

Acceptable forms of voter identification

From an article written by Emily Wagster Pettus, Associated Press, in the Clarion-Ledger.

Starting in June, Mississippi voters will have to show photo identification at the polls.

State law says the types of acceptable ID include, but are not limited to, current and valid forms of:

- A Mississippi driver's license.
- An identification card issued by a branch, department, agency or entity of the state of Mississippi.
- A U.S. passport.
- An employee identification card containing a photograph of the voter and issued by any branch, department, agency or entity of the U.S. government, the state of Mississippi or any county, municipality, board, authority or other entity of this state.
- A Mississippi license to carry a pistol or revolver.
- A tribal identification card containing a photograph of the voter.
- A U.S. military identification card.
- A student identification card, containing a photograph of the voter, issued by any accredited college, university or community or junior college in Mississippi.
- A state-issued Mississippi voter ID card containing a photograph of the voter.

The law also says:

- A voter who goes to a polling place and does not have one of the required types of ID may vote by affidavit ballot. The affidavit ballot will be counted if the person presents acceptable photo identification to the circuit clerk within five days.
- A voter who has a religious objection to being photographed may vote by affidavit ballot, and the voter, within five days after the election, must sign an affidavit in the circuit clerk's office affirming that the exemption applies.

Mississippi's top elections official says the state should start issuing free voter identification cards in early 2014, months before the first election in which people will be required to show photo IDs at the polls.

Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann said the cards will be available to any voter who lacks a government-issued photo ID. People who already have an acceptable form of photo ID — including a driver's license, a U.S. passport, a gun permit or a college identification — will not need a separate card.

“If you have those, of course, we will thank you for coming, but we will not issue you an ID,” Hosemann said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Voters will have to start showing photo ID at the polls in June, during party primaries for U.S. House and Senate races, Hosemann said. No ID is required for people who vote by mail.

Mississippians approved a voter ID constitutional amendment in 2011, and legislators put the mandate into law in 2012. At that time, Mississippi and other states with a history of racial discrimination needed federal approval, or “preclearance,” to alter their election laws.

The Mississippi voter ID proposals were still being analyzed by the U.S. Justice Department this past summer. Then, a Supreme Court ruling in late June struck down part of the Voting Rights Act and erased the requirement for federal approval in the “preclearance” states.

Since that ruling, Hosemann has been working on rules to implement voter ID.

Hosemann and other supporters say requiring ID will prevent people from masquerading as others to vote. But opponents have long said that requiring photo identification could squash the constitutional rights of people who forget to obtain a required type of ID or leave it at home while trying to vote.

Mississippi House Democratic Leader Bobby Moak of Bogalusa said, for example, that an older veteran who no longer has a driver’s license might not remember to go to the circuit clerk’s office to get a voter identification card. He said prosecution for voting fraud is rare, and requiring ID “is trying to solve a problem that doesn’t exist.”

“It’s setting the house on fire so you can say, ‘I saved the occupants,’” Moak said.

Hosemann said the state-issued voter ID card will be the same size as a driver’s license, so it will fit in a wallet. It’s designed to look different from a driver’s license, though, with a larger photo and no date of birth.

Legislators set aside money during the 2013 session for the secretary of state’s office to buy cameras to take pictures for the IDs. Hosemann said the cameras will be distributed in December to 92 circuit clerks’ offices. Mississippi has 82 counties, and 10 of those have two courthouses. In early 2014, Hosemann’s office will provide training about the voter ID law and procedures for circuit clerks and election commissioners.

Under administrative rules that Hosemann wrote, anyone who needs a voter ID card can get a free ride to the local circuit clerk’s office. Once the person is there, the clerk will run a free records check, if needed, to validate information from the voter’s birth certificate. Hosemann said the rules are supposed to address opponents’ concerns that voter ID is tantamount to a poll tax.

The Justice Department has sued Texas over its voter ID law, but no lawsuit has been filed so far in Mississippi.

Hosemann said that based on a survey his office commissioned in November 2012, fewer than 2 percent of Mississippi voters lack an acceptable form of photo ID. His office did not provide an estimate of how many people that is.