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The Confusion Over Voter ID

In last month's Florida presidential primary, Fort Myers polling places had signs saying voters could not vote without photo ID, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida. The problem is, the signs were wrong. Florida law guarantees voters without photo ID the right to cast an "affidavit ballot," which counts the same as a regular one. There is no way of knowing how many eligible voters saw the false notice and did not vote as a result.

The process by which voters prove who they are has largely been left to election professionals. It shouldn't be. Every barrier to the ballot box reduces the number of voters who end up voting. ID requirements, which vary widely by state, are complicated, and administered poorly. In November, there is every reason to believe a significant number of eligible voters will be turned away on ID grounds, perhaps enough to decide a close election. Election officials should be working to fix these problems now.

Voter ID laws must strike a balance between preventing voter fraud and not making it unduly difficult to vote. Without a national ID card, it isn't easy. Many Americans do not have driver's licenses, particularly city residents, old and young people, and some members of minority groups. The rules for what is acceptable ID vary widely by state. The Help America Vote Act, the law passed after the 2000 election mess, added new federal ID rules, some making it easier to vote, some making it harder.

Above all, election officials should enforce the law accurately. Their record, however, is troubling. In an interview, the election supervisor for Lee County, Fla., which contains Fort Myers, defended the polling place signs, saying there was an official at each polling place to tell voters about affidavit ballots. Training poll workers to operate by different rules than are stated in official written materials is a bad practice, and voters are entitled to have their right to vote correctly described.

Louisiana sent an advisory to recent mail registrants, saying that the Help America Vote Act "requires" them to provide part of their driver's license number, or alternative identification, on an enclosed form and that they must do so "immediately." This, too, was false. The act makes clear the information can be provided at the polls on Election Day. The letter gives recipients the impression that they are not fully registered. People who neglect to do the paperwork may believe they cannot vote.

Election officials also need to do a better job of telling people what ID to bring to the polls. This information is often hard to find in voter education materials, or is not there at all. Missouri's Web site

states cryptically that voters "must present one of the forms of identification as provided in 115.427," as if every voter has a set of Missouri law books at home. In an interview, a Missouri election official defended the Web site by saying a list of acceptable ID is available at every polling place. Voters should be told what to bring before they show up to vote.

There should also be closer scrutiny of state voter ID laws. Missouri lets people vote without ID if two supervisory election judges recognize them. This favors rural residents, who are more likely to know poll workers personally, over black voters in St. Louis. Critics of a South Dakota law passed last year, which imposes a photo ID requirement, say it will hurt Indian voters.

The rush of a presidential Election Day is the worst time to try to work out complicated voting issues. Election officials should do more to educate themselves, and the voters, about ID requirements well in advance of the voting.

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