

WFP says GOP, Conservatives trying to raid its ballot lines

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Mark Cuthbertson, an attorney working with the Working Families Party and a former Huntington town councilman Credit: Barry Sloan

ALBANY — The liberal Working Families Party says it’s being raided by former Republicans and Conservatives who switched their enrollment this year to the minor party and then submitted petitions to run primaries against WFP candidates, according to a Newsday review.

Working Families Party members say the June primary efforts imperil their endorsed candidates in Southampton, mislead voters and drive up the public cost of holding primaries.

“The NY GOP is engaged in a coordinated attack on the Working Families Party,” said Sharon Cromwell, deputy director of the state WFP. “They know they can’t win on the issues so are resorting to dirty tactics to confuse voters and steal elections. We should expect better from our political parties than underhanded attempts to thwart the democratic process.”

On Jan. 13, Miranda Schultz of Hampton Bays was a Republican, as she had been since she enrolled in the party in 2013. Her husband, Sean McArdle, was a registered Conservative, as he had been since he enrolled in the party in 2008, according to Suffolk County Board of Elections records.

The next day, Jan. 14, Schultz and Sean McArdle enrolled in the Working Families Party and by March 25 they had submitted petitions to become WFP candidates for the Southampton Town Council. That forced a Working Families Party primary in June against the two candidates who had been interviewed, vetted and endorsed by the minor party. The WFP chose to endorse candidates who already had Democratic endorsements.

But now the primary could potentially cost Democrats the Working Family Parties ballot in the November general election. In New York, minor party lines are coveted by major party candidates because they can draw voters from the other major party as well as voters not enrolled in any party.

Also in Southampton, Marc Braeger joined the Working Families party on Feb. 10, according to county Board of Elections records. He had previously been enrolled as a Republican and Conservative since 2019. He has forced a WFP primary against Thomas Neely, the WFP-endorsed candidate.

Mark Cuthbertson, an attorney working with the Working Families Party and a former Huntington town councilman, said the petitions for Braeger, Schultz and McArdle were carried by Republican and Conservative operatives. “I think it is occurring a lot statewide,” he said. “It may be going on without people knowing about it.”

Minor parties, including the Green Party, have experienced a similar strategy in some elections statewide for years. They call it “party raiding.” They say the strategy by major party leaders is to get their own loyalists to enroll in a minor party despite not supporting the minor party’s positions, then forcing a primary without campaigning. The strategy can sap an opponent’s resources and confuse voters.

Spokesmen for the Suffolk County Republican Committee, the county Conservative Party and the Southampton Republican committee did not respond to requests for comment.

Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at the State University of New York at New Paltz, said the practice is “hard ball” and “ethically problematic,” but not illegal. He said it reflects the increased polarization of politics.

This year, the strategy is easier to employ. Because of the pandemic, state

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laws reduced the number of signatures of party members needed on nominating petitions for a party primary from 5% of the party members in the election jurisdiction, such as a town, to 1.5%. In many jurisdictions, that could be as little as a half-dozen signatures of party members.

Petition gathering also was needed for the “opportunity to ballot,” a process that allowed a party member to petition to force a primary with a spot open for a write-in candidate determined by voters.

The Democratic-controlled State Legislature suspended the opportunity to ballot for this primary in February. Democratic legislators said both steps were taken to limit the contact and gatherings required to obtain signatures during the pandemic.

Republicans, including Assemb. Andrew Goodell (R-Jamestown), objected to the suspension of the opportunity to ballot. Goodell said the measure was “as undemocratic as we can get” because it prevents party members from challenging the party leaders’ endorsement.

Working Family Party members say that they see Republicans and Conservatives enrolling in the WFP this year as a way to circumvent the suspension of the opportunity to ballot.

“This strategy of party subversion is political hardball at the local level,” said Doug Muzzio, a political scientist at Baruch College speaking generally of the practice. “It’s not so much voter suppression as voter deception. The goal is obvious: to weaken the candidates endorsed by the WFP to the advantage of Republicans/Conservatives. These players employ a ‘fifth column’ to gain an electoral advantage. An old Soviet Union tactic brought into the 21st century.”

Lawrence Levy, who has been a political observer on Long Island for decades, said he hadn’t seen this strategy employed before.

“It’s ironic that reforms aimed at opening up democracy and making the polls accessible to more people have opened the door to politically opportunistic efforts to exploit them with the opposite intent,” said Levy, executive dean of Hofstra University’s National Center for Suburban Studies.

Robin Long is an election law attorney who said she went through a lengthy vetting by WFP leaders to make sure she supports their policies. Now she finds herself in a Working Families Party primary against Schultz, the former Republican; and McArdle, the former Conservative; who didn’t go through that process and needed only three or four signatures to force the primary.

She calls it a new form of voter suppression.

“This is purely to cause chaos,” she said. “The intention is so clearly party raiding because they don’t intend to run or speak to voters.”