

Over the past few years, voter ID laws have dominated the news, sparking a nationwide political debate. Called by some the new Jim Crow, these laws, intended to stamp out fraud, instead disenfranchise minorities and other key demographics. Each election, millions of Americans are denied the right to vote because they lack a government-issued ID. Repealing voter ID laws would mean eliminating one of the most apparent barriers separating voters from their ballots.

When debating voter ID laws, the question is often asked: who does not have a government-issued ID? After all, one is needed to drive, board a plane, and open a bank account. The answer, however, is simple. 3.2 million eligible voters lacked a government-issued ID in 2012. That number largely consists of five demographics: the elderly, minorities, low-income individuals, the disabled, and youth.<sup>1</sup> Individuals who cannot afford a car, cannot drive, or no longer need to drive are unlikely to need an ID on a daily basis. That largely explains why many elderly, poor, and disabled Americans lack a photo ID. Similarly, college students, who lack cars and only need a student ID on campus, are less likely to have a government-issued ID. For others, it is not an issue of not needing an ID; it is an issue of being unable to get one. Across the ten states with the strictest voter ID laws, getting an ID was found to place a distinct burden on poor and minority Americans. In rural areas, government offices capable of issuing an ID are scarce. More than 10 million voters do not live within ten miles of a government office, and 500,000 eligible voters do not have a car, making it extremely difficult to get to a government office. Those offices also have limited hours, giving potential voters who work all day little time to go get an ID. Furthermore, many low-income Americans lack a birth certificate, which must be shown before obtaining an ID, and cannot afford to pay as much as \$25 to get one.<sup>2</sup> With the advent of voter ID laws, these socioeconomic obstacles combine to prevent the Americans most in need from casting their ballot on Election Day.

33 states will have some form of voter ID requirement in effect for the 2016 election. In 9 of those states, a voter must present a voter ID before their vote will be counted. Other states are slightly less strict, offering some way of getting around the requirement, such as showing a voter registration card or signing an affidavit affirming one's identity.<sup>3</sup> Voter ID laws are proposed as a solution to voter fraud, yet voter fraud is incredibly rare. Between 2000 and 2014, over 1

---

<sup>1</sup> Corey Dade, "Why New Photo ID Laws Mean Some Won't Vote," *NPR*, January 28, 2012, August 8, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/28/146006217/why-new-photo-id-laws-mean-some-wont-vote>

<sup>2</sup> Keesha Gaskins and Sundeep Iyer, *The Challenges of Obtaining Voter Identification*, (New York City, NY: Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 2012): 1, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Underhill, "Voter Identification Requirements," *National Conference of State Legislatures*, July 27, 2016, August 8, 2016. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>

billion votes were cast, and a mere 31 cases of voter fraud were reported.<sup>4</sup> Voter impersonation, the only type of fraud ID laws would prevent, is virtually nonexistent. The types of fraud that do occur, such as mailing in an absentee ballot for a relative that has moved or voting in more than one state, would be much better prevented by modernizing voter registration and improving coordination between states.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of preventing fraud, voter ID laws have been shown to actively disenfranchise the poor, minorities, the elderly, and youth. Specifically, they have been shown to depress Latino turnout by 10.8 percentage points and turnout amongst multiracial voters by 12.8 points. In states with voter ID laws, the general election turnout gap between white and Latino voters was double the gap in states without voter ID laws. The same was true for the primary turnout gap between white and African-American voters.<sup>6</sup> The elderly and youth, too, are disproportionately affected by voter ID laws. Nearly 1 in 5 elderly Americans<sup>7</sup> and 2 in 5 young Americans<sup>8</sup> lack a government-issued ID, which means that large portions of both these demographics will be denied the right to vote. When each of these demographics is deprived of adequate representation, their unique needs and issues become easier to ignore. There is less pressure on politicians to address issues like social security, civil rights, and student loans. The voices of the youth, elderly, and minorities are denied.

Voter ID laws not only disenfranchise voters, but also force states to spend millions more on elections. As the issue of constitutionality continues to be debated, courts have consistently ruled that in order for voter ID laws to be fair and equal, states must provide free, easily obtained IDs and educate the public on the requirements. To fulfill those obligations, states would likely have to hire more workers, create more government offices, and extend their offices' hours.<sup>9</sup> All those steps present a financial burden on states struggling to keep their budgets balanced. In

---

<sup>4</sup> Justin Levitt, "A Comprehensive Investigation of Voter Impersonation Finds 31 Credible Incidents Out of One Billion Ballots Cast," *The Washington Post*, August 6, 2014, August 8, 2016.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/06/a-comprehensive-investigation-of-voter-impersonation-finds-31-credible-incidents-out-of-one-billion-ballots-cast/>

<sup>5</sup> Max Ehrenfreund, "How to Stop Voter Fraud and Increase Turnout at the Same Time," *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2014, August 8, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/11/04/how-to-stop-voter-fraud-and-increase-turnout-at-the-same-time/>

<sup>6</sup> Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, *Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Voters*. (San Diego, CA: University of California, San Diego, 2016): 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Citizens Without Proof: A Survey of Americans' Possession of Documentary Proof of Citizenship and Photo Identification*. (New York City, NY: Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School, 2006): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Brandon Schoettle and Michael Sivak, *The Reasons for the Recent Decline in Young Driver Licensing in the US*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Transport Research, 2013): 1-3.

<sup>9</sup> Vishal Agraharkar, Wendy Weiser, and Adam Skaggs, *The Cost of Voter ID Laws: What the Courts Say*. (New York City, NY: Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School, 2011): 1-2.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Voter%20ID%20Cost%20Memo%20FINAL.pdf>



Missouri, the cost of implementing a voter ID requirement was estimated at \$6 million for the first year and \$4 million every subsequent year, while Minnesota found that each of its precincts would need to spend \$536,000 more per election. Spending millions of dollars on a policy that only harms voters cannot be justified. Fiscally, morally, and politically, repealing voter ID laws would benefit state governments and their people.

With most policy areas, the connection between a law and its effect is vague and multi-layered, but with voter ID laws, the connection is direct. Voter ID requirements prevent countless young, elderly, minority, and low-income Americans from voting. For these groups, representation is crucial. Repealing voter ID laws would directly enfranchise millions of American voters, returning a truer meaning to the word “democracy.”

## References

Agraharkar, Vishal, Wendy Weiser, and Adam Skaggs, *The Cost of Voter ID Laws: What the Courts Say*. New York City, NY: Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School, 2011.

*Citizens Without Proof: A Survey of Americans' Possession of Documentary Proof of Citizenship and Photo Identification*. New York City, NY: Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School, 2006.

Dade, Corey. "Why New Photo ID Laws Mean Some Won't Vote." NPR. January 28, 2012. August 8, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/28/146006217/why-new-photo-id-laws-mean-some-wont-vote>

Ehrenfreund, Max. "How to Stop Voter Fraud and Increase Turnout at the Same Time." The Washington Post. November 4, 2014. August 8, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/11/04/how-to-stop-voter-fraud-and-increase-turnout-at-the-same-time/>

Gaskins, Keesha, and Sundeep Iyer. *The Challenges of Obtaining Voter Identification*. Washington, D.C.: Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 2012.

Hajnal, Zoltan, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, *Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Voters*. San Diego, CA: University of California, San Diego, 2016.

Levitt, Justin. "A Comprehensive Investigation of Voter Impersonation Finds 31 Credible Incidents Out of One Billion Ballots Cast." The Washington Post. August 6, 2014. August 8, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/06/a-comprehensive-investigation-of-voter-impersonation-finds-31-credible-incidents-out-of-one-billion-ballots-cast/>

Schoettle, Brandon and Michael Sivak. *The Reasons for the Recent Decline in Young Driver Licensing in the US*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Transport Research, 2013.

Underhill, Wendy. "Voter Identification Requirements." National Conference of State Legislatures. July 27, 2016. August 8, 2016. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>