

MISPLACED PRIORITIES: VOTER ID IN WISCONSIN

TOVA WANG

Strong voter participation and engagement are fundamental to a healthy democracy. Efforts to restrict access to voting fly in the face of this important goal. Alarming, despite another midterm election in which nationally only *41 percent* of eligible persons voted, many states are now renewing efforts to restrict, rather than expand, the franchise.

The timing could not be more inappropriate. Incoming legislators and governors are pushing the passage of strict voter identification laws while their states face critical budget crises. Instead of focusing on job creation and providing relief for millions of unemployed and underemployed residents legislators have placed a law that would disenfranchise tens of thousands at the top of their agendas.

WISCONSIN IS ONE OF THOSE STATES

The voter ID bill proposed in Wisconsin is even more restrictive than the most restrictive ID law that exists in the United States currently – the controversial Indiana law. Under the Wisconsin law, voters must have a valid (presumably current) Wisconsin driver's license, military ID, or another "identification certificate" issued by the Department of Transportation. This means other forms of government issued photo identification – including student IDs from public universities – will not be accepted. Anyone who does not currently have an in-state driver's license will have to go to the DMV and go through the arduous process of obtaining the identification needed for voting. In order to get that identification certificate from DOT, voters will have to provide their full social security number, proof of name and birth (presumably a birth certificate) and documentary proof of citizenship (a birth certificate, passport or naturalization papers).

WISCONSIN HAS MORE IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

So far, newly elected Governor Scott Walker has not provided any details on how he plans to reduce Wisconsin's significant budget shortfall. The most often cited figure for this shortfall is \$3.3 billion, with The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (relying on the Legislative Fiscal Bureau/Wisconsin Budget Project) noting that Wisconsin will have a \$3.4 billion gap prior to any new budget adoption.

Wisconsin, like many other Republican-governed states facing a budget deficit, will try to address this crisis by turning toward cutting services. A spokesman for Gov. Walker said "There will need to be sustained economic growth coupled with reductions in state spending to balance Wisconsin's \$3.3 billion structural deficit."¹ Gov. Walker has promised to present an emergency budget repair bill by the week of January 31, 2011, indicating

Wisconsin might be in even more dire financial straights than previously thought, though Gov. Walker has declined to specify how large the state's budget shortfall is.² Gov. Walker said he and the Republican-controlled Legislature is facing "a very tough, budget situation."³ One of Gov. Walker's first acts as governor was to create the Commission on Waste, Fraud and Abuse, which targets state entitlements such as unemployment benefits, food stamps, child care, state employee overtime wages, Medicaid and others.⁴

Yet the Voter ID proposal would require at least \$2.3 million in new government spending annually.

THE REAL ISSUES

- » Unemployment: Wisconsin had 153,000 fewer jobs as of January 20, 2011 than it did when the recession began in December of 2007.⁵
- » Education: Gov. Walker has reportedly "danced around" the subject of cuts to education.⁶
- » Government Money and Local Jobs Lost: The federal government withdrew the \$810 million it had awarded to Wisconsin to build a high speed rail line (a project that would have reinvigorated WI's manufacturing sector and put thousands of people back to work) when Gov. Walker tried to redirect the money to fix Wisconsin's roads and bridges, a plan Federal officials had repeatedly told Walker wasn't an option. The state had already spent \$9 million on the train project and now owes more than \$5 million in contract cancellation fees.⁷

THE WRONG FOCUS

Wisconsin's voting system, which does not require voter ID for most voters and allows same-day registration, is one of the most accessible in the country. As a result, Wisconsin consistently ranks among the states with the highest voter turnout.⁸ If the voter system is working – if Wisconsin voters are turning up in droves – and the budget deficit and unemployment levels are unacceptable, then why are Wisconsin's Republican leaders focusing on a stringent Voter ID bill?

Wisconsin Republicans have long pushed unsuccessfully for a photo identification requirement at the polls, citing the need to guard against voter fraud. Nevertheless, despite numerous investigations, *there is no evidence of substantial voter fraud* of the kind a Voter ID law would protect against.⁹ This is literally a canard legislators use to divert focus from the real problems and their real motives in passing strict ID laws: gaming the system in their favor.

MAKING VOTING AS HARD AS GOING TO THE DMV

Wisconsin's ID bill is unique in that it forces anyone who does not have a current Wisconsin driver's license to get an identification document through the Department Of Transportation. That means getting to a DMV and going through the hassle we are all too familiar with and getting the ID in time for the election. This would pose a burden disproportionately on the elderly, disabled, and low-income individuals, for whom it is most difficult to provide the supporting documentation, take time off work, and arrange transportation to ID issuing offices. According to the organization One Wisconsin Now,

26 percent of Wisconsin's 91 DMVs are open one day a month or less; only one DMV in the state has weekend hours; three Wisconsin counties have no DMVs at all; and over half of Wisconsin's 91 DMVs are open only on a part-time basis.

THE COST OF VOTER ID

• **Disenfranchisement:**

- » The Legislative Fiscal Bureau has estimated that 20% of Wisconsin residents – one out of five -- do not have the type of voter ID required by the legislation.¹⁰
- » A recent study showed that 23 percent of Wisconsinites over the age of 65; 17 percent of white men and women; 55 percent of African American men and 49 percent of African American women; 46 percent of Hispanic men and 59 percent of Hispanic women; 78 percent of African American men age 18-24 and 66 percent of African American women age 18-24 do not have the state-issued photo identification and would be required under the proposed bill.¹¹
- » It is believed that more than 120,000 students, senior citizens and other qualified voters will have their voting rights restricted by this bill.¹²

• **Increasing the Deficit:**

- » Additionally, the bill would *increase* state and local deficits. In its Fiscal Estimate – 2009 Session, the Wisconsin Department of Administration's Division of Executive Budget and Finance estimated that implementation of a voter ID bill in Wisconsin would cost the DMV upwards of \$2.3 million annually. This estimate did not include the additional cost to election administrators for voter education on the new ID requirements and procedures.¹³
- » According to One Wisconsin Now, the need to expand the numbers and operational hours of Wisconsin DMVs to provide appropriate access could increase the Wisconsin DMV budget by as much as 50 percent on top of a current \$5 million price tag to provide free identifications.¹⁴

At a time when Wisconsin is confronting an economic crisis, instead of focusing on creating jobs and saving homes, legislators are already manipulating election practices in ways they hope will assist their next campaign. Instead of being concerned about saving Wisconsinites' jobs, their first priority is protecting their own. Wisconsin has long been a model for civic engagement. This voter ID law threatens to tarnish its image as a place where democracy truly flourishes.

ENDNOTES

1. Jason Stein, "State's Budget Picture Improves," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, December 27, 2010
2. Patrick Marley and Jason Stein, "Walker Signs HAS Measure," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 24, 2011
3. Amy Hetzner, "Walker Promises School Officials "Flexibility," Little More," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 21, 2011
4. Gov. Walker: Creates Commission on Waste, Fraud and Abuse, Press Release, January 4, 2011
5. "State's Unemployment Rate Falls But Job Losses Continue," Pierce County Herald, January 21, 2011
6. Amy Hetzner, "Walker Promises School Officials "Flexibility," Little More," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 21, 2011
7. Mary Spicuzza, "Feds To Take Wisconsin's High-Speed Rail Money, Give It To Other States," Wisconsin State Journal, December 10, 2010
8. Sharif Durhams And Greg J. Borowski, "Wisconsin's Voter Turnout Rate Ranks Second In Nation," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, November 6, 2008
9. Lorraine Minnite, *The Myth of Voter Fraud*, Cornell University Press, June 10, 2010
10. Wisconsin Department of Administration, Division of Executive Budget and Finance, Fiscal Estimate - 2009 Session, LRB Number 09-1074/1, Introduction Number SB-199
11. John Pawasarat, The Driver License Status of the Voting Age Population in Wisconsin, Employment and Training Institute, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, June 2005
12. Representative Jennifer Schilling, "Voter ID is a Burden, Not a Solution," WisconsinOpinion.com, January 10, 2011
13. Wisconsin Department of Administration, Division of Executive Budget and Finance, Fiscal Estimate - 2009 Session, LRB Number 09-1074/1, Introduction Number SB-199
14. Voter ID Plan Will Likely Hike Deficit Tens of Millions of Dollars, No Private Sector Jobs, Press Release, One Wisconsin Now, January 12, 2011