

Democracy North Carolina

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To Help Voters, Election Officials Need Help

Opinion Column by Bob Hall, January 2016

In a matter of weeks, thousands of North Carolina voters will head to the polls unaware of what they'll need to vote – and election officials will be hard pressed to help them.

Ironically, conservative Republicans who promoted voting changes could suffer the most. The excitement of the Republican presidential primary will motivate new voters to show up, but newbies are the most likely not to follow the twists and turns of election rule changes.

Will they be helped or frustrated at the polls? At this point, it's up to Gov. Pat McCrory. Let me explain.

The new law cuts out safety-net provisions for new voters and dumps a load of confusing regulations on poll workers. That combination is making it hard for election officials to do their job. The evidence from the 2014 election is disturbing:

- Dr. Martha Kropf at UNC-Charlotte analyzed exit surveys from thousands of voters across the state and found that poll officials were not following the simplest of the new rules: Ask each voter, "Do you have one of the photo IDs that will be required to vote in 2016?" Dr. Kropf found that nearly half (48%) of the voters were not asked if they had the proper identification. In some precincts, 80% were not asked.
- An analysis by Democracy NC of provisional ballots and reports from poll monitors found that at least 30,000 voters could not vote in 2014 because the new law repealed two safety-net provisions – same-day registration during early voting and out-of-precinct voting on Election Day.
- A majority of the directors of county boards of elections interviewed by the League of Women Voters and Democracy NC said the experience of 2014 and complexity of the photo ID law made them worry whether they could recruit and/or fully train enough poll workers to handle the variety of problems they expect at the polls this year.

We sympathize with the concerns of well-intended, but overextended election officials. It's difficult to get poll workers to consistently deliver a simple question to voters. It's even harder to uniformly administer a law when provisions that helped voters are eliminated and inconsistent regulations are added.

It turns out DMV examiners also have trouble uniformly administering the law. They were supposed to provide free IDs to voters, but people received different treatment depending on

which DMV office they visited. As a result, the General Assembly had to add a new procedure for voters without an “acceptable” ID.

Poll workers are now saddled with helping those voters answer a series of questions, fill out multiple forms, and cast a special provisional ballot that should count if they do their job right.

If they don’t do their job right, honest voters will be disenfranchised and their testimony could doom the entire ID law in a court of law. You can’t have a law that arbitrarily excludes voters because poorly trained or overwhelmed officials can’t administer it fairly.

We are nearing the point where this train wreck is inevitable. Gov. McCrory’s so-called “common sense” requirement for voters to “show ID” has become a dangerous farce.

First, our lawmakers made the list of acceptable IDs so strict it threatened to disenfranchise from 100,000 to 300,000 citizens. Then, the process of helping those without IDs became so bureaucratic it couldn’t work. Now, the new procedure essentially lets any voter escape the ID requirement if they are willing to go through the hassle of filling out forms. We’re back to the original way North Carolina’s elections were protected against fraud – if you lie when you sign in identifying yourself, it’s a felony.

If poll workers can’t administer this new procedure fairly, the whole law is in serious jeopardy of being ruled unconstitutional.

To protect his claim that the ID law is sensible – and to protect North Carolinians’ right to vote – Gov. McCrory needs to take swift action to help poll workers and voters. He must immediately release emergency financial support to election officials to:

- (1) Educate more voters with a clear message that they should bring their ID but if they don’t have one, they should come anyway. Media outlets are mistakenly saying voters must have a photo ID to vote, and coverage of a trial about the ID rules makes everything even more confusing.
- (2) Recruit, hire, and thoroughly train more poll workers to staff up Early Voting and Election Day sites. Add greeters at every poll to help voters navigate the rules before they wait in line for 45 minutes only to learn they’re in the wrong place or must go to the help desk for “the right forms.” Add trained workers to staff the help desks and serve curbside voters.

Gov. McCrory and legislative leaders must deliver on their promise that the new election laws will not harm innocent voters. Money spent now could save them from embarrassment and save thousands of voters from senseless troubles. Voters with problems or questions should call the State Board of Elections at 1-866-522-4723 or Democracy NC’s Election Protection hotline at 1-866-OUR-VOTE. Learn the basics of election law at www.NCVoter.org.

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