

Voter bill stirs furor Democrats cry foul as measure goes to House

SONJI JACOBS, CARLOS CAMPOS . The Atlanta Journal - Constitution ; Atlanta, Ga. [Atlanta, Ga]30 Mar 2005: A.1.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Secretary of State Cathy Cox, a Democrat who is the state's top elections officer, has said her office has not received any complaints that voters faked their identity to cast a ballot at the polls. She has said HB 244 would saddle Georgia with the nation's most restrictive voter requirements.

The bill, with nearly 70 provisions, is a broad overhaul of Georgia's election code. In addition to the photo identification requirements, the bill would loosen restrictions on absentee voting, allowing any Georgian to cast a no-excuse absentee ballot by mail during a 45-day period. No identification would be needed to vote absentee.

Groups such as the AARP of Georgia, the League of Women Voters of Georgia and the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia opposed the measure. Meg Smothers, executive director of the state League of Women Voters, said the restrictions would hamper voter turnout.

FULL TEXT

Legislation to require Georgians to show photo identification at the polls advanced Tuesday over passionate objections from lawmakers who said the move could disenfranchise many black, elderly and rural voters.

After more than four hours of debate, the Senate approved House Bill 244 by a vote of 31-20. While the vote was not final — the bill must go back to the House for approval of minor changes — the Senate action moved the legislation much closer to becoming law.

It also left hard feelings, especially among black lawmakers.

"This is spitting on the grave of Martin Luther King Jr.," said Senate Minority Leader Robert Brown (D-Macon), an African-American. He compared the photo ID requirement to Jim Crow laws that once institutionalized racial discrimination in the South.

Republicans argued the measure would help prevent voter fraud and protect the integrity of the ballot. The bill would reduce the number of acceptable forms of identification for voting from 17 documents, which now include utility bills and bank statements, to six forms of government-issued photo identification.

"This bill reassures the voting public that the election process is a fair and honest process," said Sen. John Wiles (R-Marietta). "It goes a long way to making sure that people voting are the people who are entitled to vote."

Black lawmakers, who staged a walkout earlier this month when a similar bill was debated, argued the measure would turn back the clock on civil rights. Some compared the bill to a poll tax or other measures from the past that were meant to prevent blacks from voting. They spoke of the sacredness of the right to vote, and several told personal stories about how their parents, grandparents and forefathers were denied that right because of their race.

Sen. Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta) said he could not forget those who "bled, sweated and died" for his right to vote and serve in elected office.

Some saw the measure as an ominous sign for race relations.

"I do believe that this bill has fractured this body," said Sen. Kasim Reed (D-Atlanta), who is black. "I do believe this bill is a disaster for race relations in the state of Georgia. I do believe this is the most aggressive bill and attack on the rights of minorities and African-Americans that I have seen in my tenure in the House and the Senate."

Brown predicted HB 244 would make Georgia a rallying point for national efforts to renew certain provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Many African-American leaders say they worry that a Republican- controlled Congress will not act in 2007 to extend parts of the act, such as allowing the U.S. attorney general to send federal observers to monitor elections and requiring Southern states to gain the approval of the U.S. Justice Department before implementing new voting procedures or practices.

Some Democrats questioned the need for the legislation. Several critics have labeled it a Republican ploy to deny Democratic- leaning voters the right to vote, and not an attempt to stamp out voter fraud.

Secretary of State Cathy Cox, a Democrat who is the state's top elections officer, has said her office has not received any complaints that voters faked their identity to cast a ballot at the polls. She has said HB 244 would saddle Georgia with the nation's most restrictive voter requirements.

Republican leaders disputed the notion that the bill would prevent people from voting, and some have said they don't understand the controversy. Wiles said he was certain that political candidates would mobilize their supporters to get the ID necessary to vote.

If signed into law, HB 244 would have to be reviewed by the Justice Department.

Senators offered 21 amendments; only three, which make minor changes, were approved. The most significant allows Georgians to vote with an expired driver's license.

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The bill allows poor people to obtain a free state photo ID. But opponents said there are only 50 places in Georgia's 159 counties where such IDs could be obtained, and it would be inconvenient or impossible for some people to get them.

Groups such as the AARP of Georgia, the League of Women Voters of Georgia and the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia opposed the measure. Meg Smothers, executive director of the state League of Women Voters, said the restrictions would hamper voter turnout.

"Our legislators tonight passed the most restrictive voter ID law in the nation, effectively making Georgia the hardest place for properly registered citizens of our state to cast a ballot," she said.

Sen. George Hooks (D-Americus) said the bill was not just a black- white issue. It would "wreak havoc" on rural voters, he said.

In rural Georgia, "everybody knows everybody," he argued, and the photo ID requirement would be an unnecessary impediment.

CAPTION: Secretary of State Cathy Cox says she has gotten no complaints of voter ID fraud.

DETAILS

Subject:	Legislation – Georgia; Voting rights; Identification documents
Location:	Georgia
Company / organization:	Name: Democratic Party; NAICS: 813940
Publication title:	The Atlanta Journal - Constitution; Atlanta, Ga.
Pages:	A.1
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	20 05
Publication date:	Mar 30, 2005
Section:	News
Publisher:	CMG Corporate Services, Inc. on behalf of itself and the Newspapers
Place of publication:	Atlanta, Ga.
Country of publication:	United States, Atlanta, Ga.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals–United States
ISSN:	15397459
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 337133675

Document URL: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/337133675?accountid=12691>

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Last updated: 2017- 11-07

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