

Get Ready for the U.S. National ID Card

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It's only a matter of time before driver's licenses become the de facto U.S. identification card. Our licenses already have most of the features of a national ID card, and state governments are hard at work improving what little they lack. From there, it'll be only a small step for America to adopt a full-fledged national ID card. What should freedom-lovers do about it? Reread the Constitution and *1984*, and then buckle down for an impassioned debate that might challenge the way you think about the issue.

The national ID card that civil libertarians fear most is one that is issued to all citizens, who must carry it at all times; contains a unique number and personal information; and is required by government agencies and businesses for those who transact with them. Libertarians fear the ability of governments and corporations to use a national ID as a means to know much about us and to use that information against us.

But this ID may already be in our back pockets. The American driver's license has the main features of a national ID card: It's issued to nearly every adult, it contains a photo and a unique identifying number, and government agencies routinely request it as a means of identification. Our driver's licenses aren't quite a national ID, however, because of three shortcomings: The federal government doesn't require you to carry one, there's no common numbering format among the 50 states, and businesses don't widely use driver's licenses for authentication. But all this is about to change.

The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) will meet next month to hammer out its framework for new driver's licenses. In

the works is a common format for licenses across the U.S. and Canada, including a common numbering system and machine-readable biometrics, possibly including facial and fingerprint patterns. The new licenses will be protected with digital signatures to make them harder to copy.

These new licenses will be a boon for businesses, which will increasingly ask new customers to use this form of identification. Why? Businesses have been moving away from using the Social Security number as the unique code for matching customer records in their databases, in part because of a new California law restricting these kinds of uses. That loss of the SSN has made it more difficult for corporate America to do CRM. A more reliable and common driver's license would be the leading candidate to fill this great vacuum.

Legislators and bureaucrats already have this future in their sights. According to some reports, some policy-makers have already identified the laws that would need to be amended to allow the driver's license to become the national ID.

Civil libertarians will rue this day when it comes, but will the average American? I really don't think so.

Before 9/11, proposals in Congress for a national ID card always met with overwhelming public opposition. But after 9/11, a crack opened. For the first time, a majority of Americans polled supported the issuance a national ID card as a way to ferret out the America-hating foreign terrorists living here.

Momentum for a national ID -- as a separate card or as an enhanced driver's license -- will grow this year if there's a rise in illegal immigrants voting in the presidential elections. (This may occur in states such as California, where it has become easy for illegal immigrants to obtain driver's

licenses. The immigrants may in turn use their driver's licenses to meet the registration requirements to vote.) If this happens, you can imagine the reaction on Main Street, U.S.A.

If public sentiment ever swings strongly toward a national ID card, the federal government will be poised to provide it. This month, U.S. airports began scanning the digital fingerprints of foreign travelers. This October, the U.S. Passport Service will begin producing its first biometric passports for American travelers. The new passport will include a smart chip containing a facial image of the holder and a digital fingerprint. The government's experience tracking travelers is a trial run for the technologies that would be used for any citizen ID system.

Many other governments around the world are moving toward biometric national IDs (see Table 1). Their examples will increasingly familiarize Americans to the concept and make it that much easier to accept.

So, should we fear for our privacy? Certainly. This country was founded on the idea that the power of government should be fenced in by its citizens. A national ID could, over time, enable the federal government to enforce its laws with a precision that would make King George look harmless. That isn't the kind of America you or I want to live in.

What can we do about it? The AAMVA has developed eight privacy principles (see Table 2) for restricting the ways governments use driver's license information. These are the right controls to fence in the government and enable the economic and security benefits a national ID could help deliver.

Freedom-lovers should lobby their elected representatives to include these privacy principles in any laws having to do with citizen identification. Just speaking out against a national ID card, however, won't do much to change that fancy new driver's license that will be coming our way.

**Table 1
Countries Adopting Biometric National Identifiers**

Country	Type of ID Card	Planned Use of Biometrics			Timetable
		Photo	Iris scan	Finger-print	
U.S.	Driver's license	X	?	?	No set timetable or chosen biometric
	Passport	X		X	Issued in 2004
Canada	National ID	X	X	X	Under debate
European Union	Health insurance card		X	X	Issued by 2008
	Passports	X	X	X	Issued in 2005
U.K.	Entitlement card	X	X	X	Issued in 2006
China	National ID	X			Piloted in 2004, issued in 2005
	Social Security cards	X			20 large cities now issuing
Hong Kong	National ID	X		X	Issued in 2004
Thailand	National ID	X		X	Piloted in 2004, issued in 2005
Philippines	National ID	X		X	Under debate
Oman	National ID	X		X	Issued in 2003

Table 2

Privacy Principles for a National ID Card

The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators is considering building these principles into its new driver's license system.

1. **Openness.** Inform the public about all government uses of driver's license information.

2. **Individual participation.** Provide citizens a means to access and review information that has been collected about them.

3. **Collection limitation.** Limit the data that is collected to that which is minimally necessary.

4. **Data quality.** Keep data accurate, complete, current and verified.

5. **Use limitations.** Prohibit the government's use of information except as specifically allowed by law.

6. **Disclosure limitation.** Limit the sharing of information to that which is minimally necessary.

7. **Security.** Protect information against loss, destruction, tampering, theft and fraud.

8. **Accountability.** Institute checks and balances on governmental authorities using information.

Table 3

Arguments for a National ID Card

Debates over a national ID card clash over three main issues: government power, cost and personal convenience.

ISSUE	PRO	CON
Use by law enforcement and national defense agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Easier to link records on suspects■ Facilitates border control	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Invites use of card beyond law enforcement■ Gives government too much knowledge and control■ Invites monitoring of innocent citizens
Cost to government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Reduces cost of government record keeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ High initial cost of government infrastructure
User convenience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Less form-filling required	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Lost and stolen cards and erroneous card readings create high inconvenience