



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Malcolm Smith

Senate Republican Majority-backed Voter Registration Measure Stifles New Yorkers

MALCOLM A. SMITH June 18, 2008

Democrats contend the measure would disenfranchise thousands of New York voters

ALBANY, NY – June 19, 2008 – Senate Republicans passed a measure aimed at curtailing voter fraud by placing additional safeguards through identification requirements on those who register to vote. Senate Democrats argued this would discourage many voters from participating in the election process and it violates the intent of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This measure would require proof of citizenship as a qualification to register to vote. Currently a voter only needs to sign an oath or affirmation stating that he or she is lawfully entitled to register to vote. No proof of citizenship is required.

The bill would also require the State Board of Elections to establish rules and regulations that would outline acceptable forms of identification that could be used as qualifications to register. There is nothing in the bill that outlines what types of identification would be acceptable.

“This bill puts an unfair burden on the voters of New York state, new citizens, minority voters and it discourages voter participation and registration,” said Senator Martin Malave Dilan (D-Brooklyn), questioning the relevance of the measure on the Senate floor.

Some Democratic Senators openly questioned the Republican motives in a Presidential election year that could see millions of new voters energized by the Democratic candidacy of U.S. Senator Barack Obama.

“Democratic elections should be open to all voters,” said Senator Ruth Hassell-Thompson (D-Bronx/Mount Vernon). “It is very suspicious that efforts are being made to curtail higher voter turnout among Democrats in a Presidential election year. New Americans have historically voted Democrat.”

Another Democratic Senator said this measure misses the target and offered a better solution for voter security.

“This is a very bad bill,” said Senator Martin Connor (D-Brooklyn/Manhattan). “It takes out of context one feature of our election system and ignores a lot of others and creates barriers that I don’t think were anticipated when this bill was put in.”

Many Democratic Senators argued the Senate Republican-backed measure would discourage minority voters from going to the polls or registering to vote. There were other problems as well.

“The problem is going to be at the Board (of Elections) level and poll site by poll site,” said Senator Kevin Parker (D-Brooklyn). “What we have seen traditionally with laws like this is that it is used primarily to disenfranchise Black and Latino voters across the country. When you look at voter participation in elections we rank 29 out of the top 30 democracies in the world. We ought to change our system here in New York State in order to increase participation and not to hinder it.”

Senator Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan) argued against the measure: “This is a bill in search of a problem. We don’t have a voter registration fraud problem in our state that we need to fix. If this were implemented, it would target the elderly, the poor and the disabled who are least likely to be able to produce these types of documents. This would disenfranchise women who have taken the name of their husband during marriage. Most of the women I know who have been married and are above a certain age, have taken their husband’s name and we won’t even get into the issue of suppose you got divorced and remarried and changed names again.”

Senator Eric Schneiderman added his voice to the chorus of Democrats opposed to this bill: “It is absolutely clear to me that changing this requirement only imposes a disability to the millions of New Yorkers who do not have a birth certificate or a passport. This is a bill that would make it harder for people to vote. Let’s ensure that citizens are the only ones who vote without imposing a disability.”

The measure passed by a vote of 37 – 23.