. According to his study, at least 38,000 ineligible voters—and perhaps as many as 2.8 million—cast ballots in the 2008 election, meaning the "blue wave" that put Obama in office and expanded the Democrats' control over Congress would have been built on sand. For those who were fed up with margins of error, confidence intervals, and gray areas, Richman's numbers were refreshing. They were also very wrong.

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