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Voter ID laws require informed poll workers

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As Michigan gears up for its first election using new voter identification policies, the U.S. Supreme Court is preparing to hear arguments on the constitutionality of requiring voters to show photo ID to cast ballots. The justices will weigh in on Indiana's law, but other states - including Michigan - have enacted various forms of voter-ID legislation in recent years and the court's ruling could affect them as well.

Voter ID is a contentious and partisan issue. Republicans tout it as a means to stop voter fraud. Democrats see it as voter suppression aimed primarily at minority voters. Resolving the legal dispute surrounding voter ID before next fall's presidential and congressional elections makes sense. A high court ruling can head off challenges to election results. No one should want anything resembling what happened in Florida during the 2000 presidential election.

Before 2002, few states had voter identification requirements and no state required photo identification. Now, 26 states have some form of a voter identification law, and seven of them - including Michigan - require or request photo identification.

Indiana's voter-ID law is the most restrictive in the country, requiring people to show a government-issued photo ID to cast a ballot. Those who don't can only cast provisional ballots that aren't counted unless proper ID is provided in an allotted time period. Most other states that require photo ID to vote will accept non-government-issued photo ID or allow people to sign affidavits attesting to their identity, then let them cast regular ballots.

Michigan allows such affidavits and also accepts photo identification that includes high school and college student ID, tribal ID, military ID, and U.S. passports. In addition, a driver's license or state ID card is acceptable.

While showing those last two types of identification is commonplace to most people, an estimated 340,000 of Michigan's 7.2 million voters have neither a driver's license nor a state ID card. Many of them are people who don't drive, or no longer drive, or are elderly, handicapped or poor.

Michigan's Nov. 6 election will be a good test to see the effect, if any, the new policies have on voter turnout. Nothing should impede eligible voters from casting ballots. Michigan's identification law shouldn't do so, if the public and poll workers are well-informed about how the process is supposed to work. That's the responsibility of Michigan's Bureau of Elections and Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land.

Every state and local election official must make the necessary preparations to ensure the new requirement isn't an obstacle. Poll workers especially must be well-schooled about the provision allowing voters without photo ID to sign an affidavit and cast a ballot.

The right to vote is a fundamental aspect of citizenship. Voter ID laws may be an inconvenience or annoyance to some voters, but certainly shouldn't be a deterrent or barrier to the ballot box for any eligible voter. The Supreme Court will settle the issue by June, and we all can prepare accordingly for the next national election.

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