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Rally blasts student voter rules

Legislature candidate leads protest at UAlbany attacking elections board

By **MARC PARRY**, Staff writer

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ALBANY -- An Albany County Legislature candidate led a protest at the University at Albany on Wednesday even as the issue that provoked it -- voter registration of students -- seemed nearly resolved.

Anton Konev has accused the Albany County Board of Elections of disenfranchising students registered by his campaign because some of the students' voting forms have missing campus P.O. box numbers.

"It's very obvious to us that the reason for discouraging students from voting are purely political -- to protect the status quo," Konev said outside the administration building. The candidate, a self-described former UAlbany student leader, is a registered Democrat who says he is running as a Republican and independent candidate against Democratic incumbent Legislator Mary Lou B. Connolly in the 32nd District.

Allegations about political shenanigans to discourage students from voting have come up before. A fight broke out at Skidmore College five years ago over a plan -- later nixed -- to make students vote at the City Center rather than on campus as they had in the past. At the time, Democrats said the Republican City Council majority wanted to make it harder for students to vote because they usually vote Democratic.

In the Albany County case, Democratic elections commissioner Matthew Clyne said the board needs P.O. box numbers on the forms. Otherwise, there's no assurance the voter cards it sends out will reach the voters. If the card comes back, he said, the voter is placed on "inactive status."

Clyne estimated the number of forms in Konev's case was 30 to 40, and UAlbany put the number of "incomplete" forms at double that. The board is working with the university to get the P.O. box numbers for those students, Clyne said. They should be able to vote in November.

"I don't think there is a problem," Clyne said. "This system isn't anything new."

None of the purportedly disenfranchised students were at Wednesday's rally. Several political candidates and activists were. The speakers did include one UAlbany junior who had registered to vote without listing his campus P.O. box number in the past.

When mail comes in without a box number, the school will generally deliver it by looking up the student's address, a UAlbany spokeswoman said.

Melanie Trimble, regional head of the New York Civil Liberties Union, questioned why the elections board assumed the addresses wouldn't work.

She noted other past reports of poll workers turning away voters who showed up with student identification cards. Students can sign up to vote where they attend school, she said. They often assume they need to vote by absentee ballot.

"What happens an awful lot is students don't understand their rights," she said.

Marc Parry can be reached at 454-5057 or by e-mail at mparry@timesunion.com.

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