



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2015-16 Entry Form

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Restore our voting rights

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Above 50,000 circulation.

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved.

As what we call our state's "voter suppression law" went into effect, I went full throttle against this bundle of laws that are among the most oppressive in the country. I wrote that our state legislature concentrated on the Voter ID issue, using that as the hot-button smokescreen to slide in numerous other measures clearly aimed at limiting voting by blacks and poor people in general. I caught my share of heat. One anonymous letter writer even suggested I kill myself and leave my "estate" to the NAACP. The voter suppression law, which adversely affected my county's March 2016 primary, shows the bad old South is still very much with us. A judge has upheld the suppression law. But I keep fighting it.

Our view

Rejected ballots are troubling issue that must be corrected

Democracy North Carolina, a group that is nonpartisan and nonprofit, has found big problems with the handling of more than 100 provisional ballots in the Forsyth County primary last month. The local Board of Elections ultimately rejected the ballots, a sad outcome that should never have happened.

Fortunately, new Elections Director Tim Tsujii is responding well to the problem and working hard to correct it before the June 7 primary for congressional seats and a state supreme court seat the will include the re-election for the South Ward city council seat. More than 30 voters were given the wrong ballot in the South Ward Democratic primary last month, another problem the local elections department has worked to correct.

The state elections board, which allowed the new election for the South Ward, should also look at the provisional ballots problem.

Tuesday, Democracy North Carolina called attention to it. Bob Hall, the executive director of the group, had asked for a meeting with Tsujii on the issues that would be open to the press. To his credit, Tsujii agreed to that meeting, which also included several people who volunteer with Democracy North Carolina to monitor voting.

At the meeting, Tsujii, who came on board just two weeks before the primary, explained that printers his department had been using inadvertently printed out provisional ballot documents without a line on the bottom for voters to give a mandatory signature. Poll workers should have caught that, he said. At the very least, the workers should have had the voters sign the documents on the bottom, even without the line.

Even within the same precinct, election officials said, some ballot documents were signed and some were not. The local elections board had little choice but to reject the ballots with unsigned documents.

Tsujii didn't throw the poll workers under the bus. They serve long hours for little pay, often out of a sense of civic duty. Deputy Elections Director Lamar Joyner noted that workers had to concentrate heavily on carrying out the new voter ID law.

But he and Tsujii acknowledged that more and better training is needed, a point Hall pushed. Hall also noted that the local elections board, which oversees Tsujii's work, chose not to offer early voting on the first Saturday of that period. That decision, Hall suggested, made for heavier traffic at other times.

Going forward, elections workers will fill out paper forms for the provisional ballot documents. But money for training and more poll workers is needed as well. The local board of elections, which meets today, should ask commissioners for more funding.

The legislature should provide money for training and workers as well. The legislature's voter suppression law has increased the work and tension at the polls, creating an environment where a democracy's greatest treasure, votes, can be too easily lost.