A portrait of the Illinois State Board of Elections

Who decides whether SEP candidate Joe Parnarauskis will appear on the ballot?

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18 July 2006

The Illinois State Board of Elections is currently reviewing the objections filed by the Democratic Party against the nominating petitions of Joe Parnarauskis, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for State Senate in the 52nd Legislative District. On July 11, the Illinois Democrats issued an objection to more than half of the 4,991 signatures filed by the SEP and requested that the Board of Elections bar Parnarauskis from the ballot.

A preliminary review conducted by the SEP of about half of the Democrats' objections shows that at least a third are transparently false. Based on these findings it is clear that the Democrats have randomly and indiscriminately challenged the signatures of hundreds, if not thousands, of perfectly legitimate registered voters. Citing these figures and the bad-faith challenge the Democrats made to the SEP state legislative candidate in 2004, Andrew Spiegel, the attorney representing the SEP called on the board to toss out the objections, saying, "The limited and precious resources of both the candidate and the State Officers of the Election Board must not be wasted on yet another exercise in futility until a preliminary determination has been made that there is a good faith factual basis for the objector's petition."

On July 18 the attorney representing the Democratic objectors is due to respond to Spiegel's motion. The State Board of Elections will make the final ruling on the motion, some time over the next several weeks. In the meantime, however, it appears that the board will permit the Democrats to drag the SEP through a time-consuming and costly "records examination" or "binder check." During this process, which can last more than a month, the SEP must disprove each of 2,537 signatures objected to by the Democrats. SEP supporters will have to appear at the Board of Elections offices in Springfield, Illinois each day while board employees check signatures against voter registration records and Democratic Party operatives attempt to uphold each objection.

In 2004, Democratic Party representatives were sent into the Champaign County Clerk's office with written instructions to uphold every objection, no matter how clearly a signature, name and address matched the corresponding information from voter registration rolls. These Democratic operatives brazenly lied before County Clerk employees, in one instance denying the signature of a County Clerk employee, despite her protestations that the signature was indeed hers, and in another case rejecting the signature of the SEP candidate himself. Champaign County Clerk Mark Shelden denounced the Democratic objections as a "purely harassment challenge" and said, "Those of us who reviewed them would have awarded attorney's fees to Mackaman if there had been a legal provision to do so."

There is overwhelming evidence that the Democrats are once again committing election fraud. In addition to the SEP, the Democrats have also objected to the petitions of the entire statewide slate of the Illinois Green Party, including their gubernatorial candidate Rich Whitney. It is patently obvious that these objections have not been filed in good faith as a means of determining the petitions' legitimacy, but as an effort to harass, intimidate and to impose enormous legal and organizational costs on third parties, which have only a fraction of the resources of the Democrats and Republicans.

Nevertheless, based on the statements by representatives of the State Board of Elections, including its legal counsel Steve Sturm, it appears likely that the Parnarauskis campaign will be compelled to pass through the arduous and costly records examination process. In his replies to several readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* who wrote letters to the board, Sturm sought to present the records examination process as a necessary search for the truth and claimed that the objectors and the Board of Elections were solely interested in upholding election laws, not barring third parties from the ballot.

At first Sturm claimed that there was no political motivation to the objections filed against the SEP, writing that the two objectors "[were] two private citizens, Gregory Lietz and John Dreher. Any presumption of a connection to the Democratic Party is conjecture."

He changed his tune after several readers pointed out that Lietz and Dreher were both Democratic precinct committeemen and that the filing of the objection had been done by the general counsel of the Illinois Democratic Party, Michael Kasper, the former attorney of state House Speaker Michael J. Madigan, who led the effort to keep independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader, as well as the SEP, off the ballot in 2004.

Retreating from his original position, Sturm then claimed that whether or not the basis of the challenge was political or not—and by logical extension whether or not there was a history of election fraud by the Democrats—is irrelevant, commenting that "the objections are treated the same regardless of the motivation, party loyalties or independence of the voter which files them." This legally dubious statement—how can a history of politically motivated election fraud have no bearing on a current case?—reflects the presumptive opinion of the State Board of Elections as a whole.

It therefore appears likely that for the next several weeks the SEP campaign will center on the defense of the right to vote for a candidate of your choice, a struggle that will be carried out before the Illinois State Board of Elections (SBE). This begs the question: who comprises the Illinois SBE? What is this institution that minds the gates to political participation in the state of Illinois?

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The answer reveals that the SBE is not a politically neutral or disinterested body. It is a highly political institution that is yet another barrier designed to obstruct—not facilitate—the appearance of third party and independent candidates on the Illinois ballot. The members are political appointees, installed by Illinois governors, and the body is determined by law to include four Democrats and four Republicans. These politically connected individuals, by definition, are subject to a conflict of interest when it comes to third party candidates. They have a vested political interest in maintaining the two-party duopoly over Illinois politics.

Consider for example the case of Wanda Rednour, a Democrat on the Illinois State Board of Elections and its current vice chairman. The Rednour family has donated tens of thousands of dollars to the campaigns of Illinois Democrats over the past 10 years. She has served on the board since 1988, and has been vice chairman before during the 2001-2003 term. In her position, she has clearly fought for the interests of the Democratic Party, regularly voting to remove independent and third party candidates, including presidential candidate Ralph Nader in 2004.

A member of the well-connected Rednour family, she is currently on the board of directors for Rednour Steel Erectors, Inc., and is a director at the Duquoin State Bank. The Duquoin State Bank, which is run by her husband, John Rednour, is valued at approximately $76 million. John Rednour is also the mayor of Duquoin and manager of the Duquoin State Fair. For managing the Duqoin State Fair alone, which lasts one week, Mr. Rednour is compensated more than $70,000 by the state of Illinois, and also provided with a car.

On September 9, 2002, the *Chicago Sun Times* reported that Mrs. Rednour cast a vote to toss out a Republican objection to the campaign finance records of Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich two days after Blagojevich deposited $1 million into the bank owned by her husband. This transaction was not reported within 10 days, as is required by state law, and only came to light as a result of a September article in the *Sun Times*. Two days later, on August 29, Wanda Rednour voted along with the Democrats on the board to toss out the Republican complaint.

Rednour defended her actions to a reporter for the *Sun-Times*, arguing that the million-dollar transfer was just an innocent gesture of friendship. “I know at one time,” she said, “just in the process of him [Blagojevich] visiting our house, Big John [Rednour] was laughing and said, ‘Blagojevich, you got all that money, why don’t you put some of it in our bank down here?’ That’s all I knew.”

The rest of the board is comprised of individuals closely identified with the Democratic or Republican parties and the corporate interests they defend.

* Jesse Smart, a Republican and chair of the State Board of Elections, is close to Illinois agribusiness interests in the state. He was appointed to the board in 2001 by former Republican Governor George Ryan, who was driven out of office in a corruption scandal. He is the owner of Smart Seeds, Inc. in Bloomington and was mayor of the City of Bloomington from 1985-1997, where he also served on the City Council from 1978 to 1985.

* Bryan A. Schneider is a Republican who was appointed by Democrat Blagojevich in 2004. He is the corporate attorney for the major pharmacy chain Walgreens, and is also an adjunct faculty member of the University of Illinois College of Law, where he specializes in election law. He has been Parliamentarian for the Illinois House of Representatives and legal counsel for the speaker and Republican leader of the Illinois House of Representatives.

* John Keith, a Democrat, has been a member of the SBE since 2001. Previously he had been attorney to the Illinois state treasurer, the Illinois State Senate, the Illinois Redistricting Commission, and other governmental agencies. Keith has also been a member of the Illinois House of Representatives and associate circuit judge.

* Patrick A. Brady, a Republican, was appointed to the board in 2005 by Blagojevich and is an associate attorney with one of the world’s most connected law firms, Mayer, Brown, Rowe, and Maw. He has been associated closely with former Republican governor Jim Edgar. Brady has served as the political director for “Americans for School Choice,” an organization created by right-wing Senator Lamar Alexander to undermine funding for public schools.

* William McGuffage, Democrat, is a member of a Chicago law firm and has been on the board since 1998. He was legal counsel to the Illinois attorney general’s office from 1983 to 1994.

* Robert Walters, Republican, was also appointed in 2005 by Blagojevich. Walters was employed as executive director of the Southwestern Illinois Industrial Association in Wood River from 1978 to 2004 and prior to that was an Illinois state representative from 1971 to 1975.

* Albert Porter, Democrat, has been on the State Board of Elections since 2000. He has been an assistant states attorney, associate judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County, and circuit judge of Circuit Court of Cook County.

Two Republican members of the board, Smart and Schneider, recently weighed in on an objection filed by gay rights activists seeking to remove a nonbinding referendum from the ballot that seeks support for a constitutional ban on gay marriage. Organized by right-wing activists, the measure apparently fell well short of its signature requirement. Yet Brady claimed that there was not even a legal possibility to object to the petitions. Chairman Smart, for his part, was quoted as saying, “I can’t understand why anyone would object to give the voters a chance to express their opinions.”

Yet, that is precisely what the Democratic Party in Illinois is attempting to do in its efforts to remove SEP candidate Parnarauskis, as well as the Greens, from the ballot.

The Democrats and Republicans on the Illinois State Board of Elections have long collaborated in barring third parties, with Democrats working to keep their opponents on the left off the ballot with bad-faith challenges and Republicans doing the same thing against Libertarians and other parties that would tend to win support from Republican voters. They both act to prevent any challenge to the two-party monopoly and to confine political debate to what is acceptable to America’s corporate elite.

The experience of the 2004 elections was particularly enlightening. That year the State Board of Elections upheld the bulk of the objections made by the Democrats against the more than 32,000 signatures submitted by independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader and barred him from the ballot. The board rejected an effort by Nader campaigners to submit an additional 5,000 signatures, saying they had missed the deadline for filing petitions. (Illinois has one of the earliest deadlines in the US.)

That same year the Democrats and Republicans passed special legislation to alter Illinois election law so that President Bush’s name could appear on the ballot. Because the Republican convention was not taking place until September 2004, Bush could not meet the deadline for the certification of his nomination 67 days prior to the general election and therefore, according to Illinois election laws, should not have been placed on the state ballot. This was quickly resolved by state Democrats and Republicans, who passed a law, signed by Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich, to move the deadline and allow Bush to be placed on the ballot.

Two years ago, when the Socialist Equality Party beat back the efforts of the Democratic Party to remove its candidate for state representative from the ballot, the outpouring of letters received by the local County Clerk’s office proved instrumental. This public campaign put local politicians on notice that their actions were being followed by an international audience, and that the lessons derived from their antidemocratic actions would not be lost on working people.

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The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party once again call upon our readers and supporters to continue to send letters of protest to the State Board of Elections at webmaster@elections.state.il.us.

This fight will require a considerable expenditure of funds. We appeal to all of our readers and supporters, and all those who defend democratic rights, to send contributions to the SEP election fund.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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