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Another View -- Ovide Lamontagne: Choosing integrity over confusion in NH elections

New Hampshire state Sen. Regina Birdsell, R-Hampstead, has introduced SB 3 (http://gencourt.state.nh.us/bill_status/results.aspx?lSr=883&sortoption=&txtsessionyear=2017&txtbillnumber=sb3), a bill that would strengthen public confidence in New Hampshire's voting system.

During the past several election cycles, legitimate questions have been raised about the standards by which an individual may be eligible to vote in a New Hampshire election, whether it is at annual town meetings, the first-in-the-nation New Hampshire presidential primary every four years, or our state general election every two years.

Voting integrity matters. The voting process should ensure that only qualified New Hampshire voters can exercise the right to vote. No qualified New Hampshire voter should have his or her vote voided by an out-of-state voter who simply happens to be here on election day.

Qualifying to vote depends on an individual's "domicile;" that is the state in which they live, not the state they are simply visiting. Birdsell's bill clarifies how a person establishes "domicile" for legal voting purposes. Under current law, all people have to do to vote in our elections is to assert a bald claim saying that they are domiciled here without proving that they in fact live in New Hampshire and in the particular voting precinct where they want to vote. SB 3 takes the simple step of requiring proof that people claiming to be domiciled here show some evidence that their claim of a New Hampshire domicile is more than just a state of mind.

SB 3 provides a long list of ways that a person can demonstrate that he or she is domiciled in New Hampshire. The vast number of Granite Staters will simply use a New Hampshire driver's license. If people do not have a driver's license, however, Birdsell's bill provides a number of ways that they can demonstrate that their domicile here is authentic.

An important feature of SB 3 is that it contains provisions guaranteeing that no one is turned away from the polls due to lack of documentation. SB 3 contains a "trust, but verify" model of allowing people to prove they are entitled to vote here after the fact.

Birdsell's bill allows people to sign an affidavit promising to provide proof of domicile to the town clerk's office and then allows them to cast a ballot right then and there. Unlike voter residency rules in other states, voters swearing to be domiciled in New Hampshire will have their vote counted, and

then can provide proof later or else be subject to criminal sanctions.

Contrary to the claims of those who oppose voting integrity initiatives like SB 3, student voting is actually encouraged.

The law is well established that states cannot treat differently students attending colleges and universities who reside in the state than others who may temporarily reside in the state, even if the residence is a transient one, so long as they vote in no other state. SB 3 simply requires evidence showing that a student lives either in a New Hampshire college dormitory or in a New Hampshire community while attending school here to establish domicile under SB 3. This is not a bill that makes it any more difficult for a student to vote than any other citizen authentically domiciled here.

SB 3 is a sound bill that seeks to begin removing doubt about the integrity of New Hampshire's voting process while also continuing our tradition of encouraging participation in our elections. SB 3 should be enacted by the General Court as an important first step in enhancing voting integrity.

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