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Voter registration groups say new rules confusing

JOHN McCARTHY
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio - New rules issued by the Ohio secretary of state's office governing groups that pay people to register voters are confusing and have hindered their efforts to sign up new voters, critics of the rules said Monday.

Representatives of the Ohio Democratic Party, the League of Women Voters of Ohio and other groups active in registering voters said the rules developed by Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell's office go beyond the law they were intended to implement.

The Legislature, controlled by Republicans, passed the bill in January and the rules covering paid circulators went into effect May 2, the day of Ohio's primary in which Blackwell defeated fellow Republican Jim Petro for the GOP nomination for governor. The rules do not apply to volunteers who register voters.

The rules grew out of a bill Gov. Bob Taft signed Jan. 31 that overhauls Ohio election law. It will require voters to show identification at the polls before being allowed to vote, bars the attorney general and secretary of state from acting as treasurer or in an official capacity for ballot initiatives and sets new rules for people paid to collect voter registrations or signatures to qualify an issue for the budget.

One rule requires paid circulators to return signed registration cards within 10 days to either county boards of elections or to the secretary of state's office, not to the group paying them. That goes beyond what legislators intended, critics said.

Groups such as MoveOn.org and America Coming Together actively registered voters in the groups' attempt to defeat President Bush in 2004. Don McTigue, a lawyer representing a similar group, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN, said the rules are causing such groups to look for new voters outside Ohio.

"They want to engage in voter registration drives, but they might not be able to," McTigue told Judith Grady, Blackwell's elections director, at a hearing on the new rules.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio is being peppered with questions about the rules from groups that pay circulators, said Peg Rosenfield, the league's elections specialist.

"We need answers," she said.

The requirement to submit registrations directly to elections officials singles out groups usually associated with political causes, said Wendy Weiser, deputy director for democracy programs for the Brennan Center for Justice, a New-York based think tank.

"While a library might be able to accept a lot of individual forms and submit them in a box, a voter registration group could not," Weiser said. "It's just calculated to make it as difficult as possible."

The law states: "No person who receives compensation for registering a voter shall knowingly return any registration form entrusted to that person to any location other than any board of elections or the office of the secretary of state."

Blackwell is only following the law, spokesman James Lee said.

"The law clearly says it is the responsibility of the person who gathered the voter registration forms to make sure those forms get to the secretary of state's office or the county board," Lee said. "The law is clear and the rules need to reflect the law."

Rep. Kevin DeWine, a suburban Dayton Republican who sponsored the legislation, said Blackwell's office strictly followed the language. He feared that the paid collectors could just drop off boxes of registrations and libraries or other places where voters can register.

"What we didn't want was for that person to submit a large stack of registrations to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles or a school," DeWine said.

ON THE NET

Ohio Secretary of State: <http://www.sos.state.oh.us>

League of Women Voters of Ohio: <http://www.lwvohio.org>

Brennan Center for Justice: <http://www.brennancenter.org>

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