

House Democratic Office

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Republicans kill Democrats' bill to stop voter registration fraud

Republican-led House passes bill to discourage voting by seniors, young people & poor

SALEM—Rep. Paul Holvey (D-Eugene) led an effort by House Democrats Thursday to combat voter registration fraud and end the “bounty system” for registering voters, but the majority Republicans killed the measure and passed HB 2583, a bill that sets up barriers to older voters, young people and low-income citizens.

The Democrats’ “minority report,” which Holvey offered as a substitute for the Republican bill, would have prohibited politicians and interest groups from paying or receiving money based on the number of signed voter registration cards. The Democrats’ bill responded to several high-profile examples of fraud and abuse by paid registration-gatherers in Oregon.

During last year’s campaign, the Oregon Secretary of State investigated at least three complaints concerning an out-of-state political consultant whose paid canvassers destroyed the voter registrations of thousands of Oregonians who supported the opposing party. Destruction of voter-registration material is illegal under existing law, but paying people a set amount per registration is not.

Holvey pointed to examples in which paid canvassers went to bars and college campuses, where they tricked people into registering for one political party by asking for signatures on phony ballot measures. Once a person signed a phony petition, the canvasser then asked for “verification” signatures, which the signer unknowingly applied to a blank voter-registration card. On other occasions, canvassers simply asked people to sign blank cards, and promised to fill in the other information for them, based on their entries on the phony petition.

“Our bill responds to a real problem that has plagued the election system in Oregon,” Holvey said. The Republican bill, however, is “a cure looking for an illness, but it’s a cure that produces some really nasty side effects.” Holvey said the Democrats’ measure is consistent with Ballot Measure 26, which Oregon voters passed overwhelmingly in 2002. Ballot Measure 26 prohibits paying signature-gatherers on ballot measure petitions by the signature.

The Republicans’ bill would require everyone to provide citizenship documents before they could register to vote, even though federal law already provides criminal penalties for non-citizens who attempt to vote. Rep. Peter Buckley (D-Ashland) charged that the bill would discourage voting by seniors, young people, and low-income people.

Buckley also charged that voting by illegal immigrants is a nonexistent problem, and pointed to the recent scrutiny of Washington state’s voting system in the wake of the extraordinarily close race for

governor. After an intensive examination of registrations and votes, investigators found only two cases in which illegal immigrants had tried to vote. If the same rate of “abuse” occurred in Oregon, which has roughly half of Washington’s population, fewer than one voter in 1.3 million was an illegal immigrant who tried to vote—a rate of less than one ten-thousandth of a percent, Buckley said.

The claim that the bill will prevent voting by illegal immigrants is absurd, Buckley said. “Why would an illegal immigrant jeopardize himself by trying to register to vote? Why would an illegal immigrant subject herself to official scrutiny, and commit a federal felony in the process, just to cast a vote in a primary or general election?”

The Ashland Democrat explained that young people, many of them students, often don’t have access to the documents they would need to register to vote under the Republicans’ bill. “Not having the documents, they will forgo registering, and they will fall into that great, lamentable abyss of nonvoters,” Buckley said.

The same is true for older citizens. “Many of them have lost the documents they need to prove their citizenship,” Buckley said. “Many of them will simply fail to register, rather than undertake the bureaucratic hassles of replacing them.”

Low-income citizens often have enough trouble meeting the demands of tough, low-paying jobs, managing their families, and taking care of business at home, Buckley added. “Many are mobile, because they cannot afford to own a home. Many have lost or misplaced important documents, or they have left them behind in places that aren’t readily accessible. If they must produce these documents to register, chances are they won’t register. And they won’t vote.”