

A new poll tax?

Written by Lydia Schwartz
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Measure would disenfranchise many

The Minnesota Voters Alliance and Citizens for a Better Minneapolis are heading a petition for a photo ID requirement of anyone who wishes to vote because they are concerned about the potential for voter fraud in Minneapolis city elections.

These two groups and their supporters would like to see a photo ID requirement for all elections in Minnesota, but they are starting with a push in the state's three biggest cities: Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth.

Opponents of the petition argue that requiring a photo ID in order to vote is essentially creating a poll tax, which are illegal because it limits who has the ability to vote. In the event that the proposal becomes law, the State of Minnesota will be compelled to issue individuals at or below the poverty level an ID card for free.

The Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Minnesota, Keesha Gaskins, points out that this proposal will only create another tax-burden on Minneapolis residents. "Minneapolis will have to come up with a system to create IDs for people; it will be incredibly expensive. We're already struggling to pay for our schools, police, and roads," she said.

The proposal would also cause many problems for students who register to vote in the precinct they live in while attending college. Most students living off-campus will move every year while they are in school and do not bother to update the address on his or her Driver's License because of the expense. They would have to obtain a new Minnesota ID or Driver's License every time he or she moves in order to vote.

The measure would also unduly burden the poor and the elderly because many do not drive or have lost access to the documents needed in order to obtain a Minnesota ID. "The measure [only creates] an unnecessary step in an attempt to suppress the vote in Minneapolis...It's wrong to bar even a single citizen from voting," Gaskins said.

Gaskins also argues that there needs to be more evidence that voter impersonation is a major issue in Minnesota. The petition advocates "need to prove that there is a problem of voter fraud in Minnesota before they create a barrier to the ballot based on some mythological issue...We just finished a contentious race in Minnesota and [neither US Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) nor former US Sen. Norm Coleman's] lawyers made any claims of voter fraud," she said. One of the main issues that arose during the election was the disappearance of several hundred ballots, which a photo ID requirement would not have solved.

In order for a citizen petition to become a ballot question, supporters must gather the signatures of at least five percent of the total votes cast in the previous State General Election. On November 4, 2008, 208,973 Minneapolis residents voted. Supports need to gather the signatures of at least 10,449 registered Minneapolis voters in order to submit the petition to become a question on the ballot.

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Supporters of the petition argue that requiring a photo ID card helps protect the rights of legitimate voters. Kris Broberg, President of Citizens for a Better Minneapolis, says that we must prove to our fellow citizens that we have the right to choose our government. He argues, "How are we supposed to catch fraudulent voters, if all we have to go on is someone's word?"

They also argue that our electoral system cannot inspire public confidence if no safeguards exist to confirm the identity of voters. Former Minnesota Secretary of State and former MN State Rep. Mary Kiffmeyer believes that people are discouraged from voting when they cannot trust the system. "Who you are and where you live is a right for other people to know...What's secret is who you vote for," she said.

Petition supporters also point out that it can take months for Hennepin County to process voter registrations that are made on Election Day. "We don't have the tools to detect fraud [on Election Day]...It's our duty and responsibility to prevent noncitizens from voting and to report any instances of fraud," Kiffmeyer said. Currently, a first-offense voter fraud conviction is a misdemeanor. A felon who attempts to vote could go back to prison.

Under the proposed measure, absentee voting would remain the same, creating a disparity in the law between voters. Voters who vote in-person must present an acceptable ID but those voting absentee by mail are not required to do so.

Andy Cilek, Executive Director of the Minnesota Voters Alliance, says they already expect challenges to the petition from the Democratic Party. "We feel it should be a statewide issue, but the [Minnesota State] Legislature keeps throwing it under the table," he said.

In 2005, the Indiana State Legislature passed a statewide law requiring voters to present a photo ID on Election Day. The League of Women Voters of Indiana filed a complaint with the Indiana Court of Appeals and on September 17, 2009, the court found the current Indiana Voter ID law to be unconstitutional by violating the Equal Privileges and Immunities Clause of the Indiana State Constitution. The Indiana Court of Appeals decision is currently before the Indiana State Supreme Court.

Current Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie declined to comment on the debate because his office works closely with local election boards and he does not want to intervene if the question ends up on the ballot.