

COMMENTARY

Aldred and Connett: ID rule will bolster integrity of elections

**Tom Aldred and Brent Connett, TEXAS
CONSERVATIVE COALITION RESEARCH
INSTITUTE**

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The main argument against the voter identification and citizenship verification proposals in the Legislature runs as follows: requiring a person to prove his identity and citizenship constitutes a poll tax that will suppress the votes of the poor, elderly and minorities.

Instead, voter identification is about integrity of the election system and improving voter confidence in the outcome of our elections.

The office of the secretary of state reports that there are 12.5 million registered voters in Texas. According to the Department of Public Safety, there are more than 14 million valid Texas driver's licenses and almost another 4 million valid Texas ID cards issued to Texans over age 18. There are 5.5 million more government-issued identification cards possessed by the voting age population than there are registered voters.

A majority of the elderly hold valid Texas driver's license: 73 percent of the age seventy-nine and 63 percent of 85-and-older population. Most telling is that 93 percent of elderly voters who voted in 2006 in Harris County — the state's most populous county — hold a valid Texas driver's license. Even more hold a Texas ID card, utility bill, hunting license, library card — all forms of acceptable identification in HB 218, which passed the Texas House.

Opponents' concern over disenfranchising the elderly is especially dubious since one bill passed by the House exempts people older than 80 from the identification requirement. If a person does not possess and is unable to procure identification, that person can vote by absentee ballot, a process unchanged by the voter identification bill. The voter identification bill also provides for a free ID card to any registered voter who doesn't already have one and can't afford one.

Vote fraud has been well documented. In 2006, the attorney general investigated 59 cases and noted that the highest concentration of voter fraud is in the vote-by-mail process though there have been three instances of alleged illegal voting, which may include

circumstances preventable by a voter photo ID law.

Harris County has cancelled 3,742 registered voters for non-citizenship; 683 of those non-citizenship cancellations have occurred from 2000 to the present. No one knows the magnitude of this problem because there has never been a thorough investigation done by a state or county authority. The secretary of state, the state's chief elections officer, admits that there is no verification of the information provided by voter registration applicants. The voter registration process is so riddled with error, fraud and potential manipulation that the U.S. State Department will not accept a voter registration card as proof of citizenship when a person applies for a passport.

Critics dismiss this evidence, contending vote fraud is negligible and doesn't justify ID requirements. That is inherently contradictory. Just one person denied the right to vote on the basis of race is enough to launch federal action under the Voting Rights Act. But even though vote fraud cancels the legitimately cast votes of minorities, elderly and the poor, fraud is treated almost casually, if not indifferently. Vote fraud is not the same as voter intimidation, but it leads to the same result: disenfranchisement.

Lost on critics is that the illegal immigrant population in Texas is estimated to be over 1.6 million. With so many illegal immigrants residing here, and document fraud and identity theft increasingly linked to illegal immigration, their potential effect on election outcomes is too serious to ignore.

The bipartisan Commission on Federal Election Reform led by President Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker issued 87 recommendations for ensuring equal access to elections and election integrity. The commission recommended that states verify citizenship before registering voters and require photo identification at polling places.

Voter identification and citizenship verification fill a gaping loophole in election law. For the first time, there will be a mechanism to prevent, investigate and prosecute voter impersonation at the polls and in the process protect citizens' right to vote as guaranteed by the Constitutions of the United States and the State of Texas.

Aldred and Connett are policy analysts with the Texas Conservative Coalition Research Institute, which based in Austin.

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