

Posted on Tue, Oct. 05, 2004

Botched forms exclude many voters

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Miami Herald

Broward County residents who skipped over a box on their voter registration form will be barred from voting in the presidential election, while Miami-Dade residents who made the same omission will be allowed to cast ballots.

Secretary of State Glenda Hood, who oversees elections statewide, said Monday that Broward was following her instructions in disqualifying those who failed to complete the form.

But she indicated that there was no way to force Dade to follow the same procedure. And Dade said it was sticking to its plan of not disqualifying voters for skipping the citizenship box if they affirmed elsewhere with their signatures that they are U.S. citizens.

The disparate procedures came to light in the days before Monday's deadline for registering to vote in Florida in November.

In 2000, Florida decided the presidential election by a mere 537 votes. With Florida again poised to play a key role in choosing the president, groups have crisscrossed the state in recent weeks, registering thousands of new voters. Some groups may have been less than attentive in ensuring that every box is checked and every blank filled out.

"The law clearly states that form has to be filled out in its entirety," said Hood, in Broward Monday to look in on a pollworker training class. ``You cannot go in and pick and choose which boxes you choose or do not choose to fill out."

But when asked about counties that were interpreting the law differently, Hood replied: ``We can't do anything except say what the law is."

While it is causing the most controversy, the problem with the citizenship box is only a tiny percentage of the thousands of problem registrations in Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

In Miami-Dade, for example, about 40 of some 8,000 incomplete registrations turned in over the past several months were from voters who ignored the citizenship box.

Statewide, thousands of would-be voters left off information from their registration forms. In most counties, those registrations will be rejected, based on a state Division of Election ruling that prohibits officials from accepting incomplete applications.

At least two other counties, Leon and Orange, are taking the same stance as Miami-Dade. Officials say they will ignore Hood's orders and -- in the case of the unchecked citizenship box -- allow people to vote, as long as they signed the oath at the bottom pledging they are citizens.

Broward election officials say they've given people plenty of opportunities to correct any omissions.

"We've actually gone above and beyond, I think, to try to facilitate the registration process for the voters," said Gisela Salas, deputy supervisor of elections.

Over the past several months, the Broward office sent out 8,000 letters to people with incomplete registrations, Salas said.

Last week, they worked with America's Families United, a nonpartisan, Washington-based civil rights group, to send out another batch of letters.

Elections workers sent letters and a copy of the incompleting form, highlighting what was missing, to an estimated 4,000 people.

Miami-Dade officials sent out similar letters, but have taken an opposite approach to the citizenship box.

"The Miami-Dade Commission is doing everything possible to enfranchise people who have sworn that they are eligible to vote," said Murray Greenberg, a Miami-Dade assistant county attorney.

Still, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, a Miami Democrat and co-chairman of John Kerry's Florida campaign, flew to Tallahassee Monday to urge elections officials to tell county supervisors they could accept voter registration forms even if the citizenship box is not checked.

"What I've asked the secretary and deputy secretary and others is ... lean on the side of democracy and allow people to vote," Meek said.

Hood blamed the incomplete forms on eager, inattentive outreach groups blanketing Florida in hopes of registering as many new voters as possible in an all-important swing state.

Groups dumped thousands of forms on election offices, Hood said.

"If there's a third-party group out there or an individual who is not making sure that they give that information to the voter and make sure that form is complete, it's doing a great disservice to that voter," she said.

Judith Browne, a lawyer working with America's Families United, bristled at Hood's suggestion that outreach groups weren't thorough.

"Her concern should be getting voters on the rolls," Browne said. ``What we were intending to do is get more people on the rolls, and the state has stepped in the way."

One community group, the Association of Community Reform Organizations Now, announced Monday that it had registered 212,317 voters statewide, including nearly 61,000 voters in Miami-Dade County and 31,581 in Broward.

Herald staff writers Noah Bierman, Ashley Fantz and Luisa Yanez contributed to this report.