

## **VI. Verification of Identity**

# Verification of Identity

Task Force on the Federal Election System  
John Mark Hansen  
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## *Summary of conclusions*

1. States use three methods to verify voter identity in the polling place. The largest number require voters to sign their names in an official registry or on a ballot application; just over than half also require that poll officials check signatures against those provided at the time of registration. About a third of the states demand that voters produce some form of identification. Finally, all states rely upon the familiarity that election officials and partisan judges have with the residents of precincts, and 11 states rely upon their efforts exclusively.
2. States that have histories of strong party organization and election improprieties employ more rigorous methods of identity verification: signature validation and official proof of identity. Among the states with more rigorous requirements, northern states by and large validate signatures while southern states also require proof of identity in addition.
3. Signature validation imposes some significant costs on election administrators. Proof of identity places burdens on voters, especially voters who are poorer and urban. At least five percent of the voting age population does not have photo identification. Identification requirements might also be applied selectively in polling places.

In the United States, there is a long and well-developed notion of an individual right to privacy. The commitment to privacy is the traditional barrier to proposals for the issue of national identity cards, which are common in most of the world. Abroad, national identity cards are sufficient proof of identity for purposes of participation in elections. In the United States, with its different traditions, states have had to verify the identities of voters in different ways.

## *Methods of verification of identity*

In polling places, there are essentially three ways in which voters' identity is verified. One widespread method is the provision of a signature. In 39 states and the District of Columbia, voters must sign their names on an official registry or on a ballot application. In most states, the signature completes an affidavit sworn under penalty of law. In an additional 17 states voters' signatures are compared to signatures provided at the time of registration; in three other states voters' signatures may be compared.

Fourteen states require voters to produce a form of identification, and an additional six allow local election officials to ask for it. All but four of the states that require a form of identification also require a signature. In most states, the specified type of identification is broad, from driver's licenses to employee ID cards to (in some instances) birth certificates and Social Security cards, and where the requirements could be ascertained only Florida seemed to specify identification with a photograph. Several of the states that require identification, for example Virginia and Louisiana, also allow voters who lack it to vote after signing an

affirmation of identity. The states that require identification are disproportionately in the South, but not only in the South.

Finally, every state relies upon the efforts of poll workers and partisan election judges to challenge voters whom they believe not to be qualified electors. Seven states, all but one lacking major urban centers, rely solely upon poll officers' familiarity, demanding neither identification nor signature.

In sum, very few states have chosen to rely solely upon the knowledge of polling place officials to verify voters' identity. But at the same time, few states have seen it necessary to require voters to produce identification. Most states depend upon voters' positive affirmation of their identity with a signature.

### ***State histories and verification of identity***

The states that have adopted more rigorous methods for verifying voter identity have instructive similarities. The states that require voters to show identification or that check voters' signatures are disproportionately states with histories of strong party organizations based in patronage and able to control nominations. David Mayhew of Yale University has researched party organization in the states and assigned each a score ranging from 1, for minimal organization, to 5, for very strong organization. As the following table shows, almost all of the states with histories of any party organization at all—80 percent of them—require either identification or signature verification. Of the states with histories of powerful party organization, TPO scores 5 or 4, only Maryland and Rhode Island do not. States that need to exercise greater care, because they have historically been vulnerable to election improprieties, have adopted more stringent methods for certifying voter identity.

### Histories of strong party organization and verification of voter identity

State	Requires identification	Verifies signature
<i>Very powerful party organizations (5)</i>		
Connecticut	Yes	
Illinois		Yes
Indiana		Yes
Maryland		
New Jersey		Yes
New York		Yes
Pennsylvania		Yes
Rhode Island		
<i>Powerful party organizations (4)</i>		
Delaware	Yes	Yes
Kentucky	Yes	
Missouri	Yes	Yes
Ohio		Yes
West Virginia	After mail registration	Yes
<i>Significant party organization (3)</i>		
Louisiana	Yes	Yes
<i>Modest party organization (2)</i>		
Arkansas	Yes	Yes
Georgia	Yes	
New Mexico		
Tennessee	Yes	Yes
Texas	May	May
Virginia	Yes	
<i>Weak party organization (1)</i>		
30 states	Require: 5 May require: 7	Require: 6 Varies: 2

Source: Federal Election Commission and David R. Mayhew, *Placing parties in American politics* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

The other pattern in the table is the contrast between the northern states and the southern and border states. Whatever their experience with party organization, the southern states as a group require more stringent methods of verification than the northern states. The list of weak organization states that require proof of identity or signature verification or both includes every southern and border state in the category except for Alabama and Mississippi. Among states with histories of at least modest strength of party organization, the northern states favor signature verification for establishing voter identity—Connecticut is the exception—while the southern and border states demand identification in addition.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In most statistical analyses of voter turnout, residence in the South has a significant negative impact on voter participation. Wolfinger and Rosenstone found that southerners were about 6 percent less likely to turn out in 1972, even after taking account of personal characteristics like education and systemic characteristics like registration laws. Rosenstone and Hansen estimated that southerners were between 10 and 16 percent less likely to participate in the period from 1952 to 1988, controlling for an even broader array of individual, systemic, and social characteristics. Analysts

### *The costs of methods of identity verification*

Identification requirements and signature verification have clearly been strategies states have adopted to deter election fraud. Each has its downside, however. For signature verification, election administrators must make signatures (or facsimiles) from voter registration available for comparison at polling sites. At the polls, signature verification slows the process of voting, as poll workers search through the registry and make the comparison, potentially lengthening lines. Finally, signatures change over time, making signature verification an inexact art, placing a great deal of responsibility and discretion in the hands of officials at the polls. The costs of signature verification are primarily administrative, but they potentially affect voters through slower lines.

Identification requirements present two problems for voters. First, the costs of proof of identity fall more heavily upon the voters themselves. Even if states do not require it, those that demand identification clearly prefer photo IDs. But photo identification is not universal. In the early 1990s, the United States Department of Transportation estimated that 87 percent of the voting age population held a driver's license and another 4 percent held an identification card issued by a state driver's license agency. A Gallup Poll in October 2000 found that 93 percent of Americans over age 16 held a motor vehicle operator's license, an estimate that comports with the ratio of driver's licenses issued to the voting age population of the United States, 92 percent. Accordingly, some 6 to 10 percent of the American electorate does not have official state identification, and while other kinds of photo identification are available—student IDs, military IDs, employee IDs, passports—they probably broaden the number of holders of photo identification only slightly. We have not been able to locate information about the characteristics of adults who lack driver's licenses but they probably parallel the characteristics of people who do not own automobiles: they are poorer (and cannot afford a car) or urban (and do not need a car).

Consequently, while photo IDs are certainly more secure, to require them for voting would be to impose an additional expense on the exercise of the franchise, a burden that would fall disproportionately on people who are poorer and urban. The expense and trouble of obtaining a photo identification card could be a significant deterrent to their participation in the electoral process, unless states were to issue official identification at state expense and on state initiative.

A second drawback to the requirement that voters present identification is the possibility of selective enforcement in polling places. Poll workers with the best of motives might still dispense with the requirement when voters are known to them. Poll workers with the worst of motives might deliberately use the requirement to confront and intimidate "strangers." Either way, voters who were asked to show identification when others were not might come to feel that they were singled out.

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have long attributed lower turnout in the South to the cultural residuum of Jim Crow: culturally, voter participation was not very much encouraged in the South. But it is also possible that lower turnout in the South traces to the accumulation of minor barriers to voting, like identification requirements, that do not amount to much individually but sum to substantial.

### *Selected references*

Kelly Maybury, "Most Americans favor tougher drunk driving law," Gallup News Service, 26 October 2000.

David R. Mayhew, *Placing parties in American politics* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

United States House of Representatives, Committee on House Administration, "National Voter Registration Act of 1993," Report 103–9, February 1993.

### Identity verification, by state

State	Voter required to show identification	Voter required to give signature	Voter's signature verified
Alabama		Yes	
Alaska	Yes	Yes	
Arizona		Yes	
Arkansas	Yes	Yes	Yes
California		Yes	
Colorado		Yes	Varies
Connecticut	Yes		
Delaware	Yes	Yes	Yes
D.C.		Yes	
Florida	Yes	Yes	Yes
Georgia	Yes	Yes	
Hawaii	Yes	Yes	
Idaho		Yes	
Illinois		Yes	Yes
Indiana		Yes	Yes
Iowa	May	Yes	
Kansas		Yes	
Kentucky	Yes	Yes	
Louisiana	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maine			
Maryland		Yes	
Massachusetts	May		
Michigan		Yes	Varies
Minnesota	May	Yes	For absentees
Mississippi		Yes	
Missouri	Yes	Yes	Yes
Montana		Yes	
Nebraska		Yes	
Nevada		Yes	Yes
New Hampshire			
New Jersey		Yes	Yes
New Mexico		Yes	
New York		Yes	Yes
North Carolina			
North Dakota			
Ohio		Yes	Yes
Oklahoma	May	Yes	Yes
Oregon		Yes	Yes
Pennsylvania		Yes	Yes
Rhode Island		Yes	
South Carolina	Yes	Yes	Yes
South Dakota			
Tennessee	Yes	Yes	Yes

Texas	May when voter does not present valid voter's registration certificate	Yes	May
Utah	May	Yes	
Vermont			
Virginia	Yes		
Washington		Yes	
West Virginia	Yes, for first election after mail registration	Yes	Yes
Wisconsin	May		
Wyoming			
United States	14 states yes and 6 may	39 states + District	17 states yes, 1 may, 2 varies, 1 absentee only

Source: Federal Election Commission