

Opening Statement

Thank you Mr. Speaker. I rise in support of H.R. 4844, the Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006, and ask all my colleagues to support this important bill.

This bill will require presentation of a government issued photo ID to vote in federal elections, effective November 2008. Though most of the voting public already has an ID that could meet this requirement, there is a percentage of eligible voters who do not have an ID so these extra two years will give them time to acquire it.

To ensure that only citizens are voting, the amendment will require presentation by 2010 of an ID that could not have been obtained without providing proof of citizenship. Once obtained, this ID can be used to prove both citizenship and identity when voting.

This Congress has previously enacted the REAL ID Act which will require people to prove their legal status in the country to get a REAL ID. That Act has to be implemented by May 2008. Citizens will be able to use the ID's they obtain under this process to vote in elections starting in 2010 and for all elections thereafter. HR 4844 will require the ID to include some indicia of citizenship, so poll workers and other election officials will be able to tell that the bearer is a citizen.

Those who arrive at the polls without an ID will be permitted to cast a provisional ballot. These ballots will be counted if the person returns and presents to an election official a qualifying ID within 48 hours.

To help those who need, but cannot afford, the ID to vote, the amendment requires States to provide them free of cost to the indigent, and authorizes funds to reimburse States for the costs of doing so.

To most people, this proposal is a simple, common sense proposal and a necessary safeguard against vote fraud. To others, it represents a dangerous threat to some citizens' ability to access the polls. While this debate may be heated in Washington, DC, it seems the American people have made up their mind. A recent NBC/Wall Street Journal poll showed that 81% of those surveyed favored an ID requirement for voting.

Likewise, the bi-partisan Carter Baker Commission on Federal Election Reform recommended a national voter ID requirement in the report they issued last year. While the division on this issue may be partisan here in Congress, elsewhere it seems a large bi-partisan majority has concluded that requiring ID is a necessary reform.

Once implemented, H.R. 4844 will put an important safeguard in place that will enhance the integrity of our system and help restore confidence in it. By putting in place procedures that ensure voting is limited to eligible citizens, we can encourage participation and increase turnout. The experience in Arizona is instructive here –

despite all the claims that disenfranchisement would ensue after enactment of the proof of citizenship and ID requirements in Proposition 200, testimony in Phoenix revealed that registration went up 15% after the requirement to prove citizenship went into effect. The fact is, people are encouraged to vote when they believe that their vote will count, and know that their vote will not be cancelled out by an illegal vote.

I know there will be some who oppose the action we will take today and there will be some controversy generated by the proposal. I wish it were not so. It seems we should all be able to agree that voting should be limited to citizens of the United States, because that has been the law for years. If we can agree on that, we should be able to agree that our voting systems must have procedures in place to ensure it.

We should all be able to agree that every eligible citizen should be able to vote, to vote only once and to be assured that their vote will not be diluted by an illegal vote. If we agree on that, we should be able to agree that making people identify themselves when they vote is a simple and necessary safeguard.

I am sure we will hear from the other side of the aisle today that an ID requirement is not necessary and is too much trouble. But everyday, millions of Americans show a photo ID to pay by check, board a plane, or buy alcohol or tobacco. Surely the sanctity of the ballot warrants as much protection as these other activities.

In too many states, lax identification requirements mean people can cast votes without ever having to prove their eligibility. Our voting rights are too important to rely on an "honor system." We need to make sure we have procedures in place that protect the right to vote, and make sure only eligible citizens are able to do so.

I hope all members will recognize the need for these necessary reforms. They will advance the security of our electoral systems, increase confidence in their integrity and reduce the opportunities for fraud.

I ask the Members to support this important bill, and reserve the balance of my time.

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