

Beth Gottstein on Missouri's voter ID plan

Legislation would put obstacles in voters' paths as i see it

By Beth Gottstein

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The Constitution's 15th Amendment decrees that neither the United States nor any state can deny voting rights to citizens because of race, color or previous condition of servitude. The Missouri Constitution echoes this entitlement.

Ignoring the highest law of the land, the Voter Protection Act — passed by the Missouri General Assembly and awaiting Gov. Matt Blunt's signature — would disqualify up to 200,000 eligible voters as of November. Most of the 200,000 would be poor, elderly, disabled and newly registered voters.

The bill would require all Missouri voters to present federal or Missouri-certified identification at the polls this autumn. More than 169,000 eligible Missouri voters lack driver's licenses or photo identification acceptable under this plan. Four times as many African-American Missourians as white live in poverty and do not have cars. Consequently, the bill would further disengage a population with an already faltering voter turnout rate.

When the Georgia legislature attempted to initiate a similar law, a federal court issued an injunction, calling the legislation discriminatory.

The Missouri measure proposes free photo ID cards but no resources to reimburse people for missed work-hours, transportation costs to attain cards, or copies of documents needed to apply.

The legislation's supporters say it would end an epidemic of voter fraud. The threat is exaggerated. Of the 4,194,146 Missourians who cast votes in November 2004, courts convicted less than 100 of voter fraud. Statewide, fewer than 500 reports of attempts to cast dual votes emerged.

Tighter voter identification requirements are not the antidote. Strengthened resources for election boards to update their voter rolls regularly are.

It is disappointing to watch legislators create even more obstacles to exclude already disenfranchised voters. Voter turnout is dismal. In the 2004 presidential elections, less than two-thirds of greater Kansas City's registered voters participated. Even more worrisome is that in some of these areas, fewer than 50 percent of adults have registered to vote.

Our Constitution was drafted to ensure that all citizens have a say, a voice, in how our government functions. This legislation would silence an essential core of Missourians.

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