

John Nichols: We can and must renew voting rights



JUNE 02, 2013 4:50 AM • [JOHN NICHOLS | THE CAPITAL TIMES](#) | JNICHOLS@MADISON.COM

Count on state Sen. Fred Risser, D-Madison, the nation's longest-serving state legislator, to take the long view with regard to the wrangling over restrictive voter ID laws and related barriers to political participation.

“In my over 50 years of service to the state of Wisconsin, we have focused on expanding the rights of all citizens,” said Risser, after the 4th District Court of Appeals overturned one of the two injunctions blocking implementation of photo ID requirements for

Wisconsin voters. “I am gravely disappointed the Court of Appeals has, by this decision, supported the Republicans' continued efforts to disenfranchise citizens.”

While the disappointment is understandable, it is important to recognize that this ruling is not the final word.

As state Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison, notes, a lawsuit filed by the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP is still pending in state courts and two others are pending in federal courts.

“The pattern is crystal clear; Republicans have done everything in their power to restrict people’s constitutional right to vote. Everything Republicans have done since they took power just proves they want the fairest election system they can rig,” explained Taylor, an attorney and stalwart defender of civil liberties and voting rights. “While this court ruling is certainly disappointing, there are plenty more court challenges of this unconstitutional law still pending. Thus, I caution my Republican colleagues to put their fancy champagne back in the refrigerator; it’s too early for them to celebrate their efforts to disenfranchise voters.”

Taylor is right. The wrangling will continue.

Ultimately, that’s why Congressman Mark Pocan, D-Madison, is right when he argues for amending the Constitution to provide Americans with the affirmative right to vote.

“In a country founded on the principles of civic participation, it is obscene that voters need to prove their fundamental right to vote has been violated, while states can pass restrictive voting bills without demonstrating any need for their actions,” he says.

“While I expect that today’s decision is not the last word on Wisconsin’s voter ID law, it demonstrates that now more than ever, we need an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that will ensure all Americans have a guaranteed, affirmative right to vote,” explains Pocan. “My amendment will transfer the burden of proof from the voter back to the states — forcing them to demonstrate that their actions have a legitimate rationale beyond suppressing the vote for partisan gain. I will continue to fight for my Right to Vote amendment and to protect the voting rights of every voter in Wisconsin and across the nation.”

Wisconsinites can and will keep fighting, in the Legislature and in the courts, to defend voting rights. But they should also recognize that the best way to protect voting rights is to guarantee them constitutionally.

John Nichols is associate editor of The Capital Times and the author (with Robert W. McChesney) of the upcoming book "Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex Is Destroying America." Hailed by Publisher's Weekly as "a fervent call to action for reformers," it details how big-money politics warps our politics. jnichols@madison.com @NicholsUprising

John Nichols



Associate Editor John Nichols has been with The Capital Times since 1993 and has become one of Wisconsin's best-known progressive voices. He is the author of seven books on politics and the media and he also writes about electoral politics and public policy for The Nation magazine.

