

How Trump's remark about poll watchers threatens another election norm

Opinion by **Benjamin L. Ginsberg**

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Benjamin L. Ginsberg practiced election law for 38 years. He co-chaired the bipartisan 2013 Presidential Commission on Election Administration.

President Trump's hints in last week's presidential debate that he would weaponize the traditional role of poll watchers should send shock waves through all Americans.

Poll watchers are fundamental to the electoral process. Political parties and campaigns place them in voting locations as their eyes and ears monitoring the casting and counting of ballots. Each state sets its own rules for credentialing poll watchers and parameters for what they can and can't do in polling places.

Poll watchers flag irregularities as they happen and, after the votes are counted, validate the results' accuracy through the adjudication of any irregularities they find. They are permitted in every precinct in the United States. Some states have more transparency than others, but poll watchers of each party observing the entire voting process are essential for validating free and fair elections.

In the 38 years I've participated in GOP Election Day operations, Republican poll watchers have been instructed to report any fraud or irregularities they see. Those efforts always include teams of lawyers, who go to voting locations where poll watchers report a problem; they are instructed to get affidavits. Poll watchers' reports and the lawyers' affidavits are investigated, and sometimes litigated, in ensuing contests and recounts.

I know that there is no evidence to support the president's charges of "rigged" elections and claims that "tens of thousands of ballots [are] being manipulated," because Republican poll watchers observe in every precinct the party chooses to place them.

In last week's debate, Trump hinted at something that threatens to shred poll watchers' historic and necessary role. His proclamation, "I'm urging my supporters to go into the polls and watch very carefully, because that's what has to happen," appears to be not a stand-alone statement but part of his evidence-free riffing that elections are "fraudulent" based on Trump's assertion that "the only way" he can lose is if the other side cheats (his current poll numbers notwithstanding).

The president's refusal to clearly repudiate white supremacy during the debate, combined with chest-thumping by his campaign and the Republican National Committee about a 50,000-person army at polling places, raises red flags about polling-place disruptions as a Trump strategy.

The Post reported Friday that "An RNC spokesman said those dispatched to the polls would be trained to interact

politely with voters and poll workers.” The same article noted that the president’s words had prompted the founder of a neo-Nazi website to post “I still have shivers” and that “He is telling the people to stand by. As in: Get ready for war.”

The RNC was recently liberated from a consent decree imposed nearly 38 years ago for over-aggressive polling-place activities that courts found had suppressed votes. Although presidential campaigns and state parties have operated in past cycles, the RNC is reveling in, and fundraising on, again leading the poll-watcher effort on Election Day.

The problem for the RNC is that Trump’s words appear to suggest precisely the types of activities that brought on the consent decree.

Should Trump seek to delegitimize the presidential election, he would most likely begin by causing delays and chaos in precincts that voted heavily against him in 2016. His most obvious tactic would be having the RNC instruct its poll watchers to abandon their traditional role and, instead, lodge mass challenges both as voters cast their ballots and then as mail ballots are tabulated.

Such actions would be a serious assault on the electoral system. Because the president’s words hint at damaging the norm of peaceful voting by using polling-place mayhem as a tactic, the RNC and Trump campaign need to specify:

What is the mission of the 50,000-person army and to which voting locations would they be deployed? Will Republicans screen out white supremacy group members from their poll-watcher army?

What instructions and training will Republican poll watchers be given? Will those instructions vary depending on whether the state leans Democratic or Republican? Will there be a uniform challenge policy within a state, or will only voters in Democratic-dominated precincts be challenged?

Are Republican poll watchers just observing and noting irregularities that would be litigated in recounts and contests under state law as in past cycles? Will they challenge individual in-person voters? Will there be a blanket order to challenge voters or to not interrupt voting by challenging? If there is no blanket order, under what circumstances would your representatives in polling places challenge? Do your representatives in precincts or voting centers have the authority to make challenges on their own? Is there a chain-of-command approval process for challenges?

Do you plan to challenge mail-in ballots on a wholesale basis as they are being counted?

The president’s behavior at the debate made clear that he has no qualms about trampling historic norms, including debate rules to which his campaign only recently agreed. We cannot ignore the signal he sent that he is prepared to sacrifice the traditional role of poll watchers and the ways U.S. elections are conducted in his quest to retain power.

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