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opinion
Voters should prove citizenship
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El Paso County Clerk Bob Balink brings up an interesting point, but one that always raises political hackles.

If the state is going to require that people be U.S. citizens in order to vote, then it should allow election officials to verify that citizenship, Balink argues.

But if the state doesn't want to require a check of citizenship, then the law shouldn't even mention the word in its definition of eligibility. It would make sense, Balink says, to remove it.

But Balink doesn't *want* to remove the requirement. He just wants to be able to check for citizenship. Or else, he says, "How can I be sure I'm following the law?"

Balink, a Republican, insists, "It's not a political issue. It's a legal issue." But, of course, it's a political issue, too.

Republicans generally favor requiring potential voters to prove they are who they say they are. It discourages fraud, they say.

Democrats generally oppose identity or citizenship checks because it discourages people from voting. Voting should be comparatively easy, they say.

Party differences

Democrats also tend to think their party benefits when the election pool is deeper and wider. Republicans think a more selective electorate benefits them politically.

Both sets of arguments have some basis in fact. But they have developed an exaggerated mythology about them.

In Colorado, at least, voter fraud does not appear to be a widespread problem. Nor does it seem that there are significant numbers who are unable to get access to some sort of documentation of identity. (And even a few people would be a significant number in this context.)

Critics of requiring proof of citizenship raise another point. They say it's a myth that illegal immigrants would even consider voting. Anyone who is in this country without the proper documentation wouldn't want to do anything to call attention to himself, they say, and that includes registering to vote.

Balink counters that that so-called myth is a myth itself. If unauthorized immigrants want nothing to do with government, he asks, why do they avail themselves of government services such as schools, hospitals and food stamps?

In an interview with his hometown newspaper, the Gazette of Colorado Springs, Balink said he can't prove how many people lie about citizenship when they register to vote unless proof of citizenship is required.

But Mark Silverstein of the American Civil Liberties Union says such a requirement is "a solution in search of a problem."

He also says that legal citizens, including the elderly and homeless, might have a difficult time finding or paying for the documents they need to register.

Proving citizenship

Proving citizenship isn't as easy as proving identity. A driver's license or state ID card works to prove you are who you say you are. But a passport, or a birth certificate accompanied by a current photo ID, is necessary to prove citizenship.

Inconvenient, perhaps, but not onerous. Proof of identity would have to be shown only once, when a voter registers for the first time. There wouldn't be any requirement to establish citizenship for each new election. Voters would not have to show up at their polling places with passports and birth certificates.

It wouldn't change the way mail elections are conducted, either. Once a voter is registered, that voter automatically receives ballots in the mail.

Balink isn't ready just yet to impose a proof-of- citizenship requirement in his county. It would be challenged in court instantly and, he asks, "Who wants to go to court?"

But if the legislature won't consider the inconsistency of having a requirement without a way to prove it, a lawsuit would force the issue. Republicans would relish forcing the Democrats to take it up.

Senate Minority Leader Andy McElhany, also of Colorado Springs, is sponsoring a bill to require proof of what the law already requires.

Frankly, it doesn't seem like a lot to ask to ensure that only citizens vote in U.S. elections.