

ELECTION

State Employees Are Having A Hard Time Explaining Scott Walker's New Voting Restrictions

BY ALICE OLLSTEIN POSTED ON JUNE 8, 2015 AT 4:20 PM



CREDIT: ALICE OLLSTEIN

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN — When Hillary Clinton issued a sweeping call for expanding and protecting voting rights, and called out Wisconsin and other states for passing discriminatory laws, Governor Scott Walker responded by blasting her views as “extreme” and “far outside the mainstream.” He defended his own record of cutting early voting days and implementing a strict voter ID law, saying these changes “make it easier to vote and harder to cheat.”

But at a workshop held in Milwaukee in early June, state government employees struggled to explain the byzantine voting restrictions to a crowd of poll workers and community activists.

Under Wisconsin's voter ID law, which was blocked by courts until this March, you can vote with an expired military ID, but naturalization papers and student IDs must be current. Students must bring additional proof of enrollment, such as a class schedule. All Wisconsin residents can

Comment [m1]: The G.A.B. staff did not struggle to explain the law and what it requires. Participants asked questions about why certain provisions were included in the law, and staff replied those were legislative decisions.

obtain a free state ID from any DMV, but only if they have no drivers license from any state. For 18-year-olds voting for the first time, a public high school ID counts, but a private one doesn't. A bank statement can serve as proof of residence, but not a credit card statement.

Comment [m2]: The author misunderstood that this discussion was about government documents that can be used as proof of residence to register to vote, not photo ID to receive a ballot. This is the kind of confusion we were trying to address in the presentation.

“There are so many twists and turns. I hate it,” local organizer Denise Brown told ThinkProgress. “The people who passed these laws benefit from sowing confusion. They want people to get discouraged and stay home.”

Brown, who has volunteered for years registering voters in Milwaukee and the surrounding suburbs, said the provisions of the law seem to privilege some sectors of the population over others.

“Many lower-wage workers are not banked, and they’re counting on that,” Brown continued, referring to people who do not have any bank account. “Those people tend to vote more progressive, so they’re trying to eliminate them. It’s just wrong.”

Others at the workshop expressed concern about the state’s oldest voters, who no longer drive and may not have proper identifying documents.

“My grandmother was born in the South and not in a hospital,” asked one participant. “What should she do?”

Megan Wolf, who works for the Government Accountability Board (GAB) in Madison, answered that residents without birth certificates should bring any documents they have to the DMV, which has special investigators on hand. She listed marriage certificates, the death certificate of a relative, baptism papers and the birth certificate of the voter’s child as possible options.

Comment [m3]: The author omits Meagan Wolfe’s main answer to the question — that this type of voter may not need a photo ID at all if she votes by absentee ballot as an “indefinitely confined voter.” These are voters who are indefinitely confined to their homes due to age, illness, infirmity or disability. This is a significant exception to the photo ID requirement, and one that many older voters who do not have a current photo ID will be able to take advantage of.

“How does your child’s birth certificate prove when *you* were born?” asked one participant. “What if someone with those other documents goes to the DMV a few weeks before the election?” asked another.

Comment [m4]: Meagan Wolfe never used the term “special investigators.” The DMV has a dedicated team at their central office to review all cases where an individual who needs a free state ID card and does not have a birth certificate. This team works to gather necessary documentation to verify birth records and issue a state ID card.

“They’re screwed,” grumbled a third.

As frustration in the room mounted, Wolf and her colleagues repeatedly reminded residents that they were not responsible for creating the law, only implementing it. And they've have had to do so with almost no resources.

Comment [m5]: This paragraph makes it appear that Meagan Wolfe commented on the resources available to implement the voter ID law. She was responding to a question about resources for an ad campaign.

Governor Scott Walker's budget, which must pass in the next few weeks, includes almost no funding for the GAB to educate voters about the new requirements. The agency had estimated it would cost about \$500,000 to inform the state's millions of voters about the law, but they were given a only tiny fraction of that amount.

Comment [m6]: This summary omits significant facts about the budget process. At the time the G.A.B. made its budget request to the Governor's Office, photo ID was not in place and the agency did not know whether it would be for upcoming elections. As a result, the agency did not ask for funding for a public education campaign about photo ID. The Governor bases his budget on agency requests. The proposed budget does include separate funding for training local election officials about voter ID, which will help educate voters.

"We actually made a great ad campaign. We have catchy videos in English and Spanish. But we weren't given any money to air them," Wolf told ThinkProgress. "Our request for additional funding was denied."

Due to the lack of funds, Wolf said she could only give workshops if communities self-organize and request one, as they did in Milwaukee. She also implored the attendees to widely share the PSAs they can't afford to get on the radio or TV.

Comment [m7]: Meagan Wolfe never said this. Her comment was more along the lines of that the agency has a campaign ready to go but does not currently have funding to buy airtime.

Former poll worker and local activist Solana Patterson-Ramos, who attended the event said she's worried this approach will leave the vast majority of the state in the dark.

Comment [m8]: Meagan Wolfe did not say this. She said that the agency is taking many approaches to educating voters about voter ID. While the agency does not currently have funding for a large scale education campaign, we are focusing on working with community groups that can help us spread the word.

"It's a law that will really disenfranchise if we're not informed," she said. "We already have a low voter turnout and this is going to harm it even more."

While some voting rights advocates are focusing on education, others are turning to litigation. On June 1, Hillary Clinton's top campaign lawyer joined with local civil rights groups in suing Wisconsin in federal court for the voting restrictions Governor Walker has signed into law over the past five years — including additional voter registration requirements, a rollback of early voting days, the allowance of "intrusive and intimidating" election monitoring, and the voter ID law.

One of the plaintiffs in that lawsuit is Anita Johnson with Citizen Action of Wisconsin, who said the effort was part of her group's mission to "help people fight for justice."

“This law was meant to disenfranchise people of color, poor people, people with disabilities, people without transportation,” she said. “It appears the people who put this law in place want to stay in power, and the only way they can stay in power is to make sure that only their people get to the polls.”

Speaking with ThinkProgress just before the voter ID workshop, Johnson expressed concern for voters in districts where getting an ID is even more difficult than in Milwaukee. In more than half of the state’s counties, the DMVs are only open two days a week and offer no after-work hours. And for the estimated hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites who lack an ID, getting to those DMVs may be challenging in areas without reliable public transportation.

“This law is going to stop a lot of people from voting. They’re going to say, ‘I don’t feel like going through all of that,’” she predicted.

But for those willing to jump through the hoops, Johnson says Citizen Action will try to answer their questions, spread the word about the rules, and help those struggling to acquire the proper documents to make sure no one is disenfranchised in 2016.

“We are going to do everything in our power to make sure people go to the polls and vote,” she said. “Education is key. That’s why we started this crusade early, when there is no election on the horizon.”