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Our View

Election laws need revision, cases prove

Running for election in Pennsylvania is an archaic and arcane process that relies as much on knowing the rules as it does on getting votes.

Two recent election-related events illustrate the point and the need for reform.

In one case, two North Allegheny School Board candidates have managed to gain additional space on the November ballot by acquiring nominations from third parties. In the second case, a Ross commissioner candidate who was bumped from the Democratic primary ballot because of a technicality, has made it to the general election ballot by switching parties.

The candidates themselves are not at fault. The object of politics is to win the next election, and these candidates are using election laws to their best advantage.

In the North Allegheny School District, incumbent board member Barbara Childress and another candidate, Lois Schultz, this

summer gained nominations from the Libertarian and Constitutional parties. That means Childress' name will

appear on the school board ballot four times. She also won Democratic and Republican nominations in the May primary. Schultz, who won a Republican nomination in May, will be on the ballot three times.

Three other NA candidates, incumbents Jean Taylor, Maureen Grosheider and James Beierle, won Republican and Democratic nominations; and another incumbent, Mary Minnick, won just a Democratic nomination.

State election law allows candidates for school board, district justice and judge to seek nominations from both major political parties. Cross-filing is allowed in those cases because, in theory, those offices are "above" partisan politics. In a ruling this year, a state court said candidates could also cross-file on third-party

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Most school board candidates do cross-file for nominations because getting their name on the general election ballot twice improves their chances for winning election. Childress and Schultz are hoping three or four ballot listings will up the odds even more.

In Ross, former Democrat Fred Donatelli became a Republican to run for commissioner in the 7th Ward against Democratic nominee Gerald O'Brien. The township commissioners appointed Donatelli to the board in October 1997 to replace former Commissioner James Zwick.

The original Republican nominee, Fred Erbst, removed his name from the fall ballot, and the Ross Republican Committee sought Donatelli.

Donatelli wanted the Democratic nomination and filed to run against O'Brien in the primary. However, O'Brien challenged Donatelli's nomination petitions, and a judge bumped Donatelli from the primary ballot because a woman who did not live in the 7th Ward circulated a petition.

Donatelli should have known the rules, but as long as the signers of a petition live in the ward, why does it matter who's asking for the signatures?

The election rules, however, have been set up to maintain the status quo, to help politicians and political party members keep their positions. The complexity of the rules discourages newcomers and third-party candidates.

And while candidates have been working behind the scenes for ballot positions, none of that energy has been devoted to addressing issues. The election rules encourage officeholders who know how to win elections but don't know what to do after they win.