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Lawsuit: North Carolina absentee vote changes went too far

By Gary D. Robertson

RALEIGH (AP) - A portion of a 2019 North Carolina law designed to toughen mail-in absentee ballot rules following a fraud investigation in a congressional race went too far and is unconstitutional, a lawsuit filed on March 4 contends.

Lawyers for Advance Carolina, a group that works in part to get African Americans out to vote in the state, said the new limits on who can help someone fill out requests to obtain a ballot violate state constitutional protections. The group wants enforcement blocked of what it calls the new "application organizing ban."

The ban not only denies "voters valuable assistance in obtaining absentee ballots to facilitate their political participation, but it also infringes on the core political speech and associational activities of organizations and citizens working to increase voter turnout," attorney Burton Craige wrote in the lawsuit filed in Wake County Superior Court.

The law was approved by the state House and Senate in October with only one "no" vote and signed by Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper.

Supporters of the legislation say it attempted to combat illegal ballot "harvesting," which occurred in the 9th Congressional District campaign in 2018, according to evidence collected in a State Board of Elections probe. The investigation led to a new 9th District election last September.

The traditional absentee ballot process remained largely the same in the new law: a registered voter fills out a ballot request form that gets sent to the elections board in their home county. The county board then sends an absentee "application" and a clean ballot to the voter, who then fills out both.

While the measure increased criminal penalties for people who attempt to sell or destroy others' completed absentee ballots, Advance Carolina said it made no sense to further restrict who could help fill out a ballot request to only the voter or a close relative. The collection of completed or partially completed ballots was the key element in the absentee ballot probe in the 9th District, focused on a Republican operative in Bladen County.

An outside individual had been previously able to help with the ballot request form, which allowed political groups to implement get-out-the-vote efforts. Now, the lawsuit says, there are now "greater restrictions on completing absentee ballot applications than it does for filling out and submitting absentee ballots." This amounts to an unconstitutional burden on the right to vote, according to Advance Carolina.

The state and the State Board of Elections are among the defendants in the case. Joseph Kyzer, a spokesman for House Speaker Tim Moore, told WRAL-TV the bipartisan law doesn't prevent any organization from encouraging absentee voting and will be defended by legislators.

The plaintiffs' lawyers also include several from a Washington, D.C., law firm that helped represent Democrat Dan McCreech, who ran unsuccessfully for the 9th District seat in 2018 and 2019. He and his campaign weren't accused of any wrongdoing.



Archived photo of NCCU freshman Anissa Rivera during NCCU's first game this season against N.C. A&T. In Thursday's win, Rivera posted a double-double (by Kevin Dorsey)

Eagles Top Aggies Again to Sweep Season Series

NCCU and N.C. A&T will Meet in the MEAC Quarters

Freshman forward Anissa Rivera tallied her sixth double-double of the season to lead the North Carolina Central University women's basketball team to a 65-52 Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) win over archrival North Carolina A&T State University Thursday evening inside McDougald-McLendon Arena.

The Eagles completed a regular season series sweep over the Aggies for the first time since joining the MEAC in 2011-12. The victory also marks the first time NCCU has defeated N.C. A&T at home in the DI era (last home win over NCAT was Jan. 19, 2002).

NC Central (12-17 Overall, 9-7 MEAC) also finishes its regular season with 12 wins, its most wins as full DI members, and posted its first winning record in MEAC play (.563). The Eagles, who were picked to finish eighth in the preseason poll, earned the fifth seed in the MEAC Tournament after Thursday's win accompanied by a loss by Delaware State University to Howard University. It will be NCCU's best seed ever in the MEAC Tournament.

The Eagles will have to knock off N.C. A&T (19-9, 11-5) for a third time this season in order to advance to the semifinals for the first time ever. The Aggies are the fourth seed heading into postseason play and that sets up an NCCU/NCAT showdown in the quarterfinals for a second straight year. The Eagles will battle the Aggies on Thursday, March 12 at Noon.

Rivera, who leads all freshman in the MEAC in most statistical categories, completed her double-double with a game-high 18 points and 10 rebounds. She also had two blocks and two steals.

Seniors Kieche White and Paulina Afriyie also continued their strong play for the maroon and gray. White bucketed 17 points and added three assists and three steals. Afriyie just missed a double-double with nine points and a game-high 12 rebounds.

Rivera scored 11 of NCCU's first 13 points to help the Eagles fly out to an early 13-5 advantage. She canned a trio of treys during that opening surge.

NC Central still maintained a slim 15-12 edge after the first quarter before the Aggies were finally able to take their largest lead of the half and game, 26-21, midway through the second quarter. Junior Deja Winters hit a 3-pointer and made a steal and transition layup during the N.C. A&T rally.

The Eagles responded by scoring eight of the last 10 points to sneak into the locker room with a 29-28 halftime lead. NCCU was able to remain in front for most of the second half, but the Aggies kept things interesting until late.

A technical foul allowed N.C. A&T to make two free throws with 2:30 left in the fourth quarter to pull within one possession at 53-50. However, senior Zaria Atkins hit a pull-up jumper in the paint on NCCU's ensuing possession. That basket sparked a 12-2 run over the final two minutes.

Afriyie put the dagger into the Aggies by making a steal on an inbounds pass in the final minute. She then finished the play with a fast break layup while drawing a foul. Her made free throw to complete the 3-point play put the Eagles up double digits for the rest of the contest.

Atkins finished with nine points, five rebounds and five assists. Sophomore Dasmine Kasey chipped in eight points and classmate Kiyana Brown made a game-high four blocks.

Winters led the Aggies with 15 points.



Harris endorses Biden; Jesse Jackson backs Sanders - AP -- Kamala Harris endorsed Joe Biden on Sunday and said she would "do everything in my power" to help elect him, becoming the latest dropout from the Democratic race for president to line up behind the former vice president in his battle with Bernie Sanders for the nomination.



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