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Don't Use Debunked Data to Disenfranchise Voters

By Melanie G. Ramey, President, and Andrea Kaminski, Executive Director

Senator Joe Leibham and several colleagues have repeatedly referred to a recent Milwaukee Police Department report as rationale for instituting a constitutional amendment requiring voters to present government-issued photographic identification at the polls. While this proposal is being touted as a move to improve Election Day operations, its true effect could be the disenfranchisement of thousands of eligible voters who deserve to have their voices heard.

Moreover, it is shocking that proponents of Voter ID are citing a report which rolled out old findings that appear to point to widespread illegal voting in Milwaukee in the 2004 election. The truth is that virtually all of the irregularities identified in the 2004 election have already been debunked or found to be simple errors -- people signing in on the wrong line, a glitch in the voter history that incorrectly looks like people voting twice, or a misspelled name. The study identified no reports of anyone impersonating anyone else at the poll.

The report itself actually identified only three true instances of illegal voting, not the thousands that have been falsely reported by Senator Leibham and his colleagues. Two of the illegal votes were cast by felons still under supervision who didn't know they were not allowed to vote, and Voter ID would not have prevented them from voting. This has already been addressed through better education of felons and poll workers. Most of the issues in the 2004 election related to the Milwaukee database and these have been addressed by incorporating it into the statewide database.

It is not clear who really is responsible for this report, which came as a surprise to the Milwaukee Chief of Police when it was released. (<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=723753>). We do know it was written by individuals who are supposed to investigate crimes, not administer elections. Therefore their recommendations related to election administration need to be taken with a grain of salt. For example, it hints at (although never specifically states) a recommendation of an annual purge of homeless voters and those living in student housing facilities, a practice that would flatly violate federal law (National Voter Registration Act).

At first glance, many might think that requiring ID to vote would not create barriers. It is easy to assume that most everybody has a current, valid photo ID such as a driver's license. But what about your elderly neighbor, who gave up driving long ago? Your disabled coworker, who relies on friends and family to get around? A low-income single mother, who simply cannot afford to spend an afternoon waiting in line at the DMV in order to update her address?

The truth is that photo ID requirements disproportionately impact the elderly, poor, disabled and minority populations who may not have the same access to an ID that we take for granted. In 2003, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation estimated that approximately 130,000 people of voting age across the state did not have a driver's license, and that only 20% of these people would ever obtain the necessary documentation if it was required.

The League of Women Voters has long believed that the best way to improve elections is to provide the resources needed to have better management as well as enhanced recruitment, training and compensation of poll workers.

This is exactly what was done in Milwaukee following the 2004 election, and the result has been a Fall 2006 election and a February 2008 presidential primary with high turnout and very few problems. Let us use positive solutions to improve elections without disenfranchising voters.

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