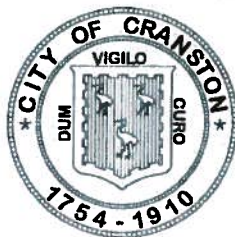


Kirk McDonough
Chairperson

Nicholas J. Lima
Registrar / Director of Elections



Quilcia I. Moronta
Member

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Member

CRANSTON BOARD OF CANVASSERS
869 PARK AVE
CRANSTON, RI 02910-2786

March 25, 2024

The Honorable Members of the House Committee on State Government and Elections
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Cranston Board of Canvassers Support for H-7662(Unaffiliated Voters in Primaries)

Dear Chairman Shanley and Hon. Members of the House State Government and Elections Committee:

The Cranston Board of Canvassers and Canvassing Authority staff are in strong support of **H-7662**, an act that would allow unaffiliated voters to remain unaffiliated when voting in primary elections. A very similar act passed the House unanimously last session.

This bill solves multiple issues in modern election administration in the state of Rhode Island by modernizing an out-of-date process that no longer works in the best interests of the voters. It is strongly supported by a **unanimous** vote of the Rhode Island Town and City Clerks' Association, and has been supported by the state Board of Elections.

H-7662 allows voters who are already unaffiliated – the vast majority of which, per voter history records, also prefer to remain unaffiliated – to vote in the primary of their choice, just as they can under current law, but without the need to fill out a disaffiliation form following the primary. In essence, unaffiliated voters automatically would remain unaffiliated after voting in a primary. This is the way it should be.

Local election officials expend hundreds of hours following every election cycle processing tens of thousands of disaffiliation forms filled out at precinct polling locations. This is an enormous waste of time and resources, as the vast majority of those voters were unaffiliated going into the very primary they voted in – we are consuming huge amounts of public time and energy to, in effect, shuffle papers around desks. In Cranston alone, processing 10,000 or more disaffiliations after a single statewide primary takes our office staff over one month of diligent work to complete, as each disaffiliation must be processed individually and checked for accuracy. Each form also involves costly mailings to the voters confirming their disaffiliation when we process it.

But there's another problem, which is growing due to the increased use of mail ballots. Unaffiliated voters who apply to vote by mail in a primary likewise become automatically affiliated with the party, but unlike in-person voters, they are not as easily afforded the opportunity to disaffiliate, as many would otherwise do at a polling place. This means that they remain affiliated with the party post-election, and when they attempt to apply for a mail ballot for the next election, our office staff in many instances must reject the application. The reason for this is, while the voters are accustomed from past elections to being disaffiliated, they are now registered with a party from voting by mail, and in numerous cases they later apply for a mail ballot for a party primary that they are now not eligible for. This broken process often results in confrontational and understandably irritated phone calls from voters to our office personnel when voters realize, too late, that they have lost their ability to vote in the primary of their choice.

Another significant issue that the bill would help mitigate is the abundance of provisional ballots that local boards of canvassers must adjudicate after each primary election. While many provisional ballots are for voters who are not registered in the voting district, a vast number – in many cases, the majority in a primary – are for voters who claim to be registered in one party, but are in fact in another party. This occurs because, nominally, the voter forgot to disaffiliate after the last primary they voted in two years ago (election officials are forbidden to “remind” voters to disaffiliate: they must do so of their own accord). Or, as mentioned above, voters who previously voted in a primary by mail didn’t realize that by doing so, they became registered to vote with a political party, but did not have the opportunity or thought to disaffiliate. When appearing at a polling place the following election, again, the voter casts a provisional ballot for a party they are now not eligible for.

These scenarios are far too common, and as election officials, we have seen them occur hundreds, if not thousands of times. We receive many angry and concerned phone calls and in-person visits from voters about this issue following the 30-day party disaffiliation deadline, as well as post-election from voters who were disenfranchised and had their **provisional ballot disqualified** due to otherwise avoidable party registration issues.

Unaffiliated voters should not be losing their right to vote over what amounts to mundane paperwork. By remaining unaffiliated after voting in a primary, a significant portion, if not the majority, of the above-referenced problems will be reduced or eliminated entirely. It would certainly be a good thing if local boards of canvassers had fewer provisional ballots to adjudicate – and disqualify – following each primary election. Likewise, the enormous effort undertaken to process thousands of post-primary disaffiliations by our staff would be better utilized on other important election tasks. This bill would go a long way towards helping unaffiliated voters have their voice heard and counted.

Voters who wish to be registered with a political party can do so at any time, online, at vote.ri.gov or by contacting their local board of canvassers to be sent a registration form. According to Rhode Island Secretary of State statistics, **a near majority of the state’s voters – 47%, or over 338,000 – choose to remain unaffiliated.** Passage would ensure these voters are not disenfranchised needlessly for simply forgetting to disaffiliate, and save local election officials countless hours of time and precious resources during busy election seasons.

We strongly urge the General Assembly to consider passing this key reform, and thank the sponsors for introducing it with both the voters and the efficacy of the elections process in mind. It is long overdue, and will improve the process tremendously if enacted. The time is more critical now than ever to do that, with two statewide primaries and a busy presidential election season ahead of us in 2024.

If you have any questions on this legislation, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at 401-780-3128, or via email at nlima@cranstonri.gov. We appreciate your consideration and support for this legislation.

Very truly yours,



Nicholas J. Lima
Registrar / Director of Elections

Cc: Kirk McDonough, Chairperson, Cranston Board of Canvassers