Trump's Election Interference Is Underway

While many of his attempts to compromise the midterms have failed, stay vigilant. Subversion doesn't always look like insurrection.

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EVEN THOUGH PRESIDENT TRUMP'S EFFORTS to bend elections to his will have so far largely failed, don't mistake defeat for retreat. The federal government's highest power centers are working overtime to tilt the election in the administration's favor.

On Thursday, the Department of Justice sued California, accusing the state of harboring noncitizens on its voter rolls. The suit was filed forty-eight hours after DOJ mailed county election officials a password-protected thumb drive purportedly containing a list of alleged noncitizen voters. This item was delivered with an ultimatum: use the list within the next two days to review the names and prepare to separate their mail-in ballots when returned—or get sued. An L.A. County official rejected the thumb drive as an insecure medium for such a list, and the lawsuit against the state followed.

On Friday, the administration escalated from litigation to threats of criminal prosecution. In a letter to Los Angeles County officials, DOJ warned that knowingly counting ballots from people federal agencies had identified as noncitizens could make election workers criminally liable—even though California officials say the administration has provided no evidence to substantiate its claims. Trump amplified the threat on Truth Social: "They will all go to jail for a long period of time!!!"

The administration's tactics in California mirror what the Department of Homeland Security tried in Nevada, where Secretary Markwayne Mullin claimed nearly 16,000 noncitizens were on the voter rolls and sent a letter to state officials pressuring them to review each case. Upon scrutiny, that number fell to 185 and then to *zero*. The pretext for the purge completely fell apart, yet the Trump administration keeps pushing these sorts of voter-fraud narratives and making demands for election officials to go to great lengths to restrict voting access.

While January 6th showed Americans what one vivid form of election subversion looks like, schemes of that sort rarely announce themselves with the clamor of an insurrection. More often, they are carried out through the subtle machinery of

government: paperwork, pressure, propaganda. And the authoritarians in the Trump administration are not discouraged by failure. They're like battering rams, hammering at the system again and again, hoping it will eventually break down in a way that benefits them.

So don't miss what's happening now. Trump's election interference effort is well underway.

Send this story to someone who cares about free and fair elections as much as you do.

Swinging against the system

The falsehood that has been used to provide a basis for all the administration's actions is simple: They pretend voter fraud is widespread. This initial lie has a natural corollary in turn: The only way to stop the fraud is to put the Trump administration in charge of who gets to vote.

Based on this false framework, Trump has issued a pair of executive orders intended to put his appointees in a position to control who can vote in our elections. The administration has interpreted these orders expansively as an instruction for agencies to create new voter requirements, to compel the states to provide unredacted voter rolls, and to prohibit mail-in ballots unless voters were placed on a new federal voter registry. Those plans faced heavy resistance, even in red states, as the Constitution strictly leaves the power to administer elections to the states.

When those efforts faltered, Trump pivoted. He demanded that Congress pass the SAVE America Act to enact some of these restrictions and requirements, but even a Republican-controlled Congress wouldn't pass it. At the same time, DOJ tried to get the

voter data another way: by suing states to hand it over. But the courts are shutting those efforts down, too; the Trump administration is 0–26 in those cases, with Republican-appointed judges delivering some of those defeats. Additionally, the Supreme Court stepped in to stop the postal rule, keeping mail-in voting safe, secure, and out of Trump's hands for now.

DHS's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) tried to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars in terrorism preparedness grants unless states and local governments accepted the imposition of FEMA's de facto nationwide election code. The agency's demands included stipulations about what kind of voting equipment to use; the means by which voters cast ballots; how post-election audits and ballot reconciliation processes are conducted; and how to make citizenship checks on voters and election workers. A judge recently blocked DHS from withholding the grants, and FEMA has rescinded the unlawful election-related requirements the agency had attempted to impose.

At this point, Trump should have taken the dozens of Nos to amount to a larger No. He didn't. He keeps pounding away.

Trump gave a primetime speech in July, during which he accused

China of nefariously accessing U.S. voting data, said voting machines were vulnerable to attack, and falsely claimed that more than 250,000 noncitizens were illegally registered to vote in California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Nevada. That speech seems to have become an operating blueprint. Those unproven allegations about California were a seed that grew into the lawsuit DOJ brought against the state this week, even after the tactic flopped in Nevada.

Beyond voter rolls: Intimidation, propaganda, and vote buying

Messing with voter rolls is obvious election interference. Other attempts to subvert the already-underway midterms are not so direct, and they indicate how widespread the impulse is across government.

The raid by Homeland Security Investigations on the home of Democratic congresswoman and Somali immigrant Ilhan Omar is a prime example. Breaking a longstanding Justice Department norm against taking public investigative steps relating to political candidates within sixty days of an election, the Trump administration wants to build a case to ultimately strip her of her citizenship and deport her. This is more than the continued weaponization of law enforcement against political rivals; it is direct election interference. Viewed against the barrage of bad-faith claims MAGA leaders have leveled at Somali and other minority communities, the Omar raid cannot be dismissed as a routine matter. Federal agencies are being leveraged to scapegoat and intimidate these voting blocs, using one of the country's most prominent Muslim women, whom the president has repeatedly denigrated, as a warning shot.

Trump's recent run of taxpayer-funded campaign ads is another. Directly ahead of the midterms, he raided $20 million in DHS funds to broadcast commercials praising himself, including reruns of a 2024 Trump campaign ad. A district judge ordered the ads to stop airing, ruling that the spots "exceed the purposes authorized by Congress and violate restrictions on publicity and propaganda," but the administration kept running them, only pulling the ads after millions of people had seen them.

Then there is the attempt to outright buy votes with Trump's promise of a $5,000 "dividend" check for all Americans—but only if Republicans keep the House and Senate. This isn't even close to normal political pandering. Trump claims he doesn't need

Congress to issue the checks because the money already belongs to the people (why he doesn't just send the checks now, in that case, he has never explained). This isn't true, but consider the audacity of this logic: Trump is telling voters these tax dollars, which supposedly belong to them, will be kept in government coffers unless they cast their ballots for his preferred candidates.

Although his $5,000 offer is getting pushback, Trump slipped almost a million Americans $500 "Obamacare refund" checks ahead of the midterms with ease. The checks came with a Trumpian self-aggrandizing message: "For years, the Biden administration overcharged you to fund the operation of HealthCare.gov. That money belongs to hard-working Americans, not the government, and now, I am returning it to you!"

What to do

The good news? This administration has tried numerous ways to seize control of the voting rolls and block access to the polls, yet the path to the ballot box during this critical early voting period remains clear.

But the election isn't over on election night. Sixty-one days separate Election Day from the date when the new Congress is seated on January 3. Don't tune out after you cast your ballot.

Trump and his authoritarian allies have proven that the post-election certification period is fertile ground for subversion. But Trump won't necessarily need to summon a mob this time. In his second term, he installed election deniers throughout the federal government—and helped some get elected to critical roles in key states—to do his dirty work from within.

Be ready to stand with the targets of this administration's intimidation and smear campaigns. It could mean organizing at

the local level or providing financial, legal, and moral support to those targets or others working to protect elections. It might mean poll-watching on Election Day.

If we are going to prevent the Trump administration from exploiting federal authority and resources for partisan advantage in the 2028 presidential election, reform-minded members of Congress must make reclaiming the body's constitutional power of the purse a top priority. We must stop President Trump from corrupting our federal coffers and using our money as a personal partisan piggy bank.

We can take comfort in seeing the administration flailing through its most brazen attempts at election interference, but we can't be complacent that some won't succeed. We won't be sure until the votes are counted and the rightful winners are seated. For now, we must recognize how dedicated these authoritarians are to pulling federal levers in their favor, and act accordingly.



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Sandsome 7H

I appreciate the Bulwark for not letting up on this story. It is vital we know how this administration is trying to deprive us of our right to vote. It is one of the many reasons I subscribe.

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TomD TomD 7H *Edited*

Do you remember the trio from crime stories, "Motive, means, and opportunity"? There is absolutely no motive for an undocumented person to register to vote and vote. Who would risk being charged with two felonies to do something that many citizens cannot be bothered to do legally? The several complete audits that were performed after 2020 confirmed this analysis.

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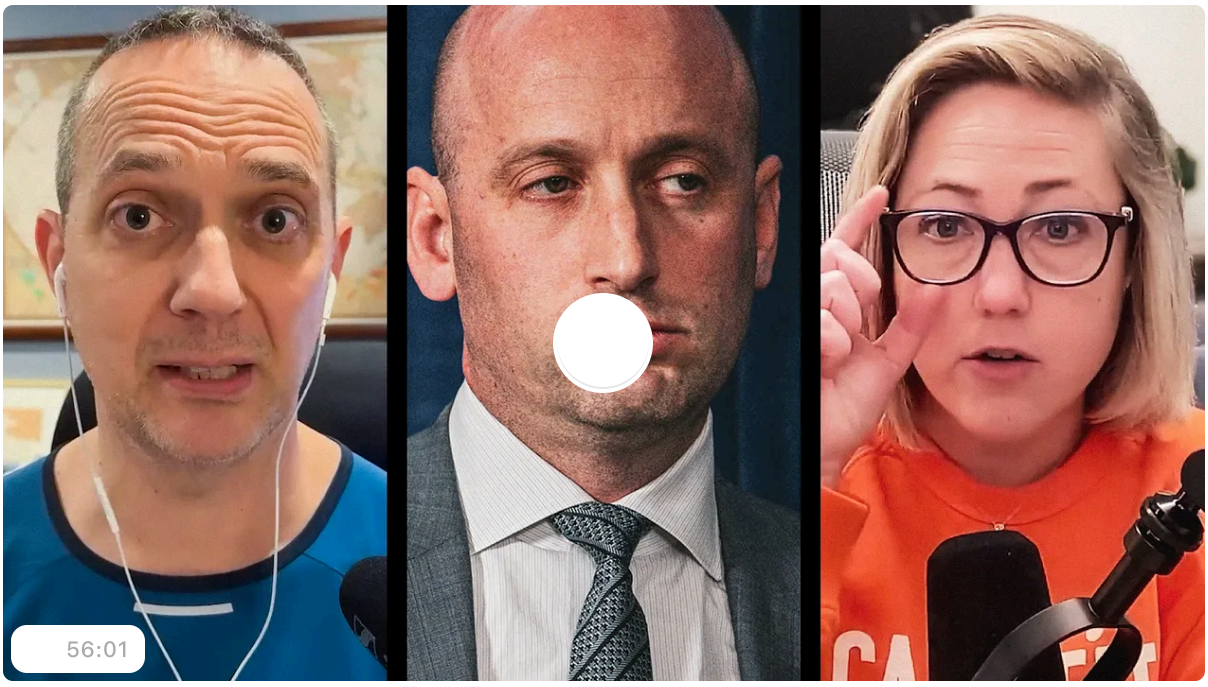


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