



FACT SHEET ON VOTER ID LAWS

(August 2021)

BACKGROUND

Unnecessarily strict voter identification laws are a part of an ongoing strategy to roll back decades of progress on voting rights. Thirty-six states have some sort of identification requirements at the polls. Not all voter ID requirements are discriminatory or burdensome to voters, but seven states have **strict photo ID laws**, under which voters must present one of a limited set of forms of government-issued photo ID in order to cast a regular ballot – no exceptions.¹

Overly burdensome photo ID laws deprive many voters of their right to vote, reduce participation, and stand in direct opposition to our country’s trend of including more Americans in the democratic process. Many Americans do not have one of the forms of government-issued photo identification that state laws list as acceptable for voting. These voters are disproportionately low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Such voters more frequently cannot afford or cannot obtain the underlying documents that are a prerequisite to obtaining government-issued photo ID card.

STRICT PHOTO ID LAWS DEPRIVE MANY AMERICANS OF THE RIGHT TO VOTE

- **Millions of Americans Lack Government-Issued ID.** About 7% of U.S. citizens – or more than 16 million Americans – cannot confirm that they have a government-issued photo ID.²
- **Obtaining ID Costs Money.** Even if offered for free, many voters must incur numerous costs (such as paying for birth certificates) to apply for a government-issued ID.
 - **Underlying documents required to obtain ID cost money,** a significant expense for lower-income Americans. The combined cost of document fees, travel expenses and waiting time are estimated to range from \$75 to \$175.³
 - **The travel required is often a major burden** on people with disabilities, the elderly, or those in rural areas without access to a car or public transportation. In Texas, some people in rural areas must travel approximately 170 miles to reach the nearest ID office.⁴ And a year after Alabama’s strict voter ID law went into effect, state officials tried to shut down 31 driver’s license offices in majority-Black counties, which would have forced rural and minority voters to travel further to access licenses.⁵
- **Unnecessarily Strict Photo ID Laws Reduce Voter Turnout.** A 2014 GAO study found that strict photo ID laws reduce turnout by 2-3 percentage points, which can translate into tens of thousands of votes lost in a single state.⁶

¹ National Conference of State Legislatures, *Voter Identification Requirements: Voter ID Laws* (2020), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>

² Project Vote, *Americans with Photo ID: A Breakdown of Demographic Characteristics* (Washington: Project Vote, 2015), <http://www.projectvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AMERICANS-WITH-PHOTO-ID-Research-Memo-February-2015.pdf>, 3.

³ Richard Sobel, *The High Cost of ‘Free’ Photo Voter Identification Cards* (Cambridge: Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School, 2014), <https://today.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FullReportVoterIDJune20141.pdf>, 2.

⁴ *Ibid* 21.

⁵ Brentin Mock, “What Effect Will Shuttering Alabama DMV Offices Have on Black Voters?,” Bloomberg (Oct. 1, 2015), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-01/alabama-closes-dmv-offices-a-year-after-voter-id-law-kicks-in>. Officials reversed course after a federal probe. German Lopez, “Voter suppression in Alabama: what’s true and what’s not”, Vox (Dec. 12, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/12/12/16767426/alabama-voter-suppression-senate-moore-jones>.

⁶ Government Accountability Office, *Issues Related to State Voter Identification Laws*, report to Congressional requesters, September 2014, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/665966.pdf>, 4

STRICT PHOTO ID LAWS ARE DISCRIMINATORY

- Minority voters disproportionately lack photo ID. Nationally, up to 13% of African-American citizens of voting age lack government-issued photo ID, compared to only 5% of whites.⁷
- States exclude certain forms of ID in a discriminatory manner. Texas allows handgun licenses for voting, but does not accept student ID cards. Until its voter ID law was struck down, North Carolina prohibited public assistance IDs and state employee ID cards, which are disproportionately held by Black voters., Wisconsin's law originally prohibited Veterans Affairs ID cards for voting, but permitted active duty military ID cards.
- Voter ID laws are enforced in a discriminatory manner. A Caltech/MIT study found that minority voters are more frequently questioned about ID than are white voters.⁸
- Strict Photo ID laws reduce turnout among minority voters. Several studies, including a 2014 GAO study, have found that photo ID laws have a particularly depressive effect on turnout among racial minorities and other vulnerable groups, worsening the participation gap between voters of color and whites.⁹

STRICT PHOTO ID REQUIREMENTS ARE A SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM

- In-person fraud is vanishingly rare. A study found that, from 2000 to 2012, there were **only 31 credible allegations** of voter impersonation – the only type of fraud that photo IDs could prevent – during a period of time in which over 1 billion ballots were cast.¹⁰
- Identified instances of “fraud” are honest mistakes. So-called cases of in-person impersonation voter “fraud” are almost always the product of an elections worker or a voter making an honest mistake, and that even these mistakes are extremely infrequent.¹¹
- Unnecessarily strict Voter ID laws are a waste of taxpayer dollars. States incur sizeable costs when implementing voter ID laws, including the cost of educating the public, training poll workers, and providing IDs to voters.
 - Texas spent nearly **\$2 million** on voter education and outreach efforts following passage of its Voter ID law.¹²
 - Indiana spent over **\$10 million** to produce free ID cards between 2007 and 2010.¹³

The ACLU has led the charge against Strict Photo ID in several states, challenging such laws in in states including Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. For more information, please contact Robert Hoffman at rhoffman@aclu.org or visit <https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/fighting-voter-suppression/fighting-voter-id-requirements> to learn more.

⁷ Project Vote, *Americans Without Photo ID: A Breakdown of Demographic Characteristics*, 3.

⁸ Lonna Rae Atkeson et al., “New Barriers to Participation: Application of New Mexico’s Voter Identification Law” (working paper, Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2007), http://vote.caltech.edu/documents/84/vtp_wp59.pdf, 23.

⁹ See also Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson, “Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes” (University of California San Diego, 2016), <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~zhajnal/page5/documents/voterIDhajnaletal.pdf>, 16.

¹⁰ Justin Levitt, “A Comprehensive Investigation of Voter Impersonation Finds 31 Credible Incidents Out of One Billion Ballots Cast,” Washington Post, August 6, 2014, <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/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jim Malewitz, “Study: Law Discouraged More Than Those Without Voter ID,” The Texas Tribune, August 6, 2015, <https://www.texastribune.org/2015/08/06/study-law-discouraged-more-those-without-voter-id/>.

¹³ Iowa State Association of County Auditors, “A Report on Photo ID for Voting Purposes (Iowa: ISACA Photo ID Exploratory Committee, 2011), <http://www.lwvwi.org/Portals/0/IssuesAdvocacy/PDF/ISACA%20Voter%20ID%20Report%20020211%20final2%5B1%5D.pdf>, 7.