

War on 'Greatest Generation'? Critics assail voter ID laws. (+video)

Voter ID laws passed by dozens of states are disproportionately hard on members of the Greatest Generation. For many, birth certificates are wrong, incomplete, or missing.



People pass signs telling of the requirement for voters to show an acceptable photo ID to vote as they head into the the PennDOT Drivers License Center in Butler, Pa., in this file photo. (Keith Srakocic/AP/File)

By Kay Nolan, Contributor / November 18, 2013 at 2:55 pm EST

Milwaukee

Genevieve Winslow of [Milwaukee](#) belongs is a member of the Greatest Generation. In 1948, at age 20, she married Alex Winslow, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Beginning a year later, at 21, she's voted in nearly every election since.

Now, she worries she might get turned away at the polls in the future.

It is a common concern among older Americans living in states that have enacted photo ID requirements for voting. Passed by Republican state legislatures as a hedge against voter fraud, the laws have been assailed by critics who say they discriminate against the elderly and minorities.

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As Wisconsin implements its law, it is opening a window into why a photo ID can be so difficult for the elderly to obtain. But it is also highlighting what some activists are calling a "war against the Greatest Generation" as federal and state budget cuts fall disproportionately on the elderly. Whether it is the government shutdown making it harder to obtain veteran's benefits or cuts to food stamps or state welfare programs, many in the Greatest Generation feel that they are now being left in the cold.

During the latest partial government shutdown, "I don't know that people didn't get their benefits, but does that mean that things did not get processed while the government was shut down? Yes," says David Hobson, executive director of the National Organization of Veterans Advocates. " That does mean that claims did not get processed, so that was being held up."

Yet voter ID laws, which have been adopted in at least 34 states, feel to many seniors like the most direct attack.

The problem Ms. Winslow faces is common among her generation: The name on her birth certificate doesn't match her other identification. Winslow's birth certificate misspelled her last name as Kujansky, when it was actually Kujawski. In addition, the first name on her birth certificate, Genava, was Anglicized to Genevieve in elementary school.

Thousands of elderly voters who lack current driver's licenses have been turned down for state-issued photo IDs for not producing proper birth certificates, says Julie Ebenstein, staff attorney with the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU), which is fighting against some state's laws. Sometimes, the birth certificate is missing or destroyed. For people born at home instead of a hospital, one might never have been issued. Back then, it wasn't uncommon for birth certificates to leave the first name blank – making them useless now for photo IDs. And for a generation of children of immigrants, ethnic names caused frequent errors.

Wisconsin's law passed in 2011, and a judge in [Dane County](#) (which includes Madison), has already blocked the law. But opponents are pursuing a ban in federal court, worried that the Dane County ruling could be overturned.

Ray Ciszewski, who volunteers at a church to help people obtain or amend their birth certificates, testified at the federal trial against the state's voter ID law in Milwaukee of a "Catch-22": "If you don't have the ID, you can't get a birth certificate. If you don't have a birth certificate, you don't get the ID."

"The older a person is, the more difficult it is to dig up acceptable records," said Mr. Ciszewski. "Sometimes, it comes down to not being able to get an amended birth certificate and the person has to go to court for a formal name change, which can cost hundreds of dollars."

In [Pennsylvania](#), which has a voter ID law as well as one of the highest percentages of elderly residents in the [United States](#), such complaints led the state to dispense with the need for birth certificates to obtain non-driver photo IDs, said Ron Ruman, press secretary for the Department of State. But challenges to voter ID continue, and a July trial featured residents in their 80s and 90s, who spoke of the physical hardship of traveling long distances to driver's license centers

and standing for hours in line, said Witold Walczak, an attorney for the Pennsylvania ACLU, representing plaintiffs in the case.

States that are cutting back on early voting or mail-in ballots create similar hurdles for seniors who lack transportation to the polls or who can't tolerate standing for long, said the ACLU's Ms. Ebenstein.

Mr. Ruman said Pennsylvania accepts photo IDs from licensed care facilities for voting purposes, and can sometimes reuse photos from old driver's licenses.

Still, Sen. Al Franken (D) of Minnesota blasted voter ID in a speech last year, saying, "I've met, at these senior centers, our Greatest Generation, people who landed at Omaha Beach and fought their way across France and across Germany to take down Hitler and they're now in their late 80s and early 90s. I met a man who's worried about being able to vote. He doesn't have his birth certificate. Are you telling me this guy ... shouldn't be allowed to vote?"