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SC legislative panel approves voting ID bill

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A bill that allows for two weeks of excuse-free early voting before elections in South Carolina, but eliminates in-person absentee voting and requires voters to show identification at the polls was advanced Thursday by a legislative panel.

A Senate Judiciary subcommittee added early voting - which Democrats advocate as making voting easier and faster - to a voting ID bill roundly condemned by Democrats and civil rights groups as making it harder for elderly, disabled, poor and minority residents to vote. The amended House bill now heads to the full Senate Judiciary Committee.

Republicans say voting ID is an issue of integrity. Currently, voters can present either a valid driver's license or a voter registration card. Without a photo, Republicans say, there's no proof the person showing the card is who they claim to be.

Sen. Chip Campsen, who led the panel, said the wording mimics laws in Indiana and Georgia that have been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court and a federal appeals court.

If voters feel confident their vote is counted and all votes are legitimate, voter participation will increase, said Campsen, R-Isle of Palms.

Under the Senate version, a voter must show a valid driver's license, passport, military ID or work ID for state, federal or local government jobs. The panel also allowed an exception for voters who object to being photographed for religious reasons. To vote, they must present an affidavit from the state Election Commission verifying their identity.

But Democrats contend there's no valid reason for the ID requirement. Groups calling on the Senate to defeat the idea include the American Civil Liberties Union, NAACP, AARP and League of Women Voters.

"There's absolutely no evidence of problems with voter impersonation," said Victoria Middleton, executive director of the ACLU in South Carolina. "... It's our view we should be facilitating voting, not impeding it."

Thirteen percent of registered voters, or about 343,000 people, don't have a driver's license or state ID card, according to the Election Commission.

The bill waives the \$5 fee for a state ID for residents over 17. But Democrats say some residents either won't know they can get a free ID or won't be able to get to a department of motor vehicles office. They also note eliminating the fee would cut hundreds of thousands of dollars from the state Department of Transportation, as expected by the state's economic advisers.

And some Democrats complained the way the measure sets up early voting would actually limit voters' access and lengthen lines.

The bill requires each county to open at least one early voting center before elections. Residents could vote in person during a 15-day window that must include at least one Saturday, but can't include the Sunday and Monday before Election Day.

Currently, residents can vote absentee in person within a month of an election but must give an excuse for not being able to vote on Election Day, such as being on vacation or at work. The bill would limit such absentee voting by mail only.

Brett Bursey, a voting rights advocate, said that would especially impact the blind and elderly, who could be forced into long, chaotic waits if they want to vote early.

"They'll have 15 days to wait in even longer lines. Rather than fix a problem, they'll make it worse, and taxpayers and voters will have to pay the cost," said Rep. Todd Rutherford, who was among Democratic lawmakers who walked out of the House as Republicans approved the voter ID bill in February and later fought the three-day early

voting proposal approved by the House Judiciary Committee.

Rutherford said Republicans' combined efforts to limit early voting and require voting identification "have to be either a backlash to Obama or a backlash to people who vote early.

"There's a suggestion Republicans always show up regardless of how difficult it is, but African-Americans are not so used to doing that," he said. "It ends up stifling the vote."

Conway Belangia, president of the state Association of Registration and Election Officials, said he's pleased the panel amended the bill to allow for more than one early voting center per county - a move done over Campsen's objection.

"We need early voting," he said, adding that large counties need more than one place for voters to go.

For example, Greenville County could open a center in each of its seven public libraries, said Belangia, that county's voting director.

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