

Protecting our future

David Orr, Cook County Clerk

11/2/2012-Regardless of who wins next week's election -- your candidates or mine -- we have a problem. Our democracy is facing a triple threat: money pouring into political campaigns, negative ads blanketing the airwaves and voter suppression measures preventing legitimate citizens from voting. All are undermining our electoral tradition.

Let's take money. The principle of "one person, one vote" cannot be sustained if some citizens can contribute millions in radio, TV and internet advertising, while most average people can only pitch in a few dollars. Those millions translate into media buys, direct mail and even feature films pressing one point of view while the other can barely pay for a squeak. This one-sided avalanche guarantees no genuine public debate between equal parties during campaigns. After the election, it skews the nation's legislative agenda.

Even more damage is done when money is hidden, and the people purchasing advertising cannot be held accountable for their inflammatory statements. A brazen example of this dangerous hide-and-seek took place this election cycle when poor neighborhoods in Ohio and Wisconsin were papered with intimidating billboards warning voters they could be arrested for voter fraud. The outcry finally forced the billboards down, but the public still does not know who was behind them.

Also chilling, large employers across the country have been telling their workers how to vote in the presidential race. In Colorado, one boss threatened employees with layoffs and benefit cuts. These business owners say their threats are 'free speech' now sanctioned by the Supreme Court's decision on *Citizens United*. This cynical bullying treads too close to surrendering the privacy of the ballot. It, too, makes a mockery of "one person, one vote" and our historical promise of equality.

Unfortunately, that is not where the suppression stops. A raft of new laws to require voters to produce government-issued photos IDs on Election Day is working its way through the courts, with troubling results. Some of these laws have been temporarily delayed until after November 6, but they have not been shelved.

In old movies I was always aghast at how feudal lords almost always oppressed their serfs and peasants. What is inspiring about our own nation's history is the American promise of equality between rich and poor, employer and worker, black, brown and white.

But the stampede of money, ads and anti-democratic laws unleashed this election compromise that promise. Whoever wins, the many committed Americans with good ideas on both sides of the aisle must roll up their sleeves and get to work to protect the future of our democracy.