

Democracy North Carolina

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Do Republican Leaders Want An Election Melt-Down in NC?

Something very strange happened in the final version of the State Budget that House and Senate leaders rolled out yesterday. It eliminates provisions in earlier versions passed by the House and Senate to provide about \$600,000 that would automatically release over \$4 million in federal funds for improving North Carolina's election system for 2012.

The \$4 million from the federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) is already in a North Carolina bank account, frozen until matching State money is appropriated. The federal funds could be used to pay for voting machine maintenance, software and upgrades, poll workers training, and Early Voting locations. But apparently the legislative leaders decided they would rather starve local election boards than free up money that could open more Early Voting sites for the 2012 election!

County election boards already must pay more than \$5 million to operate the second primary in July. Without the HAVA funds, they must get their county commissioners to pay annual machine maintenance fees that add up to \$3 million statewide, beginning July 1. In addition, they face the headache of administering the November elections with new district maps, including hundreds of split precincts that complicate ballots and add to voter confusion and delays.

The warning signs are here: The lack of proper poll worker training and equipment failure led to a large number of voters getting the wrong ballots in the May primary!

Starving NC elections is an extremely partisan decision that affects all voters. It sends the message that Republican leaders in the General Assembly are determined to make voting a privilege for the few rather than a fundamental right for all citizens.

It didn't have to be this way, and for a time everything pointed to a reasonable approach for releasing the \$4 million in federal funds.

In [a February letter](#) and then in [an April resolution](#), the bipartisan Election Boards Association of North Carolina asked the General Assembly to appropriate the roughly \$660,000 of Maintenance of Effort (MOE) State funding needed to free up \$4.1 million of Title II HAVA funds.

The House version of the budget, approved in May, included \$663,936 for the MOE - see pages 10 and 103:

[http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/sessions/2011/budget/2012/House Committee Substitute for HB-950 2012-05-30.pdf](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/sessions/2011/budget/2012/House_Committee_Substitute_for_HB-950_2012-05-30.pdf)

The Senate version included \$563,936 with a provision that the State Board of Elections could use money from another account to make up any difference needed to hit the right level of MOE funding. See the Senate version, pages 10 and 84:

[http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/sessions/2011/budget/2012/Senate Committee Report 2012-06-12.pdf](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/sessions/2011/budget/2012/Senate_Committee_Report_2012-06-12.pdf)

But when the two sides came together behind closed doors, the General Assembly leaders apparently argued about whether some of this money would go for purposes they didn't like – so they just cut it out!

The final House/Senate Conference Report actually includes a \$102,000 reduction in funding for the State Board of Elections and left the Title II money frozen, except for a small portion to improve compliance with disability access. Look for SBOE funding on page 10 and page 94 of this PDF document:

[http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/sessions/2011/budget/2012/Conference Committee Report 2012-06-20.pdf](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/sessions/2011/budget/2012/Conference_Committee_Report_2012-06-20.pdf)

Why are legislative leaders so determined to throw a monkey wrench into North Carolina's election system in the busiest, most intense election cycle in our history?

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