

Democracy North Carolina

1821 Green St., Durham, NC 27705 • 919-489-1931 or 286-6000 • democracy-nc.org

Opinion Column – March 9, 2017 – published in 17 newspapers

Same-Day Registration Shows Value of Inclusive Voting Reform

By Bob Hall

Kevin C. got married last fall and moved from Wake to Harnett County “to get out of the city.” He had no idea he was supposed to change his registration to vote 25 days before Election Day. When he showed up at the polls during early voting, he learned he was not on the rolls.

Patricia M. has lived in Harnett County for over 30 years and never voted. “I don’t care nothing about politics,” she told me. She had no interest in the presidential contest last year, but her husband “wanted me to go with him to vote, so I did.” The officials at the polls told her she wasn’t registered.

Carolyn J. of Wilkes County received a notice after the 2008 election that her registration may be cancelled unless she sent back a signed form. “It made me so angry, I didn’t do it,” she said. “I’ve lived at the same address and been registered for years.” But when she showed up to vote early in 2016, her registration had indeed been cancelled.

Isaac M. is sure he registered at the DMV office in Cleveland County when he turned 18. But his name wasn’t on the rolls when he went to vote.

All four of these voters are white Republicans and despite not being registered, they got to vote and have their voices heard in 2016.

Ironically, they were rescued at the last minute by a procedure that Republicans in the NC General Assembly tried to kill. It’s called same-day registration and it allows a voter to register and vote at the same time at an early voting location. The voter has to show the elections official a government-issued photo ID or other identification with their current address and swear under penalty of a felony that they are who they say they are.

Since it began in North Carolina in 2007, same-day registration has saved over 400,000 voters from the disappointment of being turned away at the polls. It became controversial in 2008 because it was used disproportionately by African Americans and young voters and clearly helped Democrat Barack Obama win the state.

In retaliation, Republicans repealed same-day registration (SDR) as part of their 2013 sweeping overhaul of North Carolina’s election law. The next year, tens of thousands of voters were turned away at the polls because the safety net of SDR was gone. Many were sure they had registered through the DMV but their names never made it into the system. They told their stories in our report about [“Silenced Voices”](#) and in the court case challenging the “monster” election overhaul law.

The data showed that black voters disproportionately used SDR in 2008 and 2012. African Americans were 22 percent of registered voters but 34 percent of those who used same-day registration in those years. That's why the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals slapped down Republicans for repealing SDR and adopting other elections changes "that target African Americans with almost surgical precision."

But in raw numbers, same-day registration has always helped more whites than blacks. When the federal court restored SDR in time for the 2016 election, it brought back a provision that doesn't actually help one political party over another. Rather, it disproportionately helps working-class, lower-income and younger citizens who move more and pay less attention to politics.

That fact was clearly demonstrated in the 2016 election when a surge of new Trump voters showed up during early voting with a host of registration problems. Like Kevin, Patricia, Carolyn and Isaac, they were saved by same-day registration. Republicans made up 30 percent of all registered voters in 2016, but 34 percent of the SDR users signed up as Republicans and another 30 percent registered as Unaffiliated and tended to support GOP candidates.

GOP legislators who contemplate using fraud as an excuse to restrict voting for certain groups can learn from 2016: It's better to add provisions that help expand participation for everyone – and then work real hard to make sure more of your supporters use those provisions to have their voices heard.

In the first 10 years of the 21st century, North Carolina made considerable progress in boosting voter turnout for both Democrats and Republicans by adopting early voting, same-day registration and other laws that encouraged participation. We jumped from 43th to 11th among the 50 states from 1996 to 2012. By focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion, we can achieve accessible, secure and fair elections that serve all parties and voters.

Bob Hall is director of the Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan center that promotes voter participation and fair elections.