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Panel: U.S. should require a free photo ID for voters

Such a mandate could be obstacle for minorities and poor, proposal's critics say.

Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- A private commission trying to restore public confidence in national elections recommended Monday requiring a free photo ID for voters, drawing opposition from Democrats and some voting rights activists.

Critics suggested that having to acquire the ID cards in order to vote could be an obstacle for minorities, the poor and older Americans and might intimidate some people.

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"We believe such a requirement would constitute nothing less than a 21st century poll tax," said a letter from Reps. John Conyers, D-Mich., and John Lewis, D-Ga. Poll taxes were once used in some states to prevent black citizens from voting.

Former President Jimmy Carter, a co-chair of the commission, said he was hesitant about the free photo ID proposal at first, but laws passed in some states, including Georgia, convinced him that a national approach was a better idea. Republican lawmakers in Georgia pushed through legislation that requires a new voter identification card that costs $20 for five years.

"Some states have passed abominable laws that are a disgrace to democracy," Carter said.

In Atlanta, voter and civil rights organizations challenged the Georgia law in federal court, contending in a suit filed Monday that it would disenfranchise minorities and the poor. Nineteen states require voters to show identification; five request photo ID, the National Conference of State Legislatures said.

The commission proposed that voters who don't have the card could cast a provisional ballot and produce the photo ID later. States also would have to promote the photo ID card aggressively.

The commission recommended improved voter registration lists, requiring a verifiable paper trail for electronic voting machines and rotating regional primaries, while warning that "Americans are losing confidence in elections."

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