



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS TESTIMONY ON SB 14 BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE JANUARY 24, 2011

For the 90+ years since women gained the right to vote nationally, LWV has educated and agitated for active, informed participation of all citizens in government. No form of participation is more important than voting so LWV has long fought against unnecessary barriers to voting. We oppose any requirement that imposes needless difficulties on voters or tends to discourage legitimate voters from going to the polls and casting a ballot.

Texas voters know that identification is already required at the polls. To close what is characterized as a “potential loophole for fraud,” SB 14 would restrict acceptable identification a voter must present to a limited list of photo IDs and provides for criminal penalties. Thanks to thorough investigation by Attorney General Greg Abbott and his office, we know there is no significant voter fraud in Texas—no evidence of voter impersonation that might be remedied by requiring all voters to provide a photo ID from the limited number specified in SB 14 to be accepted for voting a regular ballot.

The real voting problem in Texas is not potential voter impersonation but low voter turnout. Texas was 46th among the states in turnout of the voter eligible population for 2008 and 50th for the 2010 General Election. No state had a lower turnout than the 32.3% turnout in Texas.

In each election cycle, LWV fields hundreds of questions from voters around the state. These questions show that Texas voters are often confused about requirements and discouraged from voting when they don't understand the process. SB 14 would add uncertainties for voters and for election workers. The bill would make it more difficult for many legitimate voters to cast a ballot and tend to discourage many more legitimate voters from going to the polls at all.

Student voters would be among those adversely affected. Many students registered to vote in Texas or eligible to register to vote under Texas law might not have any of the photo IDs specified by SB 14. Those who register to vote where they attend school may fear that they will be turned away at the polls if the address on their photo ID differs from the address at which they are registered to vote.

Voters would have new reasons to worry that minor discrepancies between their ID and the precinct list might disqualify them from voting a regular ballot. Those with inadequate ID would have a right to a provisional ballot but may be discouraged to learn that there is no guarantee the ballot will count even if acceptable ID is presented in a timely fashion.

Election workers would have to verify voter identity from documentation provided and to handle additional provisional ballots. Requirements of SB 14 that seek to inform voters and election workers are admirable but costly and only a partial remedy to the added, unnecessary confusion that would result from SB 14.

If poll site voter impersonation were a tangible problem, benefits from preventing actual fraud might offset new burdens on voters. However, voter impersonation isn't an actual problem. There is no fraud to prevent so there is little benefit to offset new burdens.

In a few years we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Shortly after come the 100th anniversaries of the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1919 and ratification in 1920. Today it is hard to understand why the universal suffrage we take for granted was so contentious and required the lengthy, difficult struggles of so many. We wonder how the voter ID controversy will be viewed decades from now. Will states passing strict voter ID requirements be viewed as taking measured action to address actual problems or as taking a backwards step by imposing barriers to voting akin to those of days gone by? LWV believes that passage of SB 14 would be a step backwards and urges this body to reject the proposed law.