

Elizabeth Democrats to revote on Tuesday
First primary spoiled by mistakes at polls
Friday, September 22, 2006
BY CARLY ROTHMAN
Star-Ledger Staff

Union County officials hope to keep a special election in Elizabeth Tuesday fair and GOP-free, after a debacle in June when nearly 40 Republicans illegally voted in two Democratic primary races.

Poll workers were ultimately to blame for letting Republicans cast ballots for two Democratic city council candidates, election officials said. They are not sure whether the Republicans crossed party lines intentionally or if it was accidental.

"There is nothing to be done except policing," said Michael Moussallem, director of information systems for the county elections board. "This could be happening every time."

The Democratic June primary was a close and contentious race, pitting Councilman Bob Jaspan against former library director Joe Keenan in the 3rd Ward and George O'Grady against Nelson Gonzalez in the 2nd Ward. The Jaspan and O'Grady ticket beat Keenan and Gonzalez, who did not run as a ticket, by nine votes.

Only registered members of a political party can vote in that party's primary, according to the Help American Vote Act of 2002, and in such a tight race the Republican votes could have tipped the election.

That's why a judge threw out the June election results and ordered a second primary for Tuesday. Thirty-three poll workers have been removed from the elections board's roster as a result of the botched election.

Election board deputies, who are responsible for trouble-shooting on election days, also will be on the lookout for irregularities Tuesday, said Dennis Scott Kobitz, the board's deputy administrator.

When New Jersey voters go to the polls for primary elections, poll workers hand them color-coded slips of paper -- pink for Democrats and blue for Republicans. Voters present these papers to the person manning the voting machine, and that worker then sets it so they can only cast ballots for candidates in their political party.

The Republicans who voted in the June Democratic primary were given the wrong color slip, Kobitz explained.

"Any candidate depends on us, so you have to do a good job. That's the reason I keep working the machines," said Blanca Oliveras, 63, who has been a Union County poll worker for 25 years.

"One mistake, and that's a problem. You have to be alert."

Kobitz and Moussallem said keeping poll workers from making those mistakes is the only way to prevent another flawed election, but both warn it won't be easy.

Voters of all parties are listed together in a large book, so poll workers can sometimes misread the book to match a voter with the wrong party, Kobitz said, adding Democrats are so dominant in the 2nd and 3rd Wards that sheer force of habit might lead a poll worker to hand a Republican a pink slip.

And sometimes poll workers simply aren't paying attention.

"They start talking, talking, talking. That's no good," Oliveras said. "You keep your mouth shut, and you watch the person."

There are about four poll workers per district in Union County, totaling about 1,700.

Most are senior citizens, Moussallem said, although with permission from their parents and their school superintendents, students age 16 and older can work at the polls for a half-day. Adult poll workers must work from 5:15 a.m. to 8:15 p.m. on election days. They earn \$200 for their trouble plus a bit of extra money for chores such as transferring materials to and from the polling station.

"It's very hard to find poll workers, even though we pay them," Moussallem said.

The special election Tuesday -- which County Clerk Joanne Rajoppi called "unprecedented (in Union County) from my historical knowledge" -- will require the services of 103 poll workers. Each worker must attend a training session at least once every two years. An extra class has been scheduled for Saturday to prepare poll workers for the special election.

"This election is going to teach us a lot," Oliveras said. "When you win, win with honesty."

© 2006 The Star Ledger

© 2006 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.