

From Candidate to Elected Official: How Does a Person Get to the Ballot and Elected to Office?

Written by Keesha Gaskins
Friday, 25 June 2010 14:10



Filing deadlines have passed, endorsement conventions are complete and we are getting ready for the statewide primary election on Tuesday, Aug, 10. In this week's column I will address the following questions: How did the candidates get on the ballot? What is the party nomination and how is that different from party endorsement?

Minnesota has three major political parties, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), the Republican Party (GOP), and the Independence Party (I). Minnesota has one minor party, the Green Party. All remaining political parties are, in fact, political committees.

How a candidate gains access to the election process is determined by their party status if seeking a partisan office. Partisan offices include US Representative, US Senate, State Senator, State Representative and Governor. Attorney General, State Auditor and Secretary of State are non-partisan offices, but many candidates seek the endorsement of a major or minor political party. School boards, city council, county commissioner, county sheriff are all non-partisan offices, but candidates for these offices often seek party endorsement as well.

For partisan offices, a candidate for a major party must receive the party nomination in August at the primary in order to proceed to the general election on November 2, 2010. Candidates running for partisan office who are independent, or a member of a minor party and do not have a party nomination during the primary election, have a different process.

Independent and minor party candidates for partisan office are nominated by submitting a petition when filing for office. While major party candidates must first win in a state primary before their names are placed on general election ballots, the names of independent and minor party candidates are placed directly on the general election ballot upon filing their petitions.

What is the difference between party endorsement and party nomination? A party endorsement is the process by which party activists select their favorite candidates to inform the general electorate what candidate they prefer. With that endorsement, candidates for partisan office seek the party nomination where they must win the primary election. Candidates for non-partisan offices often seek party endorsement to show that they reflect the values of the party platform for a given political party.

In the primary, candidates for non-partisan offices must achieve the requisite number of votes in

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order to proceed to the general election. For non-partisan offices no more than twice the number of candidates for a single seat may proceed to the general election. For example, if a candidate is seeking a nonpartisan seat on a local school board race and there are three open seats for the school board – only the six candidates who receive the highest number of votes may proceed to the general election.

While the party endorsement is a competitive process, it is the primary, not the endorsement, that determines which candidates proceed to the general election. Moreover, it is only party activists that participate in the endorsement, but every citizen eligible to vote may participate in the primary election to determine the party nominee. For example in the 2010 election for Minnesota governor, only Rep. Tom Emmer is seeking the Republican Party nomination for governor and therefore does not have to run for the party nomination in the August 10 primary election. By contrast, Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher received the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party endorsement, but there are a number of other candidates seeking the DFL nomination and therefore Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher must compete in the August 10 primary election for the DFL nomination.

To find out who will appear on your ballot you can go to the Minnesota Secretary of State website (www.secretaryofstate.mn.us). Alternately, you can go to the League of Women Voters Minnesota Voter Guide (vote.lwvmn.org), which will not only inform you about who is running for office but will also provide candidate answers to nonpartisan questions to help you decide who to vote for in August and again in November.

Get involved. The primary election determines who will appear on your ballot in November. If you have a favorite candidate who has a primary election, you must turn out and vote on August 10 to try to ensure that she or he can compete for office on November 2, 2010.

Keesha Gaskins is the Executive Director for the League of Women Voters Minnesota and the League of Women Voters Education Fund. Gaskins holds a law degree from Northeastern University School of Law, and served as a law clerk for both the Minnesota Supreme Court and the Supreme Judicial Court for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Keesha graduated with honors from St. Cloud State University with a dual major in Political Science and Criminal Justice in 1996. She is a frequent lecturer on issues related to redistricting, election law, history of women in American politics, Minnesota's electoral system and democratic reform. For more information, visit vote.lwvmn.org