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Section: Editorial

EDITORIALS

One Voter, One Vote

The Issue: Commission recommends a federal law requiring voter IDs.

Our View: Photo identification is becoming a fact of life in America.

Voting irregularities have impinged on the last two presidential elections, and after the 2000 Florida debacle, many die-hard Bush opponents never did concede the legitimacy of his first term.

Thus, the recommendations of a private commission on election reform, co-chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker, are worth heeding.

One of the principal and most controversial recommendations was that voters be required to produce photo identification. A similar Indiana law already approved for Hoosier voters earlier this year. Some see this as a discouraging nuisance to the elderly and the poor, but photo IDs have become a fact of American life and, as the commission noted, "are needed to board a plane, enter a federal building and cash a check." The commission said the IDs should be free -- as they are in Indiana -- and easily available.

The photo-ID proposal should be adopted, with exceptions for voters who show up without one, either allowing them to cast a provisional ballot and return with an ID later, provide some other acceptable ID or fill out a sworn affidavit. Those exceptions can last until photo IDs become, as they inevitably will, universal.

The commission was skeptical of computerized voting, yet it is as inevitable as photo IDs. But the commission is on the right track in recommending that all votes have a verifiable paper trail. Just because an election is honest doesn't mean someone won't contest it, and a paper trail would be proof positive of the outcome.

Encouragingly, the commission found that "there is no evidence of extensive fraud in U.S. elections or of multiple voting, but both occur, and it could affect the outcome of a close election."

And, we would add, taint the whole process.

Sexual Predators

The Issue: Group wants required 25-year sentence for child molesters.

Our View: Be careful of mandatory minimums.

Most Americans would prefer that sexual predators who prey upon children be locked away forever. Short of that, they want some combination of electronic monitoring, severe restrictions on where they can live, and notification laws.

Their wishes come, with justification, from the disgust they feel each time they learn that another child has been violated and from a very real fear for their own children.

It is that same fear and loathing that have led an alliance of Evansville neighborhood associations to endorse a proposal that a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years in prison be required for first-time offenders convicted of child molesting in Indiana.

For the predatory child molester, the monster we fear the most, 25 years may be suitable. But we have a concern for mandatory minimum sentences that paint too wide a swath. After all, costly prison overcrowding in the country came about as the result of mandatory minimum sentences, primarily for drug offenses.

We have learned that not all drug offenders and offenses are the same, just as all child molesting cases may not be the same.

For example, do we really need a mandatory 25-year sentence for the 19-year-old who has sex with a 16-year-old?

Marlin Beck, the organizer of the petition drive for the United Neighborhoods of Evansville, said the campaign was motivated by the case of convicted sex offender Jeffrey G. Albright, who sought an early release from his 46-month sentence.

It costs roughly $25,000 a year to house an inmate for a year in a state prison. Let's not be too quick to replace our judges with a law that fails to recognize just who is a dangerous predator and who is not.

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

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