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*Voting Rights and Katrina
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Guest Commentator*

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As thousands celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act on August 6th, the black and white images of peaceful Blacks being tear-gassed and clubbed on “Bloody Sunday” while marching for the right to vote were, for many, faded memories of a so-called bygone era.

That is, until a month later, when the television again focused the nation’s attention on another tragedy: Hurricane Katrina. What we saw televised in New Orleans wasn’t just the function of a broken levee. It was the intersection of race and class, laid bare for the world to see how such factors literally amounted to life or death.

The striking nexus between Bloody Sunday and Hurricane Katrina is not simply that both were televised, but rather what that coverage revealed. Katrina’s vulnerable, the poor and politically disfranchised who for generations had been pushed to the margins of society, were without the economic or other means to get out of harm’s way.

Today, a growing national trend of exploiting the fear of minimally existent voter fraud threatens to hinder access to the ballot box by requiring voters to present a photo ID that our nation’s most vulnerable – the poor, elderly and many racial minorities – are likely not to have the means to acquire.

The National Commission on Federal Election reform, co-chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and James Baker, recently recommended federal legislation requiring all voters to present a “Real ID” card in order to vote. To obtain this type of photo identification, *documentary proof* would be required of an individual’s full legal name and date of birth, Social Security number, primary address and citizenship.

Unfortunately, the Commission’s “Real ID” recommendation is more draconian than any ID requirement adopted in any state to date, including Georgia’s recently enacted and widely criticized law, which President Carter, ironically, has condemned as “discriminatory.”

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Georgia's voter identification bill is one of the strictest measures in the nation. Voters are required to present one of six government-issued photo identifications at the polls, reducing from 17 the number of previously allowed forms of identification, including bank statements and utility bills, which contain no photo. Georgia's discriminatory photo ID law has been blocked in federal court.

Proponents of photo ID requirements argue that such measures are necessary to prevent fraud and to enhance confidence in election results. But the type of voter fraud addressed by photo ID requirements is extraordinarily small, and supporters of the photo ID measures have yet to make a convincing case that existing methods of discouraging and addressing fraud are insufficient.

While the anti-fraud benefits of photo ID measures are suspect, there is strong evidence that such requirements will reduce political participation by otherwise eligible rural, elderly, disabled, poor and racial minority voters, who are less likely to have photo identification or the means to acquire one.

Like the warnings about the capacity of New Orleans' levees to withstand the force of a major hurricane, a photo ID requirement will predictably increase the ranks of the disfranchised.

Many who were left behind in New Orleans did not have access to a car, and thus are least likely to possess a driver's license. The hundreds of thousands of people displaced by Katrina may find it impossible to recover the identity papers they left behind or to obtain new records from government offices and hospitals that were destroyed. These citizens, and many like them across the country, will be politically disfranchised by the Commission's ID proposal, if enacted, and by photo ID requirements like Georgia's.

Four decades after Voting Rights Act's passage, the Hurricane Katrina experience reminds us that the VRA is still necessary to protect our nation's most vulnerable from present attempts to dilute their voting strength.

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