Pa. ballot registry not necessarily permanent

Pennsylvania's 2019 mail-in ballot law continues to cause confusion as election officials across the state prepare for their first municipal primary under the new rules on May 18.

The law that the GOP-controlled legislature enacted by an overwhelming bipartisan margin in 2019 triggered a number of challenges and court clarifications last year, as millions of Pennsylvania voters flocked to no-excuse mail-in voting for the first time, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Many voters thought they had registered to receive a mail-in ballot in all future elections when they opted to be part of what the law termed a "permanent mail-in ballot list." But it turns out the list isn't so permanent. Many voters learned for the first time this month that it is, instead, an annual list that they must reregister for every year to continue to receive mail-in ballots.

"Voters who registered to be on the "permanent list of mail-in voters" will be removed from the list if they don't act now to reregister soon.

Although the 2019 law that allowed Pennsylvanians to vote by mail without providing an excuse resulted in a registry for those who opted to receive a mail-in ballot for all future elections, it added a provision that required those who chose that option to reregister annually.

"It's a misnomer," said Chris DeSulvio, policy director of the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy and Security. "This permanent mail-in or absentee list isn't permanent. It's annual."

The law requires county elections officials to send out notifications no later than the first Monday in February to everyone who registered for permanent mail-in ballots. They must inform voters they are required to renew that registration annually.

More confusion

The wording of the letter the Pennsylvania Department of State provided to counties added to the confusion. Although the text of the letter informs voters that if they do nothing, they will be removed from the list, it also includes a box immediately below the text labeled, "Request to cancel my permanent voter status."

Ignoring the letter or checking the box and returning it will have the same effect.

Department of State spokeswoman Wanda Muren said those checking the box will have their names removed from the list to receive mail-in ballots in the coming year. It would not, as some were concerned, result in their removal for voter-registration rolls.

Those who wish to remain on the registry need to fill out the form on the back of the letter, sign it and return it to the county elections office. Those anxious to save the cost of a stamp can register to receive a mail-in ballot by going to votesPA.com/ApplyMailBallot.

While voters were quick to embrace mail-in balloting, with more than 2 million Pennsylvanians casting mail-in ballots in the Nov. 3 election, county elections officials, overwhelmed by the change, have asked state lawmakers to amend the law. A report by the Pennsylvania Association of County Commissioners has recommended that lawmakers add provisions to allow the time-consuming process of processing mail-in ballots to begin before Election Day.

The group also suggested the state change the deadline for applying for a mail-in ballot from seven days before an election to 15 days to ensure there is adequate time to get ballots out and returned before the polls close on Election Day.