

March 12, 2012 at 1:00 am

Editorial: Voting reforms will help assure integrity

Johnson's proposals would assure a fair vote, without overburdening voters

It's probably inevitable that Democrats would suspect efforts by a Republican officeholder to bolster the integrity of elections might mask an attempt to suppress the turnout of groups of people who traditionally favor Democratic candidates. Secretary of State Ruth Johnson's proposals, however, contain an array of sensible reforms that should be adopted.

A key source of controversy is Johnson's proposed requirement that would-be voters produce a driver's license or photo identification card when registering to vote or when they stop at a clerk's office to pick up an absentee ballot. Those lacking photo IDs could still complete the registration process but then would have to vote in person the first time — with the exception of citizens who are 60 or older, disabled or members of the military.

This regulation would close a loophole in state election law, which already requires a voter to show a photo ID or driver's license at a polling place. The law contains accommodations for some folks, such as elderly residents who no longer have driver's licenses.

And groups conducting voter registration drives should be able to assist people in obtaining state ID cards, which Johnson points out are free to residents who are 65 or older, blind, have suspended or revoked driver's licenses, are disabled or qualify for welfare.

Johnson cites a Pew Center on the States finding that 102.54 percent of eligible adults in Michigan were registered to vote in 2008. That seeming impossibility most likely is the result of people who've died or moved out of state still being on the rolls. Keeping voter lists up-to-date is a continual challenge because elections clerks usually aren't notified about deaths or relocations.

But there's also concern the rolls could contain noncitizens. Therefore, Johnson's proposals for cleaning up registration lists and making sure only citizens are allowed to register and vote are necessary steps to keep the election process secure.

The package of bills containing Johnson's initiatives calls for tougher penalties against those who scorn campaign finance disclosure requirements. She wants to require more-frequent public reporting about donors and donations to organizations backing ballot questions; and there'd be new rules to prevent manipulative efforts to deceive voters — such as 2010's fake Tea Party in Oakland County.

While those are solid steps, more needs to be done in the way of campaign finance reform. The U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United decision in 2010 opened the floodgates to corporate and union political donations but there has been no corresponding effort to improve transparency.

In Michigan, for example, groups can spend millions of dollars on thinly disguised "issue" ads, which actually back candidates, without having to make public their donors.

To correct the shortcomings, the state needs rules to guarantee full disclosure of all contributors to voter-influence efforts — period. Johnson's proposed legislation will embed trustworthiness in the election process, but she and lawmakers should consider additional transparency their next assignment from Michigan's voters.