

North Carolina election board orders new vote

By Shelley Connor
23 February 2019

On Thursday, North Carolina election officials ordered a new contest in the Ninth Congressional District after hearing evidence of fraud committed by Republican Mark Harris's campaign. Harris won the November election by a margin of only 905 votes, primarily on the strength of absentee ballots marked in his favor. Most of those ballots were filled out or signed fraudulently. The five-person Board of Elections unanimously supported the order.

At the center of the hearing was the strategy used by Leslie McCrae Dowless Jr., a campaign consultant known as an "election guru," who allegedly harvested, diverted and tampered with absentee ballots on Mark Harris's behalf. Most of the absentee ballots submitted in Robeson and Bladen Counties were signed by either Dowless or one of his family members.

This tactic allowed Harris to dominate in Bladen County. Although Republicans accounted for only 19 of the absentee voters there, Harris won 61 percent of the county's absentee votes.

Bladen County and neighboring Robeson County comprise only two percent of the state's population, yet the two counties account for over 3,400, or 60 percent, of the state's missing absentee ballots. Dowless had requested 1,200 absentee ballots in those counties.

Kim Strach, the executive director of the state elections board, said on Monday that there was overwhelming evidence of a "coordinated, unlawful and substantially resourced absentee ballot scheme."

Prior to the hearing, numerous eyewitnesses signed affidavits in which they testified to Dowless's workers coming to their homes to collect absentee ballots or taking away incompletely filled ballots, sometimes pressuring them to hand the ballots over when they did not want to.

Harris asserted that he was unaware of any illegal ballot harvesting. Dowless himself refused to testify unless he was offered immunity. The board rejected his demand.

On Monday, Lisa Britt, Dowless's stepdaughter, testified that Dowless had paid her to harvest absentee ballots, including those that were unsealed or unsigned. Taking possession of an absentee ballot is, by itself, a felony in North Carolina.

Britt also said she had tampered with ballots by filling in any missing options with Republican candidates' names. She specified that Dowless had coached her on how to do this without raising red flags, right down to matching pen colors on the ballots and applying stamps correctly.

She testified that she had initially been paid between \$150-\$175 dollars for collecting 50 ballots. As time went by, her pay increased to \$200 a week because voters grew reluctant to hand over their ballots.

Andy Yates, the CEO of the Red Dome Group and a consultant on Harris's campaign, testified that he had hired Dowless and paid him through his company, despite the fact that Dowless had been convicted of felony fraud and perjury in the 1990s. Yates testified that he did not supervise Dowless's work and that Harris' relationship with Dowless predated Yates's involvement with Harris's campaign.

The most damning testimony came from Harris and his son. Mark Harris testified that he had paid Dowless through a political action committee (PAC), which is regarded as unethical, although he said he did not know it was problematic. On Wednesday, Justice Department attorney John Harris, Mark Harris's son, testified that he had warned both his father and Andy Yates about Dowless's potentially illegal handling of absentee ballots in a 2016 election.

John Harris said that his father went on to hire Dowless despite his protestations. He also testified that all of Harris's campaign workers had been paid through Yates's Red Dome Group in order to create political distance between Harris and his campaign workers. He presented to investigators an email he had written to his father warning him about the illegality of Dowless's tactics. "The key thing that I am fairly certain they do that is illegal," he wrote, "is that they collect the completed absentee ballots and mail them all at once."

Mark Harris's counsel submitted a flurry of new, previously undisclosed documents to the board just before John Harris's testimony. On Thursday, the elder Harris testified, under questioning from state board attorney Josh Lawson, that he had disregarded his son's warnings as he felt that he was "overreacting." He also said that his son is "judgmental" and prone to "arrogance."

In his own emails, which he hastily submitted ahead of his son's testimony, Mark Harris joked in 2016 about Dowless filing a complaint alleging Democratic election fraud in the district: "Guess he didn't like the Dems cutting into his business!"

In 2017, he referred to Dowless as "the guy whose absentee ballot project" had given Todd Johnson, Harris's 2016 rival, the lead, and said that Dowless "could have put me in the US House this term, had I known and he had been helping us."

After a brief recess on Thursday afternoon, Harris returned singing a different tune. "It has become clear to me," he said, "that the public's confidence in the Ninth District seat general election has been undermined to an extent that a new election is warranted." It did not take the election board--comprising of three Democrats and two Republicans--to agree with him.

In the aftermath of the hearing, North Carolina's Ninth Congressional District remains the only district left without representation after last November's elections. The Republicans, including Donald Trump, have worked to distance themselves from Harris's fraudulent campaign. Democratic candidate Dan McCready hailed the board's decision as a victory for democracy.

The Republican Party has relentlessly attacked voters' rights under the guise of reducing voter fraud,

especially in districts heavily populated by minority and poor voters. The Harris campaign's practices in Bladen and Robeson Counties were the logical extension of these efforts.

The Democratic Party can hardly claim moral superiority. Like the Republicans, the Democrats have worked to gerrymander voting districts. Dowless has employed the same absentee ballot harvesting scheme he used for Harris on behalf of Democrats.

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