



KNIGHT RIDDER TRIBUNE

## Political meddling erodes faith in election systems

**B**eth Fraser's Viewpoint (June 21) regarding voter intimidation in the last election highlights a larger problem nationwide: Voters are quickly losing faith in our election system because of political interference with the election process.

The sources of this problem are a combination of newly minted tactics by certain groups intent on frustrating their opponents' right to vote. In addition to injuring our trust in the system, these tactics have caused a surge in postelection lawsuits and, as several judges have warned, "seasons of discontent" following our elections. But the high voter turnout in Minnesota gives us the power to stop these problems now before people's loss of faith in the system results in cynical nonparticipation.

Research conducted by Professor Richard Hasen of Loyola Law School indicates that those on the losing end of an election often have much less faith in the election system than the winners, which recently has meant that Democrats nationwide tend to trust our system less. But when the shoe was on the other foot in Washington state and Republicans lost last fall's gubernatorial election by just 133 votes, the findings were just the opposite: according to a January 2005 Elway poll, 68 percent of Washington Republicans thought the state election process was unfair, compared with 27 percent of Democrats and 46 percent of independents.

Postelection challenges filed in state courts around the nation have risen from 61 in 1996 to



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more than 250 in 2002.

The lesson here is that the election process must be designed and run with the voter in mind and that elections must be above the political fray. Today's beneficiary is easily tomorrow's victim when the tables are turned.

The Minnesota Legislature needs to be cognizant that voters' faith in the election system is paramount and on shaky ground right now. Legislation like that summarized by Fraser — designed to stop voter intimidation — is clearly needed and addresses a real problem. But legislation such as House File 686 by Rep. Dan Severson, R-Sauk Rapids, which would take away the right of college students to vote in their local district when they live on campus, does not help. Such proposals, clearly aimed at interfering with a specific group's right to vote, run a real risk of furthering the growing feeling that the election system is just another political game.

Loss of voter faith will undoubtedly lead at some point to lower participation. Hasen identifies loss of faith as a key ingredient for postelection challenges. With voter participation at an all-time high, now is the time to focus on rebuilding voter faith and removing the political gamesmanship in elections.

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