Dr. Charles Bullock:

Data Comparison Shows Fewer Than 300K Lack Photo ID, But Handel Could Take Simple Steps To Flesh-Out The Picture

By Dr. Charles S. Bullock

(8/20/07) Since 2007 is an odd-numbered year, the only elections scheduled for this fall involve local entities, including the mayor of Macon. With the onset of an electoral season, the controversy over whether to require a photo ID of prospective voters has emerged once again. Secretary of State Karen Handel has called for the enforcement of this provision. The opponents, who turned to both federal and state courts to enjoin this requirement in previous elections, will return to court later this month in another attempt to maintain the status quo that allows voters to produce any of 17 types of identification — most of which contain no photograph of the voter.

Legislation adopted in 2006 limits the acceptable types of identification to items issued by the state or federal government that have a picture of the bearer. The most prevalent of these is a driver’s license. Among the alternatives, one can produce a card issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles in lieu of a license, a passport, an ID card from a state college or university, or a military ID.

Opponents of a photo ID see it as a Republican ploy designed to reduce the potential Democratic electorate. They contend that minorities, the elderly, the poor and rural Georgians less often possess a photo ID.

Supporters of the photo ID requirement see it as a way to prevent voter fraud. Those who cheered the enactment of this requirement do not see it as creating a hardship, since, they note, in today’s society a photo ID is a basic necessity. Without it one is impossible to board a commercial aircraft, cash a check, or use a credit card.

Federal judge Harold Murphy blocked the initial photo ID law, likening the cost of obtaining one from the Department of Motor Vehicles to a poll tax. In response the legislature passed a second bill that eliminates the cost and provides that one could be obtained in every county — rather than just at driver’s license offices that are located in fewer than half the counties.

Much of the debate about the potential impact of a photo ID requirement has existed in a data-free environment. Nobody knows for sure what impact this requirement would have. No one has tabulated how many of Georgia’s registered voters lack a photo ID as prescribed by the recently adopted statute. DMV has issued 6.5 million driver’s licenses, which exceeds by 2 million the state’s registered voters. Of course some licensed drivers are not yet 18 and cannot vote. Nor are there figures to indicate what share of those who lack photo IDs vote absentee where a picture is not required. This option may be particularly popular with older voters who no longer drive.

In an effort to develop some figures on the possible extent of the problem, my colleague M. V. “Trey” Hood and I matched up data from the DMV with the state’s roster of registered voters. We found that approximately 300,000 voters lacked either a driver’s license or the ID issued in lieu of it. This would seem to set an upper limit for the number of voters lacking a photo ID since some unknown number of these have a passport or other acceptable document.

Our research found that minorities and the elderly less often possessed a picture ID from the DMV. Significantly more suburbanites than rural Georgians had a driver’s license but no difference existed between rural and urban residents. Smaller percentages of voters who cast ballots in the Democratic primary than in the GOP primary had DMV IDs. We also found that those who lack an ID issued by the

DMV vote at lower rates.

If the attempt to block the photo ID requirement for the upcoming municipal elections fails, it will be possible to get a better read on what share of those who vote in person lack a photo ID. To obtain the estimate, tabulate the number of voters who cast a provisional ballot. (Voters who lack proper documentation can cast a provisional ballot that is then counted if they provide appropriate documentation within 48 hours.)

If the plaintiffs succeed in enjoining the photo requirement, it would be helpful if the Secretary of State conducted research to determine what share of the electorate lacks a photo ID that meets the statute. This could be achieved if election officials in the 22 counties holding elections this fall—or in a random sample of these jurisdictions—ask voters whether they have a photo ID. The question could be posed as a follow-up to any voter who presents as identification something other than what is provided for in the new legislation. Asking this as a follow-up would avoid any possible dampening effect on turnout since the voter would have already been approved for casting a ballot.

Acquiring comprehensive, reliable data would be a valuable step toward a thorough understanding of the magnitude of the alleged problem of registrants lacking photo IDs. It would shed light on the extent to which voters without DMV-issued IDs are using other government-issued items that contain a photograph.

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