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Commentary

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'Same-Day Voting' Makes Hanging Chads Look Quaint

By SHAWN STEEL

If you use your credit card at almost any retailer, you'll be asked for valid ID as a fraud prevention measure. Imagine a cashier's reaction if, instead of a driver's license, you handed over a preprinted bank deposit slip and a pre-approved credit card application you had received in the mail.

While that may not be good enough for Target, backers of the "same-day-voting" initiative on November's ballot think it's more than enough identification in order to register and cast a ballot after walking up to a polling place on election day.

That's right, this "reform" would allow Californians to register on election day and vote after showing "proof" of identity by using one of a laundry list of various items considered to be sufficient proof of residence. They also could register by going to their county registrar's office during the 28 days before an election.

The initiative's proclaimed intent is to increase voter turnout. This seemingly innocuous measure appeals to our desire to maximize participation in our representative system of government. After all, it's easy to imagine something like an untimely relocation causing a person to fall through the cracks and be ineligible to vote.

However, closer examination of the initiative makes it plain that it would become easier to commit voter fraud and harder to investigate such misdeeds and that an already complicated voting system would become even more complex and unwieldy.

Take, for example, what will be considered valid identification if this initiative passes: utility bills, credit card bills, bank statements, preprinted checks or bank deposit slips, a vehicle registration and "mail addressed to the voter at his or her current residence address." About the only thing missing is a note from your mother.

Initiative proponents contend this would actually reduce voter fraud because there currently is no ID requirement that Californians must meet in order to register and vote.

Far more likely would be organized voter fraud by unscrupulous campaigns exploiting this unbelievably permissive list.

Riverside County Registrar Michelle Townsend says it would be extremely difficult to prevent fraud if this initiative passes. Now, if

there's any question about your eligibility, you can cast a "provisional" ballot, which is set aside and counted last, after its validity has been ascertained. The same-day-voting initiative would abolish provisional ballots, thereby eliminating the main avenue for investigating voter fraud even as it multiplies opportunities to commit fraud.

If this initiative passes, you can count on vanloads of warm bodies armed with utility bills rolling up to polling locations in closely contested legislative and congressional districts, where a little fraud can go a long way toward deciding the outcome of a race. The initiative also requires county registrars to station a worker outside polling places. This would mean recruitment, training and pay for thousands of additional workers, an expensive and time-consuming order for officials already hard pressed to scratch up enough workers to discharge their current responsibilities.

Small wonder that the registrars of some of the state's largest counties think the same-day-voting initiative is a bad idea.

The measure's promise to increase voter turnout is also spurious.

Supporters say California voter turnout in November 2000 hit its lowest level since 1964, when our voting laws were certainly less flexible. Since then, we have enacted very liberal absentee voting laws and the "motor voter" program and shortened the registration blackout period to just 14 days before an election. You can even download voter registration forms from the Internet.

Voting has been made successively easier during the last two decades, yet turnout continues to decline. By what magic would this horribly flawed initiative reverse this sad trend? Clearly the cure to voter apathy lies elsewhere.

The right to vote is a precious franchise, but the same-day-voting initiative would only undermine it by creating new pathways to fraud and placing burdensome new mandates on already overwhelmed, underfunded county election officials.

The best way to increase turnout is to give voters candidates they can believe in and elected officials who respond to the will of the people rather than powerful special interests.

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