

## Findings of the Board of Elections Interviews by the League of Women Voters of NC and Democracy NC

August 2015

Volunteers with the League of Women Voters of NC or Democracy North Carolina interviewed the executive directors of 36 county boards of elections in the winter and spring of 2015. The survey asked directors about their concerns with administering the 2016 elections, including recruiting and training poll workers, educating voters, and budgeting for equipment. It also asked about their interest in online voter registration and about ways community groups may be helpful to election officials.

### Major Findings:

- With 4 elections and more than **40 election days** possible next year, the usual concern about **finding adequate staff** has become more pressing. Use of computers and electronic poll books means more tech-savvy and better trained poll workers are needed.
- The ID requirement and other changes in the law are confusing for voters and poll workers alike. There is an urgent **need for poll worker training and statewide education for voters** about the rules and how they will be implemented at the polls.
- Many districts need **upgrades to existing voting equipment**, more machines and associated training. The mandated shift to paper ballots places a further strain on many county budgets where new machines are required.
- The separate **presidential primary** in March is not only costly but presents logistical challenges to counties seeking polling locations, workers and the associated funds.

### **Detailed Findings**

The directors were helpful and thoughtful in their responses. In addition to answering the questions on the survey, they identified “best practices” and policy changes to improve the efficiency of election administration.

### Equipment issues

Many boards will need to update their equipment in the next few years. Some of this relates to the 2018 requirement to have paper ballots that was included in HB-589, which passed in 2013. In June 2015, with the passage of HB-836, the date for voting equipment compliance moved to September 2019. That change reflects the concerns we heard from several county directors. Six

directors (notably in larger counties) specifically mentioned their concerns about the cost and training involved in shifting to paper ballots from their current DRE (Direct-Recording Electronic) machines. Currently DRE are used in 24 counties, and those counties' populations make up about one third of all North Carolinians.

Two counties expressed concern that they will be short of machines for the presidential election and will need to lease machines. However, leasing equipment from other counties or states may prove challenging during a high-intensity election. At least 5 counties have budgeted for major purchases of new equipment in the next year. Others are projecting large equipment purchases in 2017.

Most of the counties surveyed have electronic poll books or are moving to electronic poll books in 2016, and all are unreservedly positive about them. Counties without them would like them.

### **2016 concerns**

There were three clear areas in the responses to this question:

- Recruiting qualified poll workers and avoiding burnout during the intense election calendar that includes the 2015 municipal elections, presidential primary, 2016 primary, and 2016 general election, along with the possibility of run-offs.
- The cost of the extra presidential primary election.
- The lack of voter awareness and need for education about the voter ID requirement and other voting law changes.

### **Poll workers and judges**

Directors in 24 of the 36 counties mentioned concerns around the shortage of poll workers and judges, the level of training needed, long hours, and computer literacy of poll workers.

Directors are seeking more poll workers and assistants, including poll greeters and assistants for curbside voters and managing traffic. They are also looking for more training resources and new ways to conduct training programs. Some directors are taking creative approaches to address these challenges:

- 2 offer classes at their community colleges.
- 4 use high school students to help with their computer needs.
- 4 expect to use unaffiliated voters as judges if the parties do not provide enough for each polling location.

Directors also suggested creative ways to address recruitment challenges, such as:

- Offer 6 or 8 hour shifts rather than the full day currently required.
- Offer incentives for those who do better work or who have longer tenures of service.
- Use temp agencies to get extra workers.

Several directors also mentioned that they are seeking funding to hire additional support staff in their offices, either during the peak election periods or throughout the year.

### **Costs, Budgets**

Many directors mentioned the additional costs associated with a separate presidential primary in 2016. One director wondered if legislators realized that the burden of financing the extra primary would fall to counties. Most directors said they have good relationships with their county commissioners who ultimately must approve their budgets, but several worried that the costs to the counties of new equipment and election administration continue to climb higher and higher. In the past, occasional state appropriations and federal HAVA funds paid for expenses that are now entirely borne by the counties.

### **Voter ID**

Directors in 13 counties specifically mentioned that the voter ID requirement could slow down the check-in process, produce longer waits, require extra poll workers, and pose implementation challenges because of the law's complexity. Some directors said they planned to have poll workers talk with voters standing in line to prepare them for the ID question at check-in, confirm they are in the right precinct, and redirect them to the correct precinct if necessary (using an iPad or other device). In order to reduce potential long lines for curbside voting, some directors are proactively reaching out to nursing homes to register voters and promote mail-in absentee voting.

One director has hired a new outreach person to conduct voter registration, assist voters in getting free voter IDs, and provide education around voting changes. Some are considering using social media to engage younger voters and spread the word about ID requirement. Most directors requested support from civic groups in spreading the word about the new rules.

### **Early Voting locations**

Many of the directors surveyed are looking at adding another One-Stop Early Voting site to ensure that they will meet the minimum hours requirement and provide better coverage in their county. Finding places that comply with voting site requirements is difficult, especially since many locations now need to be available for longer periods each day. One director expressed interest in experimenting with "super precincts" where anyone could vote on Election Day. Two suggested that schools take Election Day off to allow for easier use of school premises as voting sites. Another director is intentionally selecting early voting sites that are not precinct polls to avoid the confusion of voters going to wrong place on Election Day.

### **Online Voter Registration**

When asked about online voter registration (OVR), 14 of the 36 directors said they would like to see OVR implemented in North Carolina and only 2 said they opposed it. Most directors expressed no strong view because they either were unsure how it worked in practice or said

they would follow whatever policy decision was made regarding OVR. Currently, 22 states offer OVR and 5 have passed legislation to create OVR systems in the near future.

### **Community Support**

Several directors expressed their desire for help from community groups to recruit qualified, computer-literate poll workers. More poll workers will be needed to implement future elections given the recent changes to election law.

Another area mentioned for potential collaboration was help in scouting out potential One-Stop Early Voting locations, although community groups should be aware of the strict requirements for early voting sites (ADA compliance, sufficient parking, building access for 10+ days, a secure room, etc.)

Finally, most directors saw voter education about changes in voting laws as an important area for collaboration with community groups.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Successful elections are the result of excellent planning and implementation by local boards of elections. Throughout this interview process, our volunteers were impressed by the resourcefulness of election directors. No matter the complexity of the challenge, the “can do” philosophy is ubiquitous.

However, we were also impressed with the fact that election officials need greater financial and public support to effectively handle the combination of challenges posed by a hotly contested presidential election and new set of election requirements. Additional county-level resources are vital, but more support is needed. State lawmakers must demonstrate a greater interest in the work of boards and the integrity of the elections system by providing resources to help implement the election law changes they adopted. In particular, greater funding is needed for (1) local and statewide information campaigns to inform voters about the new rules and how they will affect the voting process; (2) recruitment and training of an increased number of high quality poll workers and support staff; and (3) purchase of new equipment to meet the paper-ballot requirement and to modernize election administration at the polls and in the county election offices. We urge legislators to show their support both personally and in the funding of these critical needs.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION** about the survey, please contact:

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