Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Nearly 200 people turned out for a town hall forum to discuss the proposed Minnesota voter identification amendment set for the November ballot.

The forum, which took place at the Sabes Jewish Community Center in St. Louis Park, was packed with mostly all who oppose the change to Minnesota's Constitution. US Rep. Keith Ellison said the proposed amendment is a clear attempt by Republicans to disenfranchise minority voters who tend to vote heavily Democratic.

"Voter ID will hurt seniors, it will hurt college students and minorities as well," said Ellison, who said 78 percent of African-American males ages 17 – 24 do not possess state identification, yet meet state voting requirements. "We have a big decision in front of us in November."

According to Ellison, there are nearly 200,000 Minnesotans registered to vote who do not have a valid state ID or driver's license.

DFL State Rep. Steve Simon (44A) said the proposed amendment could have catastrophic consequences if approved by voters.

"When you put something in the Constitution [such as the proposed amendment] it's like you're writing it in permanent ink," said Simon, who said if passed, the amendment would jeopardize absentee voting and all but end same-day registration. "I floated a compromise to have voters [without identification] to swear an oath [as to their identification]; an affidavit, with the penalty of a year in prison but the Republicans in the legislature refused to compromise."

Dr. Josie Johnson, said the proposed voter identification amendment reminded her of times in the mid-1900s when African-Americans struggled for the right to participate in the political process.

"(The proposed amendment) reminds me of my early days in Texas when with my father, I went to work to repeal the poll tax," said Johnson speaking of the then law that disenfranchised mostly poor African-Americans who were unable to pay the voting fee. Johnson, the first African-American to serve on the University of Minnesota's Board of Regents said, "When we talk about voter ID in Minnesota we talk about a law that finds origins in laws designed to keep my people, African-Americans, from voting."

Alex Ericson, an Iraq War veteran, said the proposed measure would cost many soldiers serving away from home their right to vote. Ericson said the way the bill reads, those voting absentee would need to have their ballots signed by state election judges.

"You don't have election judges over there in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Ericson.

Ericson said witnessing the Iraqi people voting in their first democratic elections helped him to realize how important voting rights are.

"And to come home and see [voting rights] under attack, I could not stand for that," said Ericson.

“So you’re a service member in Kandahar wearing the U.S. of A. and someone wants to scheme to take away your right to vote; that’s galling to me,” said Ellison.

Mai Thor, a member of Ellison’s staff and in use of a wheelchair to get around, said the proposed amendment also discriminates against those with disabilities. Thor said many people with disabilities do not operate motor vehicles and therefore do not have driver’s licenses.

“When you have someone who is blind or deaf or with an obvious disability, you’re going to question their worthiness to vote,” asked Thor.

Simon said the proposal is now before the state’s Supreme Court, due to challenges as to how the bill is to be worded on the November ballot.

Ellison said further evidence that the proposed amendment is just an attempt to take away people’s right to vote is the fact that Minnesota has had zero instances of voter impersonation. He said the only instances of voting irregularities in the state occurred when convicted felons voted without properly having their rights reinstated – an issue that would not be solved by forcing people to show identification.

Tom Lehman, who attended the town hall, said under the proposed amendment his 93-year-old mother would not be able to vote.

“She has no driver’s license, no passport, no ID; she’s living in a nursing home and not near her county of birth,” said Lehman. “If this thing passes she would not be allowed to vote.”

Ellison said a common argument of those supporting the ballot measure is people have to show their ID to go to a club or to go to the bank, so it should be no big deal to show an ID when voting.

“Going to the club is not a right,” said Ellison. “Voting is a right.”

An additional argument in opposition to the amendment was if a person loses his or her license prior to an election that person would not have a proper photo ID and would be denied the right to vote.

Those supporting the ID amendment said if someone appears at the polls without identification, that person would be allowed to cast a provisional ballot. Simon rebutted and said in most instances those provisional ballots would not be counted. He said provisional ballots would only be counted if an election were to be decided by a recount.

Citing a recent poll, Ellison said currently 58 percent of state voters favor the proposed change to the Minnesota Constitution.