

North Carolina state election board alleges fraud by Republican campaign aide

By Trévon Austin
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North Carolina election officials have declined to announce the winner of the election for the state's Ninth Congressional District after suspecting tampering with absentee ballots, favoring the GOP candidate. As the vote count stands now, Republican Mark Harris received just over 900 votes more than Democrat Dan McCready. However, the state board of elections made reference to "unfortunate activities" that raised doubts about the veracity of the election results.

The reports of suspicious activity and eyewitness accounts point to fraud. Political analysts in North Carolina noted the Ninth District had an unusually high number of absentee ballots requested but not returned to be counted. Almost one in four requested ballots were not returned, a rate significantly higher than other North Carolina districts. The suspicion is that absentee ballots were collected from voters by campaign aides—an action which is illegal under state law—and then destroyed if they were thought likely to favor the Democratic candidate.

Most of the fraud seems to be focused on Bladen and Robeson counties, in the southeast corner of the state. Michael Bitzer, a professor at Catawba College, analyzed the unusual trend in the Ninth District counties. Over 60 percent of absentee ballots were not returned in Robeson county, and over 40 percent in Bladen.

Bitzer noted that Bladen county was the only area Harris won the mail-in absentee vote, with 61 percent of the votes, compared to McCready's 38 percent. These results raised eyebrows in North Carolina's election offices. Based on the partisan breakdown of mail-in ballots in the county, Harris would have to secure the votes of all the Republican voters (19 percent of the total) in addition to nearly all ballots from unaffiliated voters and a sizeable number of Democratic votes.

Local news outlet WSOC reported lawyers from the Democratic Party sent affidavits to the state board detailing shady activities in relation to absentee ballots.

Eyewitness accounts in the affidavits include:

- David Sheppard says he overheard people talking outside a polling station who said Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr., a well known political operative in the locality, would receive a sum of \$40,000 if Mark Harris won the election. Sheppard also testified "people hire [Dowless] to work their campaigns for them to get the votes to get them elected."

- A voter says a young woman came to her house and asked for her absentee ballot because she was collecting them. Although the voter only made her choice for two offices, the woman collecting the ballot said she would fill out the rest.

- Another voter also says a woman came to her house and claimed she was responsible for collecting absentee ballots. The voter filled out her ballot while the young woman waited. The woman collecting ballots never asked the voter to sign the ballot and did not place the ballot in a sealed envelope.

- An unverified affidavit claims an individual actually talked with Dowless during the Republican primary election. According to this person, Dowless claimed to be working for Harris and stated he only accepted cash payments from campaigns.

An analysis by the *Washington Post* shows Leslie McCrae Dowless, Jr, the man who seems to be at the center of the election fraud, has been working local elections for both Democrats and Republicans for at least eight years.

In 2010, Dowless was paid over \$7,000 to provide "get-out-and-vote" services to Harold Pope's bid for district attorney. With Dowless' aid, Pope managed to win 81 percent of absentee ballots in Bladen County, and 52 percent of overall absentee ballots in the Ninth District. Pope ultimately lost the election but would have lost the absentee vote by a margin of 3 to 1 without Dowless.

Dowless has worked at least five campaigns since 2010 where he was identified as the manager responsible for collecting absentee ballots in Bladen that were either altered or never sent in to be counted. In three of the campaigns he's been involved in, candidates received significantly more support in Bladen than outside of the county

According to an NBC News analysis of election documents, Dowless turned in 590 absentee ballot request forms from late August to late October 2018. A Jessica Dowless turned in another 185 applications. At least 86 returned ballots include witness signatures from those with ties to Dowless—either those who share a last name with him or have been linked to him in some capacity. By state law, two witnesses must sign a certification affixed to the outside of a mailed-in ballot.

Red Dome Group, a political consulting firm, hired Dowless as an independent contractor and assisted with the Harris campaign. According to state records, the group was paid \$430,000 by Harris for services which included the press, strategy, and specific outreach efforts for absentee voting in Bladen County. It is unclear how much money went to Dowless himself.

North Carolina has been one of the states Republicans have fought ferociously against alleged voter fraud, mainly targeting in-person voting by illegal immigrants or others ineligible to vote, an extremely rare occurrence in US politics.

The far more likely avenue for falsifying election outcomes is through absentee ballots, an area of electoral activity where Republicans once dominated so thoroughly that North Carolina Democrats tightened rules in the early 2000s, when they were in power in the state legislature, in an effort to starve Republicans of potential votes.

In 2013, after the Republicans had taken control of the legislature, they reversed the previous law and passed one of the most aggressive voter-identification laws in the US. As federal courts have found, such laws reduce turnout for African American and other minority voters who have a harder time getting accepted identification.

The nationwide campaign against “voter fraud” is rife with racism. GOP candidates are aware impoverished minority populations are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates and employ tactics to minimize minority turnout.

In the election between Harris and McCready, an analysis by the *News & Observer* found that the ballots of minority voters were not returned to be counted at disproportionate rates. More than four out of 10 ballots

requested by African American voters did not make it back to election officials. That number jumps to more than 60 percent for Native American voters. In comparison, white voters' ballots non-return rate was just 17 percent.

The election fraud in North Carolina does not place the Democratic Party on a moral high ground. They carried out similar practices when they had the chance. Furthermore, Dowless was himself a registered Democrat before becoming a Republican, and he was hired by a Democratic candidate in 2016.

It is an irony of the 2018 elections that the Democrat who was apparently the victim of systematic vote fraud, Dan McCready, is one of those the WSWS has identified as the “CIA Democrats,” an ex-military officer turned “green” capitalist who greatly outspent his Republican rival for the seat.

It is quite likely that the state election board and the state Republican Party are only willing to acknowledge the fraud in the Ninth District because McCready is considered an acceptable, i.e., right-wing Democrat, and because Mark Harris, a Baptist pastor long at odds with the party establishment, had ousted the incumbent Republican Congressman Robert Pittenger in the primary.

There is no faction of the American ruling class genuinely committed to democratic principles. Across the US, laws and rules are set in place that make it nearly impossible for any third party to win an election. Both parties also employ gerrymandering, re-drawing district lines to ensure victories in elections without competition. When they have control over state elections, the two capitalist parties employ whatever means necessary to keep their monopoly on power.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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