

OPINION

GUEST COLUMN

Election problems require bigger fix

Potentially illegal absentee ballot activities in Bladen County should never have affected the 2018 congressional election.

The allegations were public knowledge – and national news – two years before, but a breakdown in election law enforcement left the matter unresolved for this year’s midterm elections.

The state elections board received complaints in 2016 that Bladen County political operative McCrae Dowless was paying people to collect voters’ absentee ballots and give them to him. That’s the central allegation against Dowless in 2018 as he worked for Republican Mark Harris’ congressional campaign.

If true, that’s illegal: Voters must mail in or deliver their ballots themselves, unless they have a disability that requires someone else to assist them. Elections board investigators looked into the issue, but the state board only ruled on a complaint that Dowless filed against another group. Dowless’ complaint was backed by Republican Gov. Pat McCrory’s campaign, as McCrory sought to find fraudulent ballots that might overturn his loss.

The state elections board ultimately dismissed that complaint, determining that what occurred did not affect the outcome of the election. The board turned hundreds of pages of investigatory findings over to federal prosecutors -- and that’s where the safeguards that should protect our democracy broke down.

North Carolina’s elections board is an odd agency – it investigates crimes but can’t charge people with crimes. Any evidence its investigators gather about illegal election or campaign activities must be forwarded to a prosecutor.

That put the U.S. Attorney’s office for North Carolina’s eastern district in charge. Initially that was acting U.S. Attorney John Bruce until Trump appointee Robert Higdon took over in the fall of 2017.

Higdon either didn’t complete the investigation before the 2018 midterms, or he declined to press criminal charges against anyone in Bladen. He was responsible for making sure any bad actors from the 2016 couldn’t damage our democracy in 2018, and he failed. He hasn’t made any public statement on the current scandal.

Instead of pursuing a case that could involve hundreds of fraudulent ballots, Higdon focused on non-citizen voters – and found a grand total of 19 of them, who were charged in August.

It’s time we moved elections law enforcement out of the slow and secretive federal prosecutor’s office. North Carolina has a special agency just to handle alcohol-related crimes, so why can’t we have a law enforcement agency devoted to election matters?

To stop election fraudsters, the state elections agency needs more investigators, and it needs the power to make arrests. It needs the resources to deploy election monitors to watch over local officials and polls in known trouble spots like Bladen and Robeson counties.

Those changes would require support from the legislature, which is suspicious of the elections board because it’s controlled by Gov. Roy Cooper’s appointees. So far, lawmakers haven’t effectively tackled the absentee ballot fraud issue. They did agree to a Democrat’s suggestion to require a photocopy of an absentee voter’s ID, but ballot harvesters could easily just use a portable copy machine to get that while visiting the voter’s home.

Stopping election fraud will also require Republicans and Democrats to put aside their partisan hackery when credible allegations surface. While the current reports indicate that fraud may have affected both the primary and the general election, some Democrats are opposing a do-over primary in hopes of giving their candidate an advantage. They want a rematch against a politically damaged Mark Harris, not a more viable Republican.

Republicans, meanwhile, are struggling to find the right response to alleged misdeeds on their side. Party leaders have waffled between admitting a new election could be the right solution, bashing elections board members for bringing up the topic, and continuing to cheer for Harris.

Having a secure, fair democratic process is far more important than who wins any single election. It’s time for our state’s political leaders to respect that, act like adults, and ensure that the next election is fraud-free.

Colin Campbell is editor of the Insider State Government News Service. Follow him at NCInsider.com or @RaleighReporter. Write to him at ccampbell@ncinsider.com.



Colin CAMPBELL

GUEST COLUMN

Do politicians really want to lead?

As another year draws to a close, a year of Democratic resurgence in both national and local politics, I offer this challenge to incumbent and newly elected lawmakers alike. Do you really want to be leaders? Or do you just want to be politicians?

A mastery of politics is required to lead effectively, I grant you. No more how high your ideals and how ambitious your goals may be, you have to win elections and cultivate alliances in order to fashion public policy. But only some effective politicians prove to be effective leaders.

In Washington, there is an obvious test of seriousness that, alas, few would-be leaders have been passing lately. Will Congress and the Trump administration do anything of consequence to address the most consequential issue we face, fiscal irresponsibility?

The federal budget is wildly, recklessly out of whack. Its massive annual deficits will add trillions more to the federal debt in the coming years. Democrats blame the tax cuts enacted by the Republican Congress in 2017. It’s certainly the case that the reductions in personal and corporate

income taxes, while growth-enhancing, will lead to lower federal revenues that would otherwise have been collected, at least in the near future. I believe the tax cuts should have been fully offset by budget cuts.

But Washington’s fiscal irresponsibility didn’t begin in 2017, and has little to do with the nickel-and-dime stuff we usually hear about on cable networks and talk shows. Nearly three-quarters of what the federal government does can be described as transfer payments. It collects revenue from income and payroll taxes and then sends checks either to households (for Social Security, pensions, and welfare) or to health care providers (for Medicare and Medicaid).

The federal government has promised more outflow than can be financed with the projected inflow. Progressives say they want to make up the difference with massive tax hikes – indeed, most want to expand Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and welfare programs even more – while conservatives say they want to control expenditures.

In truth, neither group seems to have the courage of their purported convictions. Few have offered anything approaching a viable plan for balancing the budget. When progressives claim only the “wealthy” will pay for their grandiose schemes and conservatives claim they can bring spending into line by targeting

only “waste, fraud, and abuse,” both groups are offering us a governing fantasy, not a governing philosophy. They are being unserious.

Here in North Carolina, the dividing line between politician and leader runs directly through the largest-single function of state government: financing education. Democrats have promised vastly larger expenditures for preschool, elementary, secondary, and higher education than the Republican-led General Assembly has yet appropriated. The money can’t come from borrowing, and the desired amount is too large to be financed by economizing elsewhere in the budget.

Either explicitly or implicitly, Democrats are calling for major tax increases – in the hundreds of millions if not billions of dollars a year. Will Gov. Roy Cooper include them in his upcoming 2019-21 budget proposal?

Will Democrats list themselves as sponsors of such a tax hike in the 2019 session?

Will the Republicans who have themselves promised much-higher spending levels be willing to sign on, as well?

Will serious leaders step forward in 2019?

John Hood is chairman of the John Locke Foundation and appears on “NC SPIN,” broadcast statewide at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and 12:30 p.m. Sundays on UNC-TV.



John HOOD

GUEST COLUMN

SEARCH group looks back at 2018

It has been a remarkable year for SEARCH.

We have been working hard to justify our name – Sustaining Essential and

Rural Community Healthcare – an effort that took on new urgency when Mission Health announced

in March it intended to sell all its assets, including Blue Ridge Regional Hospital, to HCA.

Your SEARCH leadership team has actively

researched what the sale would mean for our area. Giving time, energy and intelligence to this work are these leadership team members Victoria Hicks, Charlie Hofheimer, Britt Kaufmann, Risa Larsen, Susan Larson, Karin Rolett, Clark Tibbits, Jonathan Ward, Joy Boothe and Clark Tibbits. Many others have been involved as committee members in accomplishing the mission of each task force.

Special thanks to the Rev. Tommy James of the First Baptist Church of Burnsville and the Rev. Rich Biega of Trinity Episcopal Church of Spruce Pine for not only making their churches available for our meetings but also being

active participants themselves.

In SEARCH, the “open enrollment period” for jumping on board is unlimited. If you feel a commitment to maintaining healthcare in our rural region, we welcome you. The next general SEARCH meeting is 7 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 15, at First Baptist Church in Burnsville.

As 2018 draws to a close, we hope you’ll take time to review the summaries of the Community Health Assessments from Mitchell and Yancey counties. We salute the work of the Toe River Health District and Blue Ridge Regional Hospital in bringing this year-long effort to fruition.

Our advocate Gov. Jay

Nixon wrote these encouraging words after reading Attorney General Josh Stein’s Dec. 4 press release, which is available at www.searchwnc.org: “I hope everyone knows how rare this is in our democracy today. Reasoned citizen input is getting the appropriate reaction from an informed and empowered honest public official. It is our job to continue to educate the region about this vital asset and process so that General Stein has a clear path to do the right thing(s).”

“You all are doing an amazing job, and it’s an honor to be involved.”

Susan Larson is a member of the SEARCH executive team.



Susan LARSON

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We should celebrate students’ success

Dear editor:
I could not be more pleased with the News-Journal’s expanded coverage of the many sports in our schools

and communities.
At the same time, I thank you for the Students of the Month coverage in the Dec. 12 issue.

Recognizing student achievement beyond the once-a-year and end-of-school awards day can go a long way

to show our communities care about the whole child and we celebrate their academic successes as well as those in sports.

Please keep that feature.

Dr. Dan Barron
Bakersville



MITCHELL NEWS-JOURNAL

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828-765-7169 • Fax: 828-765-1616 • USPS 639-240

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The Mitchell News-Journal is published with pride for the people of Mitchell and adjoining counties by Community Newspapers Inc., Athens, Georgia.

We believe strong newspapers build strong communities – “Newspapers get things done!” Our primary goal is to publish distinguished and profitable community-oriented newspapers.

This mission will be accomplished through the teamwork of professionals dedicated to truth, integrity, loyalty, quality and hard work.

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Periodical postage paid in Spruce Pine
Regular yearly subscription rates: \$27 in Mitchell, Avery & Yancey Co.; \$37 for seasonal residents of Mitchell County; \$47 for out of county
Postmaster: Send address changes to: Mitchell News-Journal, P.O. Box 339, Spruce Pine, NC 28777. In the event of typographical errors in advertisements, the Mitchell News-Journal is responsible only for the space occupied by the actual error.

