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## A city wants IDs for voters Lawrence plan blocks elderly, poor, critics say

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By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | March 10, 2008

Fed up with nagging rumors of election day skulduggery, Lawrence wants to be the first city in Massachusetts to require voters to present photo identification to cast a ballot, stepping into a raging national debate over integrity at the polls.

Lawrence's City Council, backed by Latino and white leaders in this mostly Latino city, is urging the state to pass a law allowing the city to demand that residents produce a driver's license, other state identification, or a passport to vote.

State officials caution that such demands have been unsuccessful in Massachusetts, and the Legislature is unlikely to act before the US Supreme Court rules on a similar case this year. But Lawrence's campaign has touched off a debate in a city of 70,000 that made state history this year when Latinos became the majority of voters.

Critics of the proposal, including voter-advocacy groups and the state's Democratic Party, believe that requiring IDs could discourage elderly voters or low-income minority voters who might be put off by the additional hurdle. Supporters insist that the ballot box, of all places, should not be vulnerable to fraud in an era when security is a top concern.

"What we're asking people to do isn't really that big of a deal," said Mayor Michael Sullivan, who signed the measure recently and sent it to the state Legislature and the governor for approval. "It takes the doubt out of everybody's mind. After the election's over I don't like people saying, 'There's fraud, there's fraud, there's fraud.'"

Nationally, 25 states require some form of identification to vote, up from 14 in 2001, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Three states - Georgia, Florida, and Indiana - demand a photo ID. Others request everything from a Social Security card to a rental lease.

Massachusetts rules are less stringent. Under federal law, first-time voters in every state must show picture identification. Otherwise, Bay State voters show up, state their name to a poll worker, and vote. If they lie about their identity they could face up to \$10,000 in fines and five years in prison, said Secretary of State spokesman Brian McNiff.

Some state officials are skeptical of Lawrence's approach. Senator Edward M. Augustus Jr., cochairman of the Joint Committee on Election Laws, said the rule could create longer lines at the polls and exclude nursing home residents and others who can't easily obtain identification.

"All that might be worthwhile if I'd heard of widespread and systematic fraud, but I haven't heard that," Augustus said. "So what is the problem we're trying to solve?"

Lawrence's mayor and city officials acknowledge that substantiated reports of people who voted under false or stolen names are rare. But this former mill city is nevertheless rife with the kind of political intrigue in cities with a history of tension between entrenched politicians and the new groups striving for power.

Politicians say they are sick of the rumors of stolen elections - or dead people who miraculously voted - that seem to fly from talk-radio stations to hair salons after every election. Among the other rumors: Some white people think illegal immigrants are casting ballots, while some Hispanic voters suspect that white people from other towns are voting in Lawrence illegally, preventing the city from electing its first Hispanic mayor.

But there is surprising unity over the plan to require an ID for voting. All four Latinos on the City Council said they support the plan, though two missed the vote. The proposal was initially brought by former councilor Marie Gosselin, who is white.

Other Latino supporters are prominent Democrats in the city: state Representative William Lantigua; Marcos Devers, who is running for state representative; Isabel Melendez, a community activist; and Rafael Tejada, the city's bilingual election coordinator.

Many pointed out that showing an ID to vote is required in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, the homelands of many Lawrencians. And some supporters said they would also favor an alternative for voters without an ID, such as allowing them to vote and verifying their identities later.

Checking identification is necessary, they say, because the constant rumors about fraudulent elections were causing voters to lose faith in the system.

"Lawrence has always had ghosts," Tejada said. "The losing candidate argues that he lost because of fraud. . . It would be a way to take that argument out of their hands."

But Avi Green, executive director of MassVOTE, called the proposed rule "unnecessary and Draconian." Elderly voters or low-income families often cannot afford an ID, he said, or to make the trip to obtain one. Driver's licenses typically cost \$40 and state IDs cost \$15.

"I defy anyone to find me four cases of someone who voted who should not have," Green said. "The most important thing is that we have one statewide standard."

Others fear the rules could discourage minority voters who might be put off by another hurdle, or fearful of it, such as immigrants from nations with repressive governments.

"It just sets a precedent that is very shaky, and has potentially negative effects not only on their own community but other communities of color as well," said Giovanna Negretti, executive director of ¿Oiste?, a Latino group that filed a federal lawsuit in 2001 with the Massachusetts Democratic Party to prevent a similar rule from taking effect in Lawrence.

A federal judge knocked down that proposal in part because voters without IDs had to sign the backs of the ballots so their identities could be verified later. The judge said the rule violated their right to an anonymous vote.

Part of activists' concerns about a new voting law stem from Lawrence's blemished record in past elections.

In 1998, the US Justice Department sued the city for violating Latino voters' rights by having few Hispanic poll workers and no election material in Spanish, and for drawing its voting districts in a way that weakened that Latino vote.

But in the ensuing years, leaders say, Lawrence has changed. The city added Spanish-speaking workers at the polls and Latino groups launched massive voter drives.

"It's time to implement a law like this," said Grisel Silva, a Latina city councilor who voted in favor of the measure last week. "Everyone criticizes that this is bad. Then let's do it better." ■