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Opposing sides dig in over close North Carolina governor's race

By Jonathan Drew
RALEIGH (AP) - A conservative group filed a request Nov. 23 for an urgent hearing on North Carolina voters who cast ballots through same-day registration, while the state NAACP criticized the legal action as playing games with the state's still-undecided contest for governor.

The latest volley over the tight race also included a news conference by the state GOP calling for more scrutiny of ballots in Democratic-leaning Durham County. The moves come a day after Republican Gov. Pat McCrory began the process of requesting a recount.

Unofficial numbers from the State Board of Elections show Democrat Roy Cooper with a lead of about 7,700 votes over McCrory, a margin that has grown since Election Night. About 20 of the state's 100 counties - including several of its most populous - hadn't finished their tallies by late Nov. 23 afternoon.

The trailing candidate will be eligible for a recount if the margin is 10,000 votes or less after ballots are tallied.

The leader of the conservative-leaning Civitas Institute filed a motion in federal court seeking a preliminary injunction and an expedited hearing on the lawsuit it filed this week.

The lawsuit asks a federal court to require that the state Board of Elections refrain from certifying election results until it has finished verifying same-day registrants. The lawsuit argues verification can't properly be finished until December because of a mailing process that takes a month. Statewide results were scheduled for certification Nov. 29, but state officials can delay that tally.

Lawyers for the Civitas Institute wrote Nov. 23 that a hearing on the matter was urgently needed because the vote count is underway. Hours later, Judge James Dever set a hearing on the motion for Dec. 2.

But the lawsuit was criticized by North Carolina NAACP president William Barber, who called it part of a multifaceted effort to delay election results that are unfavorable to McCrory and his Republican allies.

"The election is over, and it's time for the games to stop," Barber said at a news conference.

Barber said the issue of same-day registration was settled when a federal appeals court restored that ability for voters in a July ruling. The court overturned several parts of a wide-ranging 2013 elections law enacted by the GOP.

Bob Hall, executive director of the nonprofit Democracy North Carolina, said some voters are being maligned with false accusations that they're felons. Elections protests have been filed in counties around the state, adding to the slow pace of the statewide count.

Hall said his group examined 43 cases around the state in which voters were accused of being ineligible to vote because of felonies. He found that five involved mistaken identity, and more than a dozen others were for voters convicted of misdemeanors, not felonies.

At a separate news conference later, officials with the state GOP said the NAACP has mischaracterized Republicans' motives behind looking closely at the vote - which they say is a normal part of the electoral

process. The GOP also said Durham County's 6,000 absentee ballots should have more scrutiny to see if there are any unusual patterns.

State GOP executive director Dallas Woodhouse said it's important to have a thorough look at how votes are counted and who's eligible.

"I'm not saying there is anything illegitimate," he said. "I'm just saying we're not finished."

NAACP: Gov. McCrory must end games with NC election outcome

RALEIGH (AP) - North Carolina's NAACP says Gov. Pat McCrory and his Republican allies are playing games with the election results.

North Carolina NAACP president William Barber said Nov. 23 that Republicans are trying to delay results simply because they're not satisfied. Democrat Roy Cooper holds a slim lead over McCrory in the still-undecided governor's race.

But Barber has a message for the GOP: "The election is over and it's time for the games to stop."

McCrory has started the process of asking for a recount, a conservative leaning group filed a lawsuit over votes by same-day registrants and there have been formal election protests around the state.

Bob Hall, who leads the nonprofit Democracy North Carolina, says some voters are being unfairly maligned in local elections complaints with false accusations that they're felons.

Vilsack says Democrats need better message for rural America

By Mary Clare Jalonick
WASHINGTON (AP) - No one listened to Tom Vilsack.

As agriculture secretary during the entire Obama administration, the former Iowa governor has for years been telling anyone who will pay attention - farmers, members of Congress, even Hillary Clinton - that Democrats need a better message for rural America. And he's spent most of his tenure focusing on rural development, trying to revitalize areas that ultimately voted for Republican Donald Trump in this year's presidential election.

"The Democratic Party, in my opinion, has not made as much of an effort as it ought to, to speak to rural voters," Vilsack said Nov. 22 in an interview with The Associated Press. "What's frustrating to me is that we actually have something we can say to them, and we have chosen, for whatever reason, not to say it."

Vilsack is a longtime friend of Bill and Hillary Clinton and was close to becoming Hillary Clinton's vice presidential running mate. She chose Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine instead. Clinton ultimately won Virginia but lost, deeply, in many rural areas of the country.

Vilsack says he understands why party leaders chose a different path to try for electoral victory, focusing on expanding populations like Hispanics and African-Americans who had come out in large numbers to vote for Barack Obama, the nation's first black president, in 2008 and 2012.

The problem, he said, is those groups represent around the same percentage of the population as rural voters. And he says Democrats didn't have enough of a counter argument to powerful Republican themes of less regulation and lower taxes.

"There wasn't an overarching theme that a person in a small town could go, 'Oh, they're

talking about me,'" Vilsack said.

According to exit polls conducted for AP and television networks by Edison Research, about 17 percent of voters in this year's election were from small cities or rural areas, and 62 percent of them said they voted for Trump.

Since the election, Democrats in Congress have also been talking about how to turn around the rural vote. Ohio Rep. Tim Ryan is challenging California Rep. Nancy Pelosi for House Democratic leader, saying that the party's message needs to be heard beyond the two coasts.

"We lost those voters," Ryan said last week. "We've got to find a way to get back in, and that starts with a message that resonates in the flyover states."

Vilsack says the party should have had a tougher counter-message to Trump's positions on deporting immigrants who make up some of the farm workforce and opposing trade deals that are good for agriculture.

"If you have no market and no workforce, what good does it do," Vilsack said. "My guess is, if you confronted the average farmer with that dilemma, they'd go, 'Well, let me think about that.'"

He said Democrats didn't do that "because we didn't think we'd have to," because Clinton appeared to be on track to win the election.

Vilsack is the only remaining member of Obama's original cabinet. As secretary, he's focused on rebuilding rural communities, increasing the diversity of types of agriculture, boosting innovation and research and making school meals healthier. He's also worked to resolve civil rights claims against the department.

He said he thinks the Obama administration's work on many of those issues will hold, particularly because of millennials' deep interest in food issues and because the agriculture and food industries have already adapted to many regulations.



Chancellor Debra Saunders-White

NCCU to Hold 'Celebration of Life Tribute' For Chancellor Debra Saunders-White on Dec. 2

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is saddened by the loss of the 11th Chancellor, Dr. Debra Saunders-White, who passed away on Saturday, Nov. 26 after a brave fight with cancer. Saunders-White served as NCCU's chief administrator, a position she held since June 1, 2013. In her honor, a 'Celebration of Life Tribute' will be held on Friday, Dec. 2 at 2 p.m. in NCCU's McDougald-McLendon Arena. Saunders-White's funeral is scheduled for Saturday, Dec. 3 at 11 a.m. at St. Joseph's Catholic Church (414 Buckroe Avenue, Hampton, Virginia 23664) in Virginia.

"Her loss is nearly immeasurable to our community, but her influence on higher education and her genuine love and dedication for NCCU, most especially the students, are clearly evident by her impact in Durham, across North Carolina and throughout our nation," said Dr. Johnson O. Akinleye, acting chancellor, provost and vice chancellor for Academic Affairs in a statement to the NCCU community. "Chancellor Saunders-White was a powerhouse of energy and wit; she spent her life passionately executing on her visionary and transformative strategy of using education to create opportunity."

Saunders-White was appointed as the university's first permanent female chancellor on February 8, 2013, after a successful career with the U.S. Department of Education. She joined the U.S. Department of Education as the deputy assistant secretary for higher education programs prior to her appointment as acting assistant secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education. She also served as vice chancellor for information technology systems at University of North Carolina Wilmington and vice president for technology and chief information officer at Hampton University. Prior to entering higher education administration, Saunders-White spent 15 years in the corporate sector at IBM.

A Hampton, Va., native, Saunders-White earned her bachelor's degree in history from the University of Virginia. She earned a Master of Business Administration from the College of William & Mary and a doctorate in higher education administration from The George Washington University.

Saunders-White's vision of "Eagle Excellence" made delivering excellence in NCCU's classrooms, excellence throughout the campus and excellence in the institution's service to the community a focus during her administration.

During her three years as NCCU chancellor, the university sustained a number of achievements including the current development of a new Student Center and inclusion in the Connect NC bond that will build a new School of Business. Under her leadership, NCCU received numerous high rankings and honored as the 2016 HBCU of the Year by HBCU Digest.

Throughout her administration, Saunders-White strategically enhanced, elevated and showcased NCCU as a first-choice, premier and global institution of higher learning with a significant increase in retention and graduation rates, strength and reputation among education administrators, student-faculty ratios, high school standing for incoming first-year students and alumni giving. As a result, the university became the third-highest ranked public Historically Black College of University (HBCU) in the nation by U.S. News & World Report. Additionally, NCCU has recorded several institutional fundraising records.

A testament of truth and service, Saunders-White was actively involved in a number of service and community organizations, including Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., The Links, Incorporated, Made for Durham and United Way of the Greater Triangle.

Saunders-White is survived by two children, Elizabeth Paige and Cecil III, her mother, Irene Saunders, and her brothers, Roger, Ralph and Kyle Saunders, and their families, a number of other family members and a host of friends and colleagues.

In lieu of flowers, please make contributions to The Saunders-White Family Endowed Scholarship at www.nccu.edu, select 'Giving' and choose The Saunders-White Family Endowed Scholarship from the designation list. Checks can be made payable to the NCCU Foundation with The Saunders-White Family Endowed Scholarship on the memo line addressed to NCCU Institutional Advancement, PO Box 19363, Durham, NC 27707.

Fact Sheet on Sessions Record Available Online

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Following President-elect Donald Trump's announcement that he intends to nominate Senator Jeff Sessions to the position of U.S. Attorney General, Alliance for Justice joined civil-rights and pro-democracy organizations compiling fact sheets on Sessions' record.

The AFJ fact sheet, detailing disturbing aspects of Sessions' record on civil rights, women's rights, the environment, LGBTQ rights, immigration, criminal justice and the environment, is available here.

You can also find it on this page on our AFJ website with Nan Aron's essay on the Sessions nomination. Our resources on this page will be updated as more become available.

Please contact Laurie Kinney at AFJ for more information or to reach AFJ President Nan Aron for comment.