

Cameras at Polling Places: The Long, Strange Trip Continues

A few weeks ago we reported on the efforts to repeal or modify the law that, as of September 1, will require moderators at elections to take a photograph of anyone who votes by signing a challenged voter affidavit, rather than by showing a photo identification. At that time, the Senate had killed a bill to repeal the odd requirement, and the House had eliminated the funding for the Secretary of State to provide the needed photography requirement. Thus, the law was scheduled to take effect, and municipalities would be required to provide their own cameras and printers, a blatantly unconstitutional mandate.

In the last week, a solution of sorts has emerged. The House Election Law Committee this week recommended passage of SB 39, relative to recounts on questions, with a non-germane amendment that makes a modest change to the camera requirement: it allows the moderator to take a photograph that “may be in color or in black and white.” (If not changed, the law would require a color photograph.)

How, you might wonder, does this solve the problem? By allowing for a black and white photograph, the law will enable the Secretary of State’s office to buy inexpensive instant cameras that print a photograph without the need for a printer. These apparently can be bought for under \$100 each, so the cost for 300 polling places would be about \$30,000. The budget trailer bill, now in the Senate, would still need to be amended to restore the requirement that the Secretary of State supply the cameras, but we are told that is the plan.

If the plan goes through, then yes, it does eliminate the unfunded mandate. But if ever there was an appropriate application of the phrase “like putting lipstick on a pig,” this is it. As we understand it, this is how the process would work: The Secretary of State’s office buys 300 plus instant cameras (probably equal to the total number sold in the United States last year), finds a place to store 300 plus instant cameras, trains election officials on their use (presumably not difficult), distributes them to municipalities before each election, and collects them after each election.

Given that there will be city primaries in September, city general elections in November, a presidential primary in January or February, town elections in March, April, and May, and state primary and general elections next September and November, with a few special elections sprinkled here and there, that’s a lot of distributing and collecting.

And for what? To guard against the approximately one case of identity fraud that occurs in a given decade – and perhaps give a boost to the price of Fujifilm stock?

This is silly.

SB 39 will likely go to the House floor on Wednesday, May 6. Because the amendment does begin to address the unfunded mandate problem (although, again, HB 2 [the state budget bill] will still need to be amended to close the loop), we encourage representatives to hold their noses and vote for it. However, the real solution remains a repeal of the camera requirement.