

Voter's Signature or Photo ID: Gold Standard or Fraud

In Michigan, the voter's identity for election purposes has always been a signature, signed in the presence of a sworn election official, to register to vote, and to apply to vote at the polls. The noun, "signature," connotes an unchanging and trustworthy identity. Used as an adjective, as in "this is his signature move," it connotes an instant identification. This is a secure system: it is very hard to put a forged signature past experienced election administrators, who are skilled in signature matching.

On the other hand, replacing the signature match with a photo ID has made it easier, not harder to impersonate a voter. It is relatively easy to get a fake photo ID that matches your face--ask any teenager who wants to pass as age 21. Anyone with a digital camera, the right software, and a laminator can create a facsimile of a "government-issued" photo ID. Requiring any kind of photo as identification is a poor substitute for the signature match. Photo ID is also logically invalid because there is no standard of record at the polls for comparison.

Prior to 1998, every polling place used a book of assembled voter master cards as the precinct voter list. An election worker compared the voter's signature on the application to vote, against the original signature on the voter's registration master card. Once identity was verified, the voter was issued a ballot.

The elements of a voter's signature change very little. Even age and illness leave the basic characteristics of the signature unaltered. According to Ruth Holmes, Certified Document Examiner and handwriting expert, "A signature is unique to every individual. While there may be shared characteristics due to education, heredity and circumstances, there are distinct characteristics which allow a trained observer of signatures to verify the identity of an individual."

However, with the implementation of the Qualified Voter File in 1998, precincts no longer used the signature match. Computer-generated precinct lists determined who could be given a ballot.

A bill passed by the Michigan House (HB 5061) and about to go before the Senate, would further weaken election security. Voters who wish to obtain an absentee ballot in person would have to show photo ID to the Clerk, overriding the signature match still in place for absentee voting. Voters who decline to show ID would have their ballot permanently identified with a challenge number and recorded. This group of completely qualified voters would thus lose the secret vote guaranteed in the Michigan Constitution, and the equal protection of the laws promised by the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

Meanwhile election workers will continue to have a tough time figuring out if that low quality photo is really the person standing before them. A Drivers License photo might be

four years old, and in that time, people change haircuts, hair color, facial hair, make-up, hats, clothing, and facial features by cosmetic surgery, injuries, or health conditions. The ID card might be folded, crushed, water-damaged, or partly missing.

Michigan's current and pending photo Id requirements add unnecessary cost, time and work to the voting process. And they seriously weaken the security and integrity of our elections.

For the most trusted and secure election, a person's unique signature is still the Gold Standard for voter identification and it should be restored to the voting process, not replaced and abandoned.

[Submitted as a Guest Op-Ed]