

Student Handout Number 5

“Legislation Would Force Voters to Show ID at Polling Places”

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“HARRISBURG – (Pennsylvania) House Republicans have approved a bill that would require residents to present identification before voting, infuriating Democrats and civil rights activists who describe it as a "poll tax" that would disenfranchise voters.

The measure's sponsor, Rep. Daryl Metcalfe (R-Butler), said it was aimed at curbing voter fraud, not preventing legitimate citizens from voting. "We were concerned about the fraud that is alleged to have taken place in areas of Pennsylvania," Metcalfe said. "We don't want to harm anybody's ability to vote."

The measure, which requires voters to present a voter-registration card or photo identification at the polls, was added to a Republican-sponsored bill concerning poll workers' compensation. The bill passed the House late Wednesday on a party-line vote and now goes to the Senate. Democrats said they were blindsided by the late amendment.

They disparaged it as a blatant political move designed to hold down voter turnout in Democratic strongholds in a year when Pennsylvania residents will pick a governor, and an attempt to shut out low-income, elderly, and minority residents from the voting process.

"This is a violation of the equal-protection clause of the Constitution," said Rep. Mark Cohen (D-Phila.).

Eleven states have laws requiring some type of identification at the polls, but only South Carolina requires a photo ID and has no option for voters without identification. The other states requiring IDs, such as Delaware, have "escape hatches," Cohen said, allowing voters the option to sign an affidavit testifying to their identity at the polling place.

In Pennsylvania and New Jersey, voters need only show that their signatures match the ones in the voter rolls. Opponents said the proposal would create a "poll tax" because residents who do not drive would need to pay for a photo ID.

Rep. Babette Josephs (D-Phila.), said the ID system would intimidate urban voters who may not have driver's licenses, and thus suppress turnout.

"We have many senior citizens in our state who have voted without incident in most, if not every, election since turning 18," Josephs said. "Now we'll be turning them away. This is not how the Democratic electoral process is supposed to work."

Pedro Rodriguez, executive director of the Action Alliance of Senior Citizens of Greater Philadelphia, said the bill puts an "extra burden" on the elderly and their ability to vote.

"We find that to be really offensive," he said. "To say you will solve voter fraud with a photo ID is ridiculous. The way to prevent it is to have inspectors and an informed citizenship."

Metcalf said the Democrats were using seniors as "a straw argument" to defeat the bill. "Every one of us has seniors in our districts," he said. "It's not unreasonable to ask for ID the same way you ensure safety on the highways by requiring a driver's license."

Metcalf said most counties have agreed to issue new voter-registration cards at no cost to individuals who have lost them. In a fiery floor debate on Wednesday, Democratic lawmakers charged that the bill was an election year attempt by Republicans to sideline Philadelphia voters, who overwhelmingly supported Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ed Rendell in the May primary.

"This is an outrageous attempt to steal the election," Cohen said. "This shows Mike Fisher can't win on a fair vote."

Fisher is the Republican gubernatorial candidate. Cohen and others said the bill threatens civil-rights laws established over the last 50 years.

"This will make Pennsylvania in 2002 look like Mississippi or Alabama in 1952," he said.

"At a time when states and the federal government are looking at making it easier to vote and establishing more reliable voting procedures, this can only be seen as an attempt to disenfranchise people," said Larry Frankel, legislative director for the American Civil Liberties Union in Pennsylvania.

Republicans said the bill represented a non-partisan effort to wipe out fraud.

"We need to do what we can to do to protect the integrity of every true and honest vote," said Steve Miskin, a spokesman for House Majority Leader John Perzel (R-Phila.), who cited a recent study by the Republican National Committee that found tens of thousands of duplicate registrations in Pennsylvania."