

GOP Oath Causing Controversy

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HARRISONBURG — The idea of signing a pledge declaring party affiliation is so off-putting to one county election worker, she won't be taking part in this year's presidential primary — or even casting a ballot.

Miriam Clark has served as the chief election official at the Broadway voting precinct for years. But, Clark said, she will not be there on March 1 if the Republican Party of Virginia goes through with its plan requiring voters to sign a statement of affiliation before casting a ballot.

"I can't force the voters to do anything I don't believe in," said the 61-year-old Melrose resident. "That pledge is preventing me from voting, too."

Open Primary State

Virginia is one of several states that hold "open primary" elections in which voters do not register by party.

Voters who wish to cast a Republican primary ballot this year, however, will be asked to sign a statement furnished by an election official that says: "My signature below indicates that I am a Republican."

As far as state party officials are concerned, it's a sensible request that has the goal of ensuring those who vote in the primary have the GOP's interests at heart.

"The Republican Party of Virginia's State Central Committee has set a reasonable threshold to participate in the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary, signing your name to a very simple nine word statement," Virginia GOP Chairman John Findlay said in a statement on the party's website.

Findlay goes on to say the oath does not target any candidate, group of voters or establish an unreasonable barrier to voting.

State Republican Party officials did not return several phone calls seeking comment for this story.

The oath already has survived a legal challenge.

Supporters of GOP presidential contender Donald Trump filed a lawsuit to have it thrown out. But on Jan. 14, U.S. District Judge M. Hannah Lauck ruled there wasn't enough evidence to show that voters would suffer "irreparable harm" by signing a party affiliation statement before receiving a ballot.

For her part, Clark said she is opposed to the measure on principle.

"In Virginia, you don't register as part of a party — you register as a voter," she said.

She noted if a left-leaning voter didn't want to vote for any of the Democratic candidates, they would need to lie to receive a ballot.

"I just don't understand it, and I think it's wrong," Clark said. "I will not work the polling place that day, because I refuse to tell someone they have to lie to vote."

Little Reaction So Far

Rockingham County Registrar Lisa Gooden said she hasn't received any other complaints about the statement so far.

"Unfortunately, this is something we have to do as far as state code goes," Gooden said.

She has been asked by some voters about their options should they refuse to sign the statement.

"We're still waiting on some guidance from the state Department of Elections on what to do," Gooden said.

Clark said she's worried voters who don't want to sign the statement will instead be asked to cast a provisional ballot, and those ballots might not count.

"There's really no way to know if those ballots will even get counted," she said. "The state Board of Elections decides that after the fact."

Harrisonburg Voter Registrar Deborah Logan has yet to receive any complaints or questions about the statement.

"We haven't had many absentee voters come in yet, though," Logan said. "I'm actually really surprised at how quiet it's been."

She's mailed out a handful of absentee ballots with the statement as well and hasn't heard from any of those voters.

"I imagine if there were any issues, they would happen at the polls on primary day, with voters that may not realize they have to sign," Logan said, though she pointed out that signing the affiliation statement was not a permanent commitment to the party.

Republican poll chiefs working on primary day will receive extra training to ensure everyone voting in the GOP contest receives the same information about the statement and their options, she said.

So far, none of the city's election workers has recused themselves from the primary, either.

"Maybe I'm just lucky," Logan said.

The deadline to register to vote in the March primary is Feb. 8.

More information about the primary election can found at the Virginia Department of Elections website, elections.virginia.gov.

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