

Polls don't decide elections

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
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In late September, the “nonpartisan” Web site Real Clear Politics reported that President Obama leads Republican nominee Mitt Romney in several battleground states. According to the polls, President Obama leads by 5.2 percent in Ohio, 4.5 percent in Virginia, 4.2 percent in Nevada, 4 percent in Iowa, and 3 percent in Florida. Do we believe the polls? I’m not so sure. But I surely don’t believe these polls should alter an aggressive effort to re-elect this Democratic president.

There are lots of ways to do voter suppression. One is to deny people ballots, or to change the rules on voting. Mandatory state-issued ID, new and more distant polling places, and all of the shenanigans documented by the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law are methods of voter suppression. In some cities and states, police cars have been parked outside polling places, intimidating those who may have minor infractions of law, including unpaid parking tickets.

Another ways to suppress the vote is to attempt to influence voter attitudes. For example, in the 2008 election, a Republican operative did robo-calls to the Black community telling people they didn’t need to vote because Democratic candidates President Obama and Gov. Martin O’Malley of Maryland had already won. He was convicted of four counts of fraud last year and faces jail time.

Other communities have experienced similar pranks, including one that crudely told people that the election was on a Wednesday instead of a Tuesday, and another that said polls were open until 10 p.m., although they closed at 8p.m.. Well-informed voters repel these shenanigans, but some voters fall for them. If such tawdry tactics affect only a few voters in a few precincts, they can have an impact on an electoral outcome. That’s why it is so effective to go door to door on Election Day, to provide rides for those who need them, and to do anything and everything to ensure that every voter gets out. That’s why it also makes sense to encourage early voting, especially for the elderly and others who may have challenges getting to the polls.

I am wondering if these polls showing President Obama in the lead in key swing states represent another form of subtle voter suppression. If we think the president is leading, then some will pull back on their efforts. And that’s exactly what some Republicans are counting on. Jay Cost, who writes for the conservative Weekly Standard, told radio talk show host Hugh Hewitt that “Democratic enthusiasm is going to recede.”

Another analyst said that the current polls are assuming a “record Democratic turnout.” Still another said that while 90 percent of registered Republicans will vote for Romney and 90

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percent of Democrats will vote for President Obama, the race will be decided by independents, many of whom are not polled.

My grandmother used to say, "Don't feed me fat meat and tell me it ain't greasy." Or, "Don't spit on me and tell me it's raining." In other words, don't believe the hype. To be sure, President Obama may be leading the polls in some states, but polls are like putting your finger in the air to see which way the wind blows. They are like calling the basketball game based on who is leading after the first half. They are like handicapping the horse race based on who is first out of the gate. They tell a story about a point in time, but not about the outcome.

Thus, polling results are both good news and provisional news. The good news – the polls tell us that an Obama win is not only possible but likely. The provisional news – President Obama won't win unless we work for it. Imagine that the basketball team started chilling in the second half because they led in the first, or that the horse first out of the gate decided to slow up because, after all, the win was decided. We've all heard about the flash in the pan, the tortoise and the hare, and the importance of persistence.

These polls ought to be a motivator for those who support President Obama. The goal ought to be to make these poll results a reality by ensuring that Democratic enthusiasm increases, not recedes, and that Democratic turnout does hit record numbers. It ain't over til it's over, and the outcome of this election will depend on the work that is done in the next several weeks.

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