Editorials & Commentary

Indiana's Voter ID Bill "Embarrassment" to GOP and State

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As a reporter covering a mayoral primary, I watched a van pull up with emergency blinkers and six men in overcoats emerge. The driver handed each a small piece of paper. Then the group entered the polling place and lined up. When asked their name and address, each looked down and read from the paper. After voting, the proud citizens loaded into the van and drove away.

"What's next?" I asked my companion reporter. "Next precinct," she replied. "It's the way they do business in this neighborhood."

No question, the photo IDs advocated by Statehouse Republicans would have prevented the fraud we witnessed. But this was Chicago in the mid-1970's, not Indiana in 2005.

The ID requirement has passed the House and Senate and will soon make its way to Gov. Daniels. Supporters of the legislation, politicians and the press have made the most spurious case for this legislation. One legislator noted that photo ID is required to board an airliner. Andrea Neal, writing on this page, said her son needed an ID to take the SATs. And the Wisconsin-Milwaukee basketball team needed photo IDs to get into the Cleveland State practice facility.

These examples have equal relevance to Indiana voting, which is to say none.

Secretary of State Todd Rokita and his legislative allies have unleashed their mighty swords to solve a non-existent problem. Indiana does have a fraud problem, but it has
to do with absentee voting, where no photo ID would be required under this legislation. When ID supporters are asked what problem they are solving, they can't point to one. As Julia Vaughn of Common Cause pointed out, "Not a single case of in-person voting fraud has been prosecuted in Indiana in recent history."

This gives rise to the reasonable suspicion that Rokita and his allies are involved in the common practice of Republicans around the country: voter suppression, aimed primarily at minority voters. In states as diverse as Arizona, Louisiana and Virginia, Republicans have discouraged minority turnout with tactics like sending certified letters to all voters in minority precincts warning that they will have to meet rigid criteria to cast their ballots.

Ed Rollins, once Ronald Reagan's campaign manager, admitted using "walking around money" to suppress the minority vote in Christie Whitman's 1993 gubernatorial race. Whitman won, but Rollins' comments tarnished her victory and his reputation.

Last year in South Dakota a federal judge enjoined GOP poll watchers from following American Indians from the courthouse to the parking lot where they conspicuously wrote down the voters' license numbers.

Craig Donsanto, who investigates voting improprieties for the Public Integrity Section of the Justice Department, says the cases are legion of GOP poll watchers challenging any voter who looks foreign or ethnic. He cites instances of Republicans hiring guys who look like cops to stand outside polling places in Hispanic areas holding signs that say, "It is a felony for non-citizens to vote."

"The Civil Rights Division has issued injunction after injunction," says Donsanto.

GOP national chairman Ken Mehlman is trying to repair relations with Hispanic and black leaders. Newspaper headlines say President Bush is courting those same voting groups for his Social Security plan. Both are undercut by political schemes like this photo ID bill.

How could you possibly think this is racial? Ask the Hoosier Republicans pushing the ID requirement. In Georgia, where GOP legislative majorities are pushing the same requirement, they plead the same innocence. But, like Indiana, there has not been a single case of voter misrepresentation in Georgia for the last five years.

If they can't prove there is a problem of in-person voter abuse -- and they have not, either in Georgia or Indiana -- how can you think it is anything but a standard, race-based GOP voter suppression program?
Mitch Daniels has a long history in Republican politics. He ran the GOP Senate Campaign Committee and served as President Reagan's White House political director. Never has there been a single instance where his hands have been sullied by involvement in schemes to suppress minority voters.

The voter ID bill sponsored by Rokita and his GOP allies in the Indiana legislature is an embarrassment to the Republican Party and the state of Indiana. Mitch Daniels must think there was a more serious purpose in his running for governor. When this bill reaches his desk, it would be a giant public service to veto it.

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