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Forum: Lessons from Election Day 2012: Examining the Need for Election Reform

Woodbridge Virginia
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My polling station was a seven minute walk from my apartment building in Crystal City. My fiancé and I arrived just before 9 am. The line formed a figure eight that stretched from one apartment building, through the lobby, to the other apartment building, returning through the lobby to the first building. There were some couches and chairs in the lobby. Some people took turns resting, while their friend or partner stood in line. I noticed at least one father who came into the lobby with his young child, took one look at the line, and left.

My fiancé Shawn and I waited in line for three and a half hours. He had to take work off that morning unexpectedly and was fortunate that his boss was very understanding. I watched videos on my iPod and he listened to podcasts on his phone to pass the time. We were very tired, hungry, and rather cranky by the time we entered the voting area after 12 pm.

I had registered to vote at the Library of Congress. Shawn and I both had our voter registration cards with us. We were called to step up to a desk with two poll workers. Shawn had poll worker #1 (male, young, sitting on the left). I had poll worker #2 (female, elderly, sitting on the right).

Poll worker #2 asked for my name and to say my address out loud. I did so. She asked for a form of ID. I presented my voter registration card. She looked at it and made some comment about my name that I can't remember – something about if Chi-Wei Ho was my last name or not. I probably said "Ho is my last name." She then looked at her Electronic Poll Book, and grew immediately frustrated. I remember her saying, among other things, "It's just not working. I don't get it, it's not working."

She did not explain to me what wasn't working. She then asked for my driver's license.

I knew that my voter registration card was all that was required to vote. I knew that I did not need to show my driver's license. I was irritated and confused as to why poll worker #2 asked me for my license. She did not explain to me why. I cannot remember exactly what I said, but at some point I said "I've been waiting here for three hours." She responded with "I've been here since 4 am." I did not reply with what I wanted to say, which was that poll workers volunteer to do what they do and they shouldn't snap at voters because of their lack of sleep.

She then asked me for my driver's license a second time. By this time my fiancé was already voting at a machine. Poll worker #2 still hadn't explained why I had to show my license. At this point a supervisor had noticed our increasingly heated exchange and said, "We'll get the chief to come over." She did not say why the chief had to come over. I am not sure if she had heard the whole exchange.

Finally I asked poll worker #2, “Why do I have to show my license?” She replied, “So you can prove that you are who you say you are.” This made me very angry because my voter registration card, by law, should have been enough.

I had a concern, however. I told her, “I do not have a Virginia’s license yet. I moved here recently. I still have my California’s driver’s license.” I knew that if I was voting in Virginia and did not have my voter registration card, I would have had to show a Virginia license. She said a California license would be fine. I showed it to her. She let me vote.

After my fiancé and I voted, we started walking home and compared stories. We have very different voting stories.

Shawn’s voter registration card was accepted. He was never asked to show his driver’s license. This is important because we moved to Virginia at the same time and he also did not have a Virginia driver’s license at the time of the election. His poll worker’s Electronic Poll Book seemed to work fine. His poll worker did not speak to him angrily.

My voting experience was exhausting. I felt like I had been singled out by a cranky, poorly trained poll worker. There should’ve been no reason for our experiences to be so different. I would like to note, however, that my fiancé is white and I am Asian. I understand that my experience may not have been racially based, but after three and a half hours on my feet, I was not inclined to give poll worker #2 the benefit of the doubt.