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## Middleton, Zia: Voter ID 'compromise' a lose-lose deal

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Guest Columnists

Last week, the Senate reached a so-called compromise on the voter ID bill by inserting, among other provisions, a period of early voting. This may make it more convenient for some citizens to vote, but it does not justify disenfranchising 178,000 people - 7 percent of all registered voters in the state. And it does not justify the cost of the legislation. This "compromise," if allowed to prevail, would mean a huge step backwards in the struggle for voting rights in our state.

Conservative estimates put the cost at more than \$1 million annually to implement the original bill, which requires voters to obtain and show a government-issued photo ID before exercising their constitutional right to vote. The amended bill will dramatically increase this cost. The costs include lost revenue from elimination of fees for photo ID cards supplied by the Department of Motor Vehicles, additional training for poll workers, a statewide voter education program and new voter registration cards that include a photo. Not factored in are the considerable costs of legal challenges that South Carolina could incur.

At a time when teachers are being furloughed, there are cuts in student testing and mental health and crime prevention programs are being eliminated, it makes no sense for taxpayers to be forced to pay for this costly, unnecessary and suppressive legislation. South Carolina is already one of 25 states that require identification to vote at the polls.

Photo ID requirements represent the most serious threat in decades to our historic progress in ensuring the right of every eligible American to vote. Research shows that they encourage racial and ethnic discrimination at polling places, limit voter turnout and prevent eligible voters from participating in our democracy. And they do very little to combat the demonstrably rare instances of a voter impersonating someone else at the polls. Indeed, there have been no prosecuted cases in our state. This legislation is genuinely a solution in search of a problem.

The sheer number of people who could be disenfranchised by this bill is daunting. At least 178,000 of our neighbors who are registered to vote do not have valid photo identification. The burden will be greatest for those people - the elderly, low-income, minority and handicapped - for whom it is most costly and inconvenient to take off work, get transportation and stand in line to apply for documentation. In many cases, these individuals don't have access to the documents, such as birth certificates, needed to get an ID. Ultimately, this requirement would disenfranchise the very people who must work the hardest to vote at all.

The right to vote and to have that vote counted is the most important constitutional right we have; it guarantees all other rights. The Legislature should be in the business of encouraging full participation of our citizenry, not limiting the right to vote.

Any proposal that raises barriers to voting is a fear-based, not a fact-based, solution. We strongly encourage members of the Legislature to do the right thing by opposing legislation that would require photo IDs to vote and instead focus on improving polling operations, including training and recruitment of poll workers, and making voting more efficient, secure and accessible. This is the proven way to ensure fair and democratic elections.

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*Ms. Middleton is executive director of the ACLU S.C. National Office, and Ms. Zia is president of the League of Women Voters of South Carolina. This column also represents the views of Sue Berkowitz, director of S.C. Applesseed Legal Justice Center; Dot Scott, president of the Charleston Branch NAACP; and Teresa Arnold, legislative director for AARP South Carolina; John Crangle, executive director of Common Cause of South Carolina; and Lonnie Randolph, president, S.C. state conference of the NAACP.*

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