

Officials dispute claims of changed voter registrations

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

County and state elections officials are disputing claims that Oregon voters' party affiliations were changed without their consent.

Secretary of State Bev Clarno, a Republican, oversees the state's elections. Her office has been pushing back on conspiracy theories circulating on social media that Republicans' registrations were changed to nonpartisan before this year's primary election to keep them from voting in the Republican primary.

"Claims that our office changed the party of voters to nonpartisan without consent are misinformation and flat out false," she said in a statement. "We work to protect the integrity and fairness of every election."

Kim Lindell, elections manager for Umatilla County, said usually after an election her office gets a few calls from people who believed their party had been changed, but she has seen an increase this time around.

"We got a lot more angry calls than in the past," she said.

The county's elections system keeps a record of voters' party affiliation over time, and allows elections officials to look at what ballot those voters were sent in each election since 2005. Lindell said when people have called with a complaint, so far she hasn't found any record that those voters' affiliations were changed recently.

During primary elections, held once every two years, Oregonians receive different ballots, depending on their party affiliation. Registered Republicans receive a ballot that includes choices for which Republican will face off against the other parties' nominees during the general election in November. Members of other parties participate similarly in their own



Emily Bennett removes ballots from their envelopes at the Umatilla County Elections office on Tuesday, May 19, 2020.

party's primary. And nonaffiliated voters receive a ballot with only nonpartisan races, such as county commissioner or city councilor.

Lindell said if people haven't voted during previous primaries, when fewer voters generally turn in a ballot, they wouldn't have noticed they were receiving a nonpartisan ballot.

"My thought is that people are remembering how they voted in November, for a particular candidate, and in November everyone gets the same ballot," she said.

Morrow County elections manager Bobbi Childers said she is seeing a similar phenomenon of people claiming that their party affiliation was changed recently, even though records show they received nonpartisan ballots in past primaries.

"People say, 'I voted for Trump in the last election,' and we have the ballots, and we can say, 'Yes you voted for Trump, but that was in



Dan Lonai, the Umatilla County director of administrative services, watches as ballots run through a counting machine at the Umatilla County Elections office in Pendleton on Friday, May 15, 2020.

November," she said.

Oregon uses information from the Department of Motor Vehicles to automatically register U.S. citizens to vote, and those who are automatically registered receive a postcard in the mail notifying them that they will need to change their politi-

cal party status if they want to join a party. Childers said many of the complaints she has seen have been from people who were automatically registered and this is the first time they have tried to vote since.

Some voters remain adamant that their party registration was changed by someone other than them. When Clarno posted an article by fact-checking website Lead Stories to the Oregon Secretary of State Facebook page, the post was inundated with comments from people stating they had personally experienced their registration being changed.

Regardless of their current party status, Oregon voters can change their party registration at any time, other than the period starting 21 days before an election and ending after the election's results are certified.

This rule has caused some additional confusion right now, both Lindell and Childers said, as the May 19 election's results have yet to be certified. If a voter attempts to change their registration now, that change will only take effect after the election's results are certified in early June, leading some people to mistak-

enly believe that the state is switching their registration back to nonaffiliated.

"One gal said she has changed it six times, and she did, but those are sitting in the queue," Childers said.

Once results are certified, those changes that have been requested during the election period will go through. Lindell said the reason they are held is to make sure the final elections results show accurate statistics for figures, such as voter turnout by party.

"It's Oregon law. It always has been," she said.

Elections are not certified until 15 days after election day. The elections office "challenges" ballots where the person's signature is missing or the signature does not match the one the elections office has on file for that voter, and voters have 14 days to provide "sufficient evidence" that they were the ones who filled out the ballot. Other votes come in to the office after election day because they were turned in at a ballot box outside the county. On Thursday, May 28, Lindell said Umatilla County still had 275 ballots yet to be counted.

Another complaint Lindell said some people have is that they did not receive a ballot at all. To remedy that problem, she said, people should contact their elections office as soon as they realize other people have received one and they have not. If the election is far enough out, the elections office can send them a new ballot in the mail after verifying their address. If there isn't enough time, voters can pick up their ballot in person at the county courthouse.

"Always call us," she said. "That's what we're here for, to get a ballot in your hand and make sure it gets returned."

For more information about voting, or to make changes to your registration, visit oregonvotes.gov.

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