

Photo IDs = False Security

by Jan BenDor

For most of the 20th century, the voter's identity for election purposes was a signature, signed in the presence of a sworn election official. Only in the past two decades has the photo ID requirement been added.

Prior to the late 1990s, the match of a polling place signature against a master signature was a secure system: it is very hard to put a forged signature past experienced election administrators, who are skilled in matching. In one case, election administrators in a Michigan community could tell the difference between signatures of father and son with the same name and address, when the return envelopes for their absentee ballots were accidentally switched.

When Republican-controlled legislatures enacted the requirement to show photo ID in state after state, Secretaries of State produced estimates that hundreds of thousands of registered or eligible voters had no photo ID. The demand for photo ID places a burden on large numbers of voters, but it does nothing to improve the security of voter identification.

To the contrary, replacing the master signature match with a voter-carried photo has made it easier to impersonate a voter. The typical precinct voter list is now a printout generated from a master voter file, with the voter's address and birth date, but no signature to check, and no master photo to match.

Instead, election workers ask the voter to produce certain forms of photo ID, which must include the voter's name and photo. Since election workers have no "photo standard" to match against, all they can do is approve the voter if, in their untrained judgment, the face of the person resembles the photo ID.

It is relatively easy to get a fake photo ID that matches your face — ask any teenager who wants

For a trusted and secure election, a person's unique signature is still the Gold Standard for voter identification.



WILL SCENES LIKE THE ABOVE PLAY OUT IN NOVEMBER? LET US SINCERELY HOPE NOT.

Voter ID Requirements

- ◆ Requires a photo ID
- Requires a photo ID
- ◊ Requires a non-photo ID
- Does not require an ID

◆ Ala.	■ La.	○ Ore.
◆ Alaska	○ Maine	○ Pa.
◆ Ariz.	○ Md.	■ Puerto Rico
◆ Ark.	○ Mass.	◆ R.I.
○ Calif.	■ Mich.	◆ S.C.*
◆ Colo.	○ Minn.	■ S.D.
◆ Conn.	○ Miss.	◆ Tenn.
○ Del.	◆ Mo.	◆ Texas*
○ D.C.	◆ Mont.	◆ Utah
■ Fla.	○ Neb.	◆ U.S. Virgin
◆ Ga.	○ Nev.	◆ U.S.
○ Guam	○ N.H.	○ Wash.
■ Hawaii	○ N.J.	○ Is.
◆ Idaho	○ N.M.	○ Vt.
○ Ill.	○ N.Y.	◆ Va.
◆ Ind.	◆ N.C.	◆ Wash.
○ Iowa	◆ N.D.	○ W.Va.
◆ Kan.	◆ Ohio	◆ Wis.
◆ Ky.	◆ Okla.	○ Wyo.

*Will require Department of Justice approval.

graphic: National Conference of State Legislatures & Election Boards

to pass as age 21. Anyone with a digital camera, the right software, and a laminator can create a facsimile of a "government-issued" photo ID. Election workers are rarely trained to spot a fake.

Even given a "valid" ID, election workers have a tough time figuring out if that low quality photo is really the person standing before them. A driver license photo might be ten years old, and in that time, people change haircuts, hair color, facial hair, make-up, glasses, and overall appearance by cosmetic surgery, injuries, or health conditions.

There is no standard law for the situation in which the election worker cannot match the person to the photo. Should they refuse the application to vote? Challenge the voter's ballot? Photo ID not only makes it easier to impersonate a voter, but also makes it easier to erroneously disenfranchise the voter.

In contrast, the elements of a voter's signature change very little. Even age and illness leave the basic characteristics of the signature unaltered. According to Ruth Holmes, Certified Document Examiner and handwriting expert, "A signature is unique to every individual. While there may be shared characteristics due to education, heredity and circumstances, there are distinct characteristics which allow a trained observer of signatures to verify the identity of an individual."

The Photo ID requirement is "security theater." There is no standard photo of a voter in the elections records in the same way there is a standard signature on file, so there can be no independent validation of identity.

For a trusted and secure election, a person's unique signature is still the Gold Standard for voter identification and it should be restored to the voting process.

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graphic: BBC