

Nev. considers ways to overhaul voting process

By Alison Noon, AP

CARSON CITY – Lawmakers are gearing up to change how and whether people cast ballots in Nevada as the state faces a shifting electorate and unfounded claims of voter fraud and intimidation.

Eligible Nevadans would automatically be registered to vote and be able to participate in primary elections despite their party affiliation under a couple of the proposals up for debate this session.

Democrats won control of the Legislature in November and have pledged to prioritize access and equality in the state's elections. But proponents of change on both sides of the aisle say they're cautiously optimistic about the proposals.

More than 125,000 Nevadans signed a petition to automatically register people age 18 or older to vote, and update registrants' information, when they apply for any state identification card at the Department of Motor Vehicles – unless they opt out in writing.

Six states and the District of Columbia have similar policies, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. Twenty-two state legislatures are considering implementing or expanding automatic registration this year.

Nevada law required the petition to move to the state government, which could implement the policy if lawmakers approve it by mid-March and Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval signs it. Democratic legislative leaders and Sandoval have declined to say whether they support the petition.

If lawmakers or the governor do not approve it, the measure would go before voters on the 2018 ballot.

An assembly committee will hear the bill Tuesday.

A shrinking portion of the Nevada electorate is able to participate in the state's primary elections, which allow only voters affiliated with a political party to take part in that party's primary.

"People have got to have a say in who represents them," said Doug Goodman, who lobbies the Legislature for various election reforms, including one this year to abolish the current primary system. "They are voluntarily giving up that right when you have a closed primary."

Goodman is working with Republican Sen. James Settelmeyer of Minden to enact a new process that would put candidates from all parties on the same ballot and allow the top two vote-getters to advance to the general election.

Settelmeyer sponsored the measure after hearing from registered-nonpartisan constituents frustrated they didn't have a say in the 2016 Republican or Democratic primaries.

Supporters of the top-two primary system say it would not only increase turnout and expand voters' choices, but also force politicians into less-polarizing political positions as they attempt to win over voters.

Opponents argue the parties should reserve the right to select their own candidates.

Nearly 21 percent of Nevadans who voted in November did not identify with a political party. "Recapturing that pool of voters is what drives this whole thing," Goodman said.

The Democratic majority has not deterred Republican efforts for stricter identification requirements in Nevada, where people already must prove their residency in the state to

register to vote. Republican lawmakers introduced a bill this week that would give voters the option to decide ahead of an election to voluntarily show proof of identification at the ballot box and prohibit those people from voting at the polling place if they show up without a valid ID.

Senate Majority Leader Aaron Ford, a Las Vegas Democrat, said no voter ID-related bills will succeed under his watch.

But Republican Sen. Don Gustavson of Sparks said he and the measure's four other sponsors hope Democrats will consider it an option for people to voluntarily protect their vote from ballot theft.

Republican Sen. Pete Goicoechea of Eureka said he would elect to show his driver's license at a polling station if for no other reason than to pressure other voters to do the same.

Nevada Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske, a former Republican lawmaker who supports ID requirements, said her office found no evidence of illegal voting in November.

Her office is seeking to correct isolated incidents of voter-registration fraud identified after the November election. Two people were convicted of tampering with others' registrations, and Cegavske said the state is still investigating the election.

She's backing a bill this session that, among other things, would allow her to require training for anyone who registers voters.