

Milwaukee, Dane County Clerks: Call for Suspension of Photo ID law in light of UW study

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Tens of thousands of registered voters deterred from voting due to confusing and restrictive law

A study conducted by the UW-Madison Department of Political Science shows that tens of thousands of registered voters in Dane and Milwaukee Counties were deterred from voting in the 2016 November election due to aspects of Wisconsin's photo ID law, one the strictest in the nation. Between the two counties an estimated 17,000 to 23,000 voters were deterred from the ballot box due to the recent enactment of the photo ID law. Surveyed registered voters cited not having acceptable photo ID or believing they did not have the acceptable form of photo ID as reasons for not voting. The study also shows the law disproportionately affects African-Americans and low income individuals. The study was commissioned by Dane County and followed all national academic and survey methodology standards.

"It is completely unacceptable that thousands of voters were deterred from exercising their sacred right to vote due to this law. Citizens' basic belief in their democracy is seriously eroded when those in power target some for exclusion from self-government. The photo ID law must be suspended until changes can be made to restore every voter's access to the ballot box," said Dane County Clerk Scott McDonell.

"As the clerk who serves the largest population of African-Americans in the state, I was shocked by the numbers and am furious to see that Jim Crow laws are alive and well. The state must suspend the photo ID law until this injustice can be remedied,"

said Milwaukee County Clerk George Christenson.

The UW study shows that most registered voters deterred by the law from voting were confused by what they needed to vote. “The acceptability guidelines for a Wisconsin driver license, certificate of naturalization, Veteran Affairs ID and university student ID are all different under Wisconsin’s photo ID law. Some may be expired, some require additional documentation,” stated McDonell. “Educating voters on the law is a challenge.” This finding also replicates a 2015 Rice University study of the Texas photo ID law.

“Other states offer an expanded list of acceptable photo IDs, without such convoluted restrictions and offer an affidavit process to allow voters the opportunity to vote if they can’t present an ID. At a minimum Wisconsin should adopt these changes and dramatically simplify the rules surrounding the acceptable use of photo IDs,” McDonell said.

Clerks Christenson and McDonell are calling for a suspension of the photo ID law until changes are made that will eliminate the impediments to voting. “This study confirms that the result of the photo ID law is to suppress citizens’ ability to vote. Voting is not a privilege but a sacred right granted by our constitution,” said Christenson.

The study also demonstrates the photo ID law had a disproportionate effect on people of color and lower-income individuals. Further, it suggests, as does previous research efforts, that many voters are confused by photo ID laws. Christenson and McDonell would like to see a bipartisan effort to make the Photo ID law less punitive while still protecting the voting process. Until, then, the current Photo ID law must be suspended.

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