



Thursday, March 13, 2008

Change to voter rolls called into question

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A county election commissioner accused of inappropriately moving over 10,000 voters from active to inactive status since the beginning of the year said she was simply doing her job.

District 1 Election Commissioner Sue Sautermeister came under fire late last week when it was revealed she had been changing voters' status since the start of this year. Election Commission Chairman Kakey Chaney said this was done improperly.

Statistics indicate that there are several thousand more voters registered on the books than actual eligible voters.

According to estimates from the 2006 U.S. Census, the county had a population of 87,419, but only 63,000 of those residents are over 18 and eligible to vote.

As of March 7, there were 70,871 registered voters on the books, according to numbers provided by Circuit Clerk Lee Westbrook.

Sautermeister has said she will not resign from her position despite calls for her to do so, and has remained steadfast in her belief that the Election Commission has delayed cleaning up the voter rolls for far too long.

Westbrook said she had received a surprisingly low volume of calls from voters concerned about the issue over the past week.

"Either people are not alarmed, or it's one of those things they'll think about on Election Day," she said last Friday. "Every one of us thought we would be bombarded."

All but 185 voters had been moved from inactive to active status by the Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann's office since Wednesday when the situation was made public.

Westbrook said the voter rolls had been restored in time to avoid any problems for this past Tuesday's elections.

On Monday, the Board of Supervisors voted to withhold Sautermeister's pay from the county for the end of January and February, totaling \$1,848, until the situation could be clarified further. Sautermeister also voluntarily suspended her access to the State Elections Management System that allowed her to make voters inactive.

Many of the hours listed for Sautermeister on her per diem pay sheet describe "purge" as the action taken during those times. None of the pay sheets for the other four election commissioners list purging as part of their activities during the same time period.

According to Westbrook, making voters inactive within 90 days of a federal election is a violation of federal election laws.

Sautermeister admitted in an interview last week that "the timing may be off" because of Tuesday's federal election, but maintained that keeping the voter rolls clean should be a priority for Election Commission members.

"This is part of our job, to keep the voter rolls clean," she said. "This is something we're supposed to be doing. The others knew I was doing it."

She added that she believed there was a legal difference between making voters inactive and purging them from the books and had requested clarification from Hosemann's office before Wednesday.

Last year, the supervisors rejected a budget request by Chaney for additional funds to send out notification cards to registered voters who had not responded to mail such as jury summonses.

Some supervisors expressed concern that the cards would only confuse voters about their status during an election year.

According to procedure outlined by Chaney on Monday, voters may be made inactive if these notification cards are not filled out and returned in 30 days. Inactive voters who do not vote in the two subsequent federal elections are purged from the voter rolls.

"It appears Sue Sautermeister inactivated voters but before sending the required notice to voters," Chaney told the supervisors on Monday.

But Sautermeister countered that since the county had never undertaken such an effort before, it was unclear what the correct procedure should be for the county.

"We still don't know how the process works," she said, adding that some commissioners from other counties had told her that voters could be made inactive prior to notification cards being sent.

Westbrook said the commissioners had been collecting returned mail since they took office at the start of 2005 as the first step towards cleaning up the voter rolls.

The words "purged" and "inactive" had been used interchangeably but incorrectly over the past week, according to Westbrook, since purged voters are those who are deceased or those who have felony convictions that forbid them to vote.

But the effect for many inactive voters would still be the same, since they would have to vote by an affidavit ballot.

"It's not something I would have done. I would not have assumed that authority," Westbrook said of Sautermeister's actions.

Sautermeister said she hoped the situation would raise awareness of the county's ongoing problem with inflated voter rolls.

Too many people, she said, are not voting in the correct precincts and should update their voter registration information whenever it is necessary.

"That's the hope. People will realize their voter registrations are wrong," she said.

Westbrook and Sautermeister differed about the status of Mississippi Third District congressional candidate David Landrum, a Madison County resident, whom Sautermeister made inactive.

While Westbrook said she would not have inactivated Landrum and recently personally confirmed that Landrum was a county resident who had recently moved, Sautermeister said her decision was correctly based on pieces of returned mail.

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