Thinking about Voter ID
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What should we think about Pennsylvania’s new voter ID law set to take effect for the 2012 presidential election? The law requires all voters to provide stringently prescribed photo ID every time they vote.

Enacted this spring, it unleashed a cascade of contention since Governor Tom Corbett signed it in March. It has been hailed, assailed, praised, condemned, defended, attacked, cursed, and blessed. Most Pennsylvanians like it according to polls, although the same polls suggest many don’t understand it well. The law's goal, to prevent voter fraud, enjoys universal support, yet doubt exists that much fraud actually exists.

Sorting out the facts of Voter ID—many of which we are only now learning—doesn’t paint an encouraging picture.

- **The laws purpose appears to be a sham.** Its stated objective, to prevent voter fraud, seems to be a classic case of a solution looking for a problem. Evidence of significant voter fraud is virtually nonexistent. Nationally, not a single person was found guilty of impersonating another voter between 2002 and 2007 (the latest data available). A GOP advocacy group last year did identify 400 fraud prosecutions over the previous decade. Even if true, however, this would still be less than one fraud a year per state. In Pennsylvania alone, there have been only four fraud convictions over the last eight years, none of which would have been prevented by the new law.

- **The law potentially disenfranchises hundreds of thousands.** Using data recently released by the Corbett administration, some 750,000 Pennsylvanians could be barred from voting by the law. But legislators voting for the bill in March were told the law would affect as few as one tenth of one percent of voters. The highest estimate was put at 100,000 voters. Putting the kindest construction on it, the March legislation was sloppily prepared before being rushed through the legislature without consideration of its potential impact.

- **The law is politically motivated.** Voter suppression (i.e., discouraging certain groups from voting) is apparently the real motivation of the law. Republicans have frantically denied this, but their own House majority leader publicly acknowledged it last month. Showing perhaps more candor than caniness, Representative Mike Turzai implied the law had the partisan goal of winning the presidential election for Mitt Romney. “Voter ID,” proclaimed Turzai, “is going to allow Governor Romney to win the state of Pennsylvania.” Smoking guns don’t get clearer than that.

- **The law is discriminatory.** It disproportionately hits Democratic voters, notably older, younger, minority, and poor voters. However, it also will affect Republican voters statewide. The GOP stronghold of Cumberland County is estimated to have the largest number of effected voters outside Philadelphia. Cumberland is closely followed by Republican Cameron County. The stunning high
numbers of voters involved evoke sordid memories of voters suppression techniques practiced in the American south in the pre-civil rights era.

- **The law is duplicative.** Almost undiscussed is that Pennsylvania already has a voter ID law in place for first time voters. It is one that has been neither difficult to implement nor controversial. Now, by replacing a simple law that works with a convoluted one that won’t, it’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that more sinister motives were at work in passing Voter ID. In fixing what was not broken, the legislature risks breaking what was already fixed.

- **The legislation is untested.** The Corbett administration ran a trial run of Voter ID during the spring 2012 primary, but with few races and low turnout, it provided no real test of what will happen during a close presidential election with high turnout. We are barely 12 years from the national agony suffered in 2000 in the disputed Bush/Gore election. But that electoral calamity may be mild compared to what these voter ID laws can produce. And counting Pennsylvania, some 30 states may have new voter ID laws on their books by November.

The conclusions are inescapable.

Voter ID was not well thought out, planned, or executed. Many legislators voting for it did not know how many people would be affected. In addition, the noxious whiff of voter suppression motives is pervasive. There cannot be a greater crime in a democracy than systematically attempting to prevent eligible voters from exercising the franchise. It’s truly a repulsive act.

What should we do now?

Common sense screams the obvious solution. We should simply suspend implementation of the new law until an election or two of trial runs shows us how it works and with what effects. Rolling it out in the middle of a presidential contest is sheer folly. There are many ways to delay implementation. The simplest is for Governor Corbett to declare a moratorium on applying Voter ID until it has been thoroughly studied. The courts can also do it, and many believe they will. However we do it, the 2012 presidential election is the wrong time to introduce Voter ID to Pennsylvania. In an age of seemingly insoluble problems and endless challenges, this is one we can still avoid.

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