

Issue: Elections

Legislator: Charlie Dent

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Content: Dent wants to ax straight-party voting

WASHINGTON, D.C.

U.S. Rep. Charlie Dent wants to eliminate straight-ticket voting from ballots in federal races.

The Lehigh Valley Republican says the outdated practice gives political parties unfair control over elections and can prevent voters from considering the merits of individual candidates.

Pennsylvania is one of just nine states that still allow voters to pick all the Republican or Democratic candidates with a single punch or mark on the ballot, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The option - to mark a single box or press a single button to choose all candidates from one party - has been abolished by 10 other states in the last 20 years.

"This manner of voting discourages voters from making an honest evaluation of each candidate on his or her individual merits and encourages an all-or-nothing decision based purely on party affiliation," Dent said.

Dent said he believes his legislation, known as the People Before Party Act, would address the excessive partisan bickering in the political system that his constituents often list as one of their greatest frustrations.

"Individuals who wish to vote a straight party line may certainly continue to do so, but they should not be offered a short-cut or a one-touch workaround from the need to consider their vote for each individual candidate and for each office," he said. "This bill will empower voters to elect thoughtful leaders and reduce the power of the parties."

Dent, who cosponsored the legislation with U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, had previously championed the same measure in 2013 but it failed to gain traction with his colleagues.

He thinks it has a better chance now. And that could be because centrist lawmakers like Dent, who is backing Ohio Gov. John Kasich for the nomination, could be fearing their fate if Donald Trump becomes the GOP presidential nominee.

"I think there could be members in both parties that would rather have voters see their names," he said when asked if Trump headlining the Republican ballot was a concern.

The effort to end straight-ticket voting has bipartisan support here.

But on one condition: The Legislature needs to pass the same legislation at the state level.

"It would definitely be confusing to not have the option for federal races and then have it for state races," said Kevin Boughter, chairman of the Berks County Democratic Committee. "It would be much better if they did it all at once."

"I had no idea that Pennsylvania was so behind on this - maybe we should get with the program," added Bonnie Stock, chairwoman of the Berks County Republican Committee.

Dent said he has reached out to GOP state lawmakers about taking up the issue.

"It's just good public policy and I think most legislators recognize that," he said.

State GOP Chairman Rob Gleason said he would support the effort despite its possible impact on the party machine.

"Times have changed. A lot of people are splitting their tickets already or selecting candidates based on their qualifications," he said. "When this all started people didn't really know much about their candidates. People have more information now."

A spokesman for the Pennsylvania Democratic Party said Chairman Marcel Groen needed more time to examine the proposal.

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