

Oregon's independent voices need to be heard

2/11/2016

Editorial Board

The Motor Voter Act, which Democrats rammed through on a straight party-line vote last year, promises to prove a win-win for them.

It not only will swell voter rolls with youthful and often disengaged voters, largely leaning Democratic, but also to deliver turnout dividends that have always improved Democratic electoral fortunes. What's more, as things stand, it's virtually certain to return the Independent Party of Oregon to minority status in 2018, thus snuffing a threat of potentially greater magnitude than that posed by Oregon's increasingly marginalized and demoralized GOP.

Maverick Scappoose Democrat Betsy Johnson bucked party leadership on Motor Voter in both 2013 and 2015, but the Democrats gained enough seats in 2014 balloting to Betsy-proof the Senate. In 2013, they needed Johnson's vote to prevail, but in 2015, they did not.

Under the bill, every eligible but unregistered Oregonian is automatically added to the rolls upon visiting DMV for a driver's license. They can opt out by mailing a postcard to the state Elections Division, but less than 6 percent have been availing themselves so far for that choice.

The new voters are automatically listed as unaffiliated, unless they mail a postcard expressing a party preference. Less than 9 percent have been exercising that option.

To maintain major party status, the Independents needs to hold the allegiance of at least 5 percent of registered voters. Flooding the rolls with an estimated 300,000 new voters the first two years, and potentially 1.5 million over time, serves to put that standard well out of reach.

The IPO has asked the Legislature, currently conducting an abbreviated off-year session, to temporarily allow continued use of the mid-2015 registration figures for determining major party status. That would give Legislature time to more fully and fairly consider possible longer range solutions.

The 2016 election cycle is the first in which the Independents have been able to field candidates of their own, rather than simply cross-nominating moderate Republicans or Democrats. Hitting

the pause button would extend that ability through the 2018 cycle, and possibly 2020. In the process, it would give the IPO an electoral track record that could be factored in.

The Republican Party has gone all-in on the IPO's behalf. In a letter signed by its entire Senate caucus, it has urged Senate President Peter Courtney to allow introduction of a bi-partisan bill maintaining the status quo for the 2018 and 2020 cycles.

The Legislature already has a bill to give the smaller Working Families Party an exemption from an unintended consequence of the Motor Voter Bill. But the WFP stands in much greater favor than the IPO, as its mission is cross-nominating labor-friendly candidates, who vote overwhelmingly Democratic.

In addition to securing Courtney's blessing for introduction of a bill, the IPO would, of course, have to secure the bill's passage in the problematic Senate and even more problematic House, the latter a decidedly unfriendly venue. But simple fairness dictates Courtney provide that opportunity.

In this era of extreme partisanship, the IPO is struggling to offer a middle path of constructive moderation. That's something all Oregonians should applaud.