http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/voter-primaries-s5.jpg 

Recently passed Republican legislation changes absentee/early voting rules in Wisconsin, making the window for early voting very small and more difficult to use for many working people.

LA CROSSE, WI - “We’ve got to go to the clerk and get your ballot sent to college,” I said to my son.

“Aw Mom. Is this election really that important?” he asked. “YES!” I answered. Maybe I added a little too much emphasis.

Spring elections are April 5th. Voters will choose, among others, all county board supervisors, a Supreme Court judge and their preference for President.

Voters are required to show an ID card. For folks not home on Election Day - the truck driver, college student or traveler - the absentee voting window is closing much faster.

To explain voting changes, I will take the perspective of an over-the-road truck driver named Joe.

The window for voting used to be fairly long. Joe could vote at his rural clerk’s kitchen table over the weekend. He had three weeks to get to the clerk’s home. Most town clerks work full-time out of the home. Usually, the best times for the clerk and the driver was on the weekend or later in the evening. Recently enacted law changes removed both of these options.

The new early voting timeframe opens later and closes earlier. Joe can only vote in person two

weeks before Election Day. And he can only come to the clerk's home (or municipal building in a city) Monday through Friday during limited hours. Voters can no longer vote absentee on the weekend or the Monday before an election.

Joe drives all week. With these changes, his only option is to ask for a ballot by mail.

To do this he must obtain an application, either by mail from the clerk or download the application from a website. Joe must fill out the application and make a copy of his ID. Then he must mail the ballot application and copy of the ID to the clerk. Or, like my son and I, deliver the application in person. The clerk holds the application until the very limited voting window opens. She then mails the ballot to Joe. He fills out the ballot, has it signed by a witness, and mails it back to the clerk. She delivers the ballot to the polling place.

If Joe had a scanner, an Internet connection and email, he could scan the ID and the ballot application (after he had downloaded it) and email the whole package to the clerk. He might shave off a few days in the process.

Shaving days off the process is critical because the ballot will not be counted unless it arrives by Election Day. The window is tight.

A bill (Senate Bill 295) changing voting rules recently passed the legislature. This bill was the 32nd new law making changes to voting and elections since the GOP majority took control in 2011. The new law requires the clerk receive absentee ballots by Election Day.

The new law also requires clerks to log in a statewide computer system every action they take in the absentee ballot process I described. Clerks must make five separate entries. This information will connect Joe's name and address with the date he applied for the ballot, the date the clerk mailed the ballot, the date he returned his ballot and the polling place at which he would have voted.

Under Senate Bill 295, all this information is sold by the state as a subscription service presumably to groups who want to influence Joe during the time prior to completing his ballot.

For Joe, or any other absentee voter, this means voter harassment targeted specifically at him.

Senate Bill 295 made many changes in voting laws. Some are useful, like allowing on-line voter registration by 2017 and allowing veteran's IDs for voting purposes for the April election. Some are very harmful like shortening the voting window. And the absentee ballot tracking system seems like a tremendous, unnecessary invasion of voter's privacy.

My son and I drove over to our clerk's home late Friday night and got his ballot sent to college. We chatted about his friends from high school. More became truck drivers than any other occupation. For these folks, voting became harder.

And the importance of voting never greater!