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ELECTIONS

Governor wants to tighten state's grip on election laws

State officials would gain much more control over elections -- and the purging of voter rolls -- under a sweeping legislative proposal drawn up by Gov. Jeb Bush and the Department of State.

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TALLAHASSEE - In a move that would dramatically increase state control of elections, Gov. Jeb Bush and the state elections office will ask the Legislature for greater authority, including the ability to decide which voters should be purged from voting rolls.

The secretary of state, who is appointed by the governor, also would be given strong enforcement powers, including the authority to seek criminal charges and fines up to \$5,000 against any of the state's 67 election supervisors -- most of whom are elected -- who fail to follow the rules.

On Wednesday, the governor's office and the Department of State said the new measures, included in two separate bills, would bring Florida into compliance with federal laws and ensure that voters are treated uniformly.

"This is just Florida continuing to look at way to improve our election process," said Jacob DiPietre, a Bush spokesman. "The secretary of state is the chief election official of the state and has an obligation and duty to enforce election laws."

But the proposals have roiled many election supervisors. They also have drawn fire from Democrats and skepticism from the two Republicans who lead the Legislature.

POTENTIAL HURDLES

House Speaker Allan Bense and Senate President Tom Lee said they were unaware of the legislation and are open to discussing it with the governor's office and the secretary of state. Both said they are concerned about giving that much control to the state.

Lee called the measures "a bit paternalistic for my taste," adding, "especially since it is a power being sought over constitutional officers at the local level."

Mark Anderson, Republican elections chief in Bay County, questioned whether the measures are necessary. "I thought we had an excellent election and we didn't have any issues," he said. "Why would we need this?"

Leon County elections supervisor Ion Sancho, who has no party affiliation, was more blunt: "I guess this is our reward for Florida getting it right."

Seth Kaplan, spokesman for Miami-Dade Supervisor of Elections Constance Kaplan, also expressed concern: "Before we make any wholesale changes for elections in this state, we should consider the ramifications."

The lengthy bills drawn up by the Department of State and the governor's office cover everything from a new statewide voter registration system required under federal law to changing the standards for early voting, voter registration drives and gathering signatures for proposed constitutional amendments.

But the two biggest changes place complete control of voter registration rolls in the state's hands.

The state would determine voter eligibility and decide whether to purge people from the rolls, including convicted felons whose civil rights have not been restored. Under existing law, the state draws up a felons-purge list, but it is left to supervisors to remove voters from the rolls.

DEMOCRATS WARY

The state would gain this authority even though it was forced last summer to scuttle its felons list after news organizations showed it was riddled with errors, among them the exclusion of Hispanic felons. State officials contend the new system won't repeat those mistakes, but some Democrats are unconvinced.

"I think the state showed gross incompetence with the felons list last time and I'm very skeptical why they would have the sole power" to purge the rolls, said House Democratic Leader Chris Smith of Fort Lauderdale.

The other change is a response to the limited control that the state now has over elections. One example: After a disastrous primary election in 2002, the governor threatened to suspend Miriam Oliphant, then elections supervisor in Broward, for problems at the polls. Short of threats, the governor had little authority to do anything to bring her in line. He eventually suspended Oliphant, an action still under appeal.

The new legislation also responds to the 2004 election cycle, when supervisors disagreed with Secretary of State Glenda Hood over some laws.

One example: whether to register people who had not checked a box on their application stating they were a citizen. Some counties, including Broward and Miami-Dade, registered the voters despite Hood's contention that it was illegal to do so.

Herald staff writer Erika Bolstad contributed to this report.