



## RESTRICTIVE VOTING REGULATIONS

A new group called Wyoming FREE says it formed because its members felt compelled to fight Secretary of State Chuck Gray and election rules that they feel are overly restrictive. Gray calls the organization a "heavily partisan, radical left-wing group."



**Leo Wolfson**

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Laramie, Wyoming, voters fill out their ballots at Laramie High School in Election Day in 2022. (Greg Johnson, Cowboy State Daily)

There have been some significant changes to Wyoming election law in recent years, which a new state advocacy group says has made it harder for people to vote in the state.

Wyoming FREE wants lawmakers and the public to consider the difference between what has been happening nationally with elections and what is actually happening in Wyoming.

"There definitely are fears at the national level throughout this country, and yet I think we're the exception," said Paul Vogelheim, a Jackson resident and treasurer for Wyoming FREE.



The group also opposes [new voter registration rules](#) proposed by Secretary of State Chuck Gray that would require voters to not only provide proof of identification to vote, but also proof of residency.

Wyoming FREE's leadership includes state Rep. Dan Zwonitzer, R-Cheyenne, former Republican state legislator Shelly Duncan and Vogelheim, a Republican who ran for the Wyoming House in 2022. The executive director of the group is Rebekah Fitzgerald, who also is one of the main organizers of the Wyoming Caucus in the state Legislature.

Zwonitzer and Duncan are former members of the Legislature's Corporations, Elections and Political Subdivisions Committee.

### Partisan?

Gray told Cowboy State Daily he views Wyoming FREE as “a heavily partisan, radical left-wing group that opposes the common-sense elections I have championed and Wyomingites want.”

He and others who have advocated for the legislative changes have said Wyoming needs to address or prevent election fraud issues from happening in the state.

Vogelheim said Wyoming FREE is an advocacy leg for the state's county clerks, a group he said he highly respects that can't always offer personal opinions publicly about what they might believe is best for state elections.

“They have to be impartial, and they have to be willing to listen and hear,” Vogelheim said. “It's not their agenda ... it's following the state Constitution and the guidelines and direction from the secretary of state's office.”

Fremont County Clerk Julie Freese said this is usually the case, but admitted the Wyoming County Clerks' Association might have pushed a little beyond that in a Jan. 8 memo to Gray. In that memo, the clerks express “significant concerns” with proposed voter registration rules his administration has brought under the premise of stopping out-of-state voters from participating in Wyoming elections.



additional documentation proving a physical address and length of residency in Wyoming.

Freese said the clerks mostly oppose the rule changes now as they believe they have been proposed without enough time before the upcoming elections and haven't been studied long enough by the Legislature. They also have concerns the rules could prevent legal voters from voting.

“We only want legal voters to vote, but we don’t want to turn someone away that should be allowed to vote,” Freese said.

The proposed rules were set to be discussed in a Friday public hearing at the State Capitol.



A Laramie County election worker monitors voting in Cheyenne during the 2022 general election. (Matt Idler for Cowboy State Daily)

## What Fraud?

Vogelheim believes some people jump to conclusions that election issues happening in other places around the country are also happening in Wyoming. After every election in Wyoming, audits are performed at local and statewide levels to ensure the results are legitimate.



security.

“I just hate to have us driven by fears that are going on at the national level,” Vogelheim said. “As Wyomingites, I think we should be very, very proud of our system.”

According to the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, Wyoming has prosecuted three election fraud cases since 2000, the last occurring in 2014.

“If it’s not broken, are we taking steps to make it more difficult for people to participate in a democracy?” Vogelheim questioned.

Wyoming FREE cites a 2022 Cost Of Voting Index report from the University Press of Kansas that finds Wyoming has the seventh most restrictive voter laws in the country, which it concludes also makes it the seventh hardest place to vote in the U.S.

The index determines its results based on a list of factors including registration deadlines, registration restrictions, registration drive restrictions, pre-registration laws, automatic voter registration, voting inconvenience, voter identification laws, poll hours, early voting days, and absentee voting.

## Recent Legislation

Over the last few years, the Wyoming Legislature has passed measures reducing the number of early voting days, tightening party affiliation deadlines and increasing voter ID requirements.

Last year, legislation was passed reducing the number of early voting days from 45 to 28.

Wyoming FREE said this change could prove to be problematic as the U.S. Postal Service has recently announced it is considering relocating Wyoming's last remaining mail processing facilities from Cheyenne and Casper out of state, likely causing further delays for county clerks to receive absentee ballots.

Another piece of legislation passed last year that changed Wyoming's primary elections by requiring voters to decide which party they want to vote for at least 96 days before the election date. This bill makes it harder to change party affiliation to influence another party's primary election in Wyoming, a practice known as crossover voting.

What it also does is increase partisanship in primary elections by requiring voters to declare



During his 2022 campaign, Gray also said he would ban ballot drop boxes, but hasn't addressed this issue yet.

“We (Republicans) have a supermajority of power here and that’s good, but let’s make sure that we have participation,” Vogelheim said.

Both of these efforts were supported by a significant majority of Republican legislators.

Gray said he finds it “deeply troubling” that Wyoming FREE opposes these types of reforms.

“Their attack on commonsense, conservative election integrity reforms is also highly political,” Gray said.

He also mentioned how Fitzgerald pushed a short-lived write-in campaign against him in 2022 after he won the Republican nomination for secretary of state. Zwonitzer also initiated a proposal around that time that would have stripped the secretary of state of the right to oversee the state’s elections.

“This is clearly a left-wing political group trying to get headlines that does not respect the will of the majority for common sense election improvements,” Gray said.

## The Clerks And The Rules

In its memo, the clerks urge Gray to work with the Legislature during the 2024 interim session to develop a solution that is easily understood by voters and enable them to register and exercise their right to vote without substantial burden.

The clerks also express concern that Gray’s rules could disenfranchise voters and that there’s no evidence of out-of-state voters misrepresenting themselves as Wyoming residents in past elections.

“This causes us to wonder whether the desired effect of the proposed rules – ensuring Wyoming residents, and only Wyoming residents, participate in Wyoming elections – would be outweighed by the unintended consequence of dissuading or hindering eligible voters from registering to vote,” the memo reads. “A single nonresident voting in Wyoming elections is unacceptable, but a single entitled voter being disenfranchised from that right should be of equal concern.”

Sheridan political activist Gail Symons went further, saying Gray is posturing to curry favor with his base supporters.

she said.



Secretary of State Chuck Gray. (Cowboy State Daily Staff)

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