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Big G.O.P. Bid to Challenge Voters at Polls in Key State

By MICHAEL MOSS

Republican Party officials in Ohio took formal steps yesterday to place thousands of recruits inside polling places on Election Day to challenge the qualifications of voters they suspect are not eligible to cast ballots.

Party officials say their effort is necessary to guard against fraud arising from aggressive moves by the Democrats to register tens of thousands of new voters in Ohio, seen as one of the most pivotal battlegrounds in the Nov. 2 elections.

Election officials in other swing states, from Arizona to Wisconsin and Florida, say they are bracing for similar efforts by Republicans to challenge new voters at polling places, reflecting months of disputes over voting procedures and the anticipation of an election as close as the one in 2000.

Ohio election officials said they had never seen so large a drive to prepare for Election Day challenges. They said they were scrambling yesterday to be ready for disruptions in the voting process as well as alarm and complaints among voters. Some officials said they worried that the challenges could discourage or even frighten others waiting to vote.

Ohio Democrats were struggling to match the Republicans' move, which had been rumored for weeks. Both parties had until 4 p.m. to register people they had recruited to monitor the election. Republicans said they had enlisted 3,600 by the deadline, many in heavily Democratic urban neighborhoods of Cleveland, Dayton and other cities. Each recruit was to be paid \$100.

The Democrats, who tend to benefit more than Republicans from large turnouts, said they had registered more than 2,000 recruits to try to protect legitimate voters rather than weed out ineligible ones.

Republican officials said they had no intention of disrupting voting but were concerned about the possibility of fraud involving thousands of newly registered Democrats.

"The organized left's efforts to, quote unquote, register voters - I call them ringers - have created these problems," said James P. Trakas, a Republican co-chairman in Cuyahoga County.

Both parties have waged huge campaigns in the battleground states to register millions of new voters, and the developments in Ohio provided an early glimpse of how those efforts may play out on Election Day.

Ohio election officials said that by state law, the parties' challengers would have to show "reasonable" justification for doubting the qualifications of a voter before asking a poll worker to question that person. And, the officials said, challenges could be made on four main grounds: whether the voter is a citizen, is at least 18, is a resident of the county and has lived in Ohio for the previous 30 days.

Elections officials in Ohio said they hoped the criteria would minimize the potential for disruption. But Democrats worry that the challenges will inevitably delay the process and frustrate the voters.

"Our concern is Republicans will be challenging in large numbers for the purpose of slowing down voting, because challenging takes a long time," said David Sullivan, the voter protection coordinator for the national Democratic

Party in Ohio. "And creating long lines causes our people to leave without voting."

The Republican challenges in Ohio have already begun. Yesterday, party officials submitted a list of about 35,000 registered voters whose mailing addresses, the Republicans said, were questionable. After registering, they said, each of the voters was mailed a notice, and in each case the notice was returned to election officials as undeliverable.

In Cuyahoga County alone, which includes the heavily Democratic neighborhoods of Cleveland, the Republican Party submitted more than 14,000 names of voters for county election officials to scrutinize for possible irregularities. The party said it had registered more than 1,400 people to challenge voters in that county.

Among the main swing states, only Ohio, Florida and Missouri require the parties to register poll watchers before Election Day; elsewhere, party observers can register on the day itself. In several states officials have alerted poll workers to expect a heightened interest by the parties in challenging voters. In some cases, poll workers, many of them elderly, have been given training to deal with any abusive challenging.

Mr. Trakas, the Republican co-chairman in Cuyahoga County, said the recruits would be equipped with lists of voters who the party suspects are not county residents or otherwise qualified to vote.

The recruits will be trained next week, said Mr. Trakas, who added that he had not decided whether to open the training sessions to the public or reporters. Among other things, he said, the recruits will be taught how to challenge mentally disabled voters who are assisted by anyone other than their legal guardians. In previous elections, he said, bus drivers who had taken group-home residents to polling places often helped them vote.

Reno Oradini, the Cuyahoga County election board attorney, said a challenge would in effect create impromptu courts at polling places as workers huddled to resolve a dispute and cause delays in voting. He said he was working with local election officials to find ways of preventing disruptions that could drive away impatient voters and reduce turnout.

State law varies widely on voter challenges. In Colorado, challenged voters can sign an oath that they are indeed qualified to vote; voters found to have lied could be prosecuted, but their votes would still be counted. In Wisconsin, it is the challenger who must sign an oath stating the grounds for a challenge.

"You need personal knowledge," said Kevin J. Kennedy, executive director of the Wisconsin State Elections Board. "You can't say they don't look American or don't speak English."

National election officials said yesterday that Election Day challenging had been done only sporadically by the parties over the years, mainly in highly contested races. In the bitterly contested 2000 presidential election, they said, challenges occurred mainly after Election Day.

The preparations for widespread challenging this year have alarmed some election officials.

"This creates chaos and confusion in the polling site," said R. Doug Lewis, executive director of the Election Center, an international association of election officials. But, he said, "most courts say it's permissible by state law and therefore can't be denied."

In Ohio, Republicans sought to play down any concern that their challenging would be disruptive.

"I suspect there will be challenges," said Robert T. Bennett, chairman of the Ohio Republican Party. "But by and large, people will move through quickly. We want to make sure every eligible voter votes." He added, "99.9 percent will fly right by."

Challengers on both sides said they were uncertain about what to expect. Georgiana Nye, 56, a Dayton real estate broker who was registered by the Republicans as a challenger, said she wanted to help prevent fraud and would

accept the \$100 for the 13 hours of work and training.

For the Democrats in Dayton, Ronald Magoteaux, 57, a mechanical engineer, said he agreed to be a poll watcher out of concern for new voters. "I think it's sick that these Republicans are up to dirty tricks at the polls," Mr. Magoteaux said. "I believe thousands of votes were lost in 2000, and I want to make sure that doesn't happen in Ohio."

Democrats said they were racing to match the Republicans, precinct by precinct. In some cities, like Dayton, they registered more challengers than the Republicans, election officials said. But in Cuyahoga County, where the Republicans said they had registered 1,436 people to challenge voters, or one in every precinct, Democrats said they had signed up only about 300.

The parties are also preparing to battle over voter qualifications in Florida, where they had until last Tuesday to register challengers. In Fort Myers, Republicans named 100 watchers for the county's 171 precincts, up from 60 in 2000. But Democrats registered 300 watchers in the county, a sixfold increase.

Nader Loses Ohio Ballot Bid

COLUMBUS, Ohio, Oct. 22 (AP) - The Ohio Supreme Court on Friday rejected an effort by [Ralph Nader](#) to get his name on the ballot, most likely ending his chances in the state for the Nov. 2 election.

Mr. Nader wanted the court to force election boards to review their voter registration lists, a process he said could have led to the validation of petitions to place him on the ballot. The court ruled 6-1 against him.

James Dao contributed reporting from Ohio for this article, and Ford Fessenden and Anthony Smith from New York.