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Proposed Rule Would Disenfranchise Voters and Cause Election Chaos

By Andrea Kaminski, Executive Director, League of Women Voters of Wisconsin Education Fund

The League of Women Voters believes that voting is a fundamental right that must be guaranteed to every eligible citizen, and that election administration should be efficient and well coordinated. The Government Accountability Board (GAB) is considering for the second time a proposed emergency rule which threatens both voting rights and smooth election administration.

The GAB in July decided not to adopt a rule that would have prevented voters from casting a regular ballot, and having that ballot count, if there is no “complete match” between the voter’s ID information on the voter registration list and other government databases. An “unmatched” voter would only be eligible to cast a provisional ballot, which would not be counted unless the voter presents proof of residence to election officials by 4:00 p.m. the following day.

The GAB decided against adopting the proposed rule before the fall elections, in part because no one knows how extensive the mismatching between the various state databases is. All kinds of discrepancies can trip it up, including misspellings, use of nicknames, hyphenated or double last names, middle names and initials, first names that look like last names and vice versa. However, the Republican Party has asked the GAB to reconsider its position.

Wisconsin’s system of open and clean elections has resulted in very few problems over the years. Requiring thousands of voters whose names are tagged as a “nonmatch” to cast a provisional ballot will wreak havoc on our system. It could make Wisconsin “this year’s Ohio.”

Besides, it is unfair. Voters who use provisional ballots must bring their ID or proof of residence document to the clerk's office by the day after the election in order for their vote to be counted. Asking voters to do that at this fall's elections will result in many people disenfranchised simply because the matching system is still unproven. As with other restrictive measures, the burden would fall disproportionately on the people for whom it would be most difficult to get to the clerk’s office, that is, the elderly, disabled, low-income and/or minority people.

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin opposes the imposition of this emergency rule, which would disenfranchise voters and foul up election administration. Now that the matching software is up and running, the GAB chose wisely to address the matching issue by cross checking new registrations as they come in. It is important to note that a nonmatch doesn’t mean the registration is invalid or fraudulent. It may mean that there is a problem with the name and address, which might have been mistyped when entered into the system by a busy human being.

Through use of the statewide voter registration system in the fall elections, the GAB will gather data on how extensive the mismatches are, and they will address those following the election. That is a better time to work out the bugs in the software, so they don't interfere with the right of eligible Wisconsin citizens to cast a vote and have it counted.

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin (LWVWI) Education Fund is a nonpartisan political organization that promotes informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. LWVWI Education Fund is a proud member of Community Shares of Wisconsin.