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Point of View

Voter ID's burden

By Gene Nichol

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Politics, as they say, ain't beanbag.

And North Carolina has seen more than her share of bare-fisted, partisan brawls.

When I moved here, for example, I was surprised to learn that, unlike almost everywhere else, when a voter casts a "straight ticket" ballot, the sweep doesn't include the presidential race. If a Tar Heel seeks to go "all Democrat" or "all Republican," she must first mark the presidential ballot separately. An odd logic.

When I suggested to a prominent senator – who shall go unnamed, but for whom I developed great affection – that this looked like a rule fashioned by a Democratic majority in a state where folks frequently break ranks and elect Republican presidential candidates, he smiled. "What's the justification for it?" I asked. He answered, unembarrassed, "the perquisites of incumbency, of course."

I pressed further. "What would you do if a tremendous Democratic presidential candidate appeared who would sweep the state by huge margins?" He didn't hesitate. "We'd change the rules, forthwith."

When Democrats controlled the legislature, they gerrymandered to beat the band. When Republicans took over, they made their predecessors look like pikers. Whether it's fudging district lines, changing

finance rules, holding midnight sessions or banking veto overrides, the ins dedicate their energies and imaginations to handicap the outs. Fair enough. Or, perhaps, unfair enough.

But, that said, it is possible to take the traditional shoving match a step too far.

Following colleagues across the country, North Carolina Republicans have, for months now, sought to make it more difficult to vote by imposing tough new identification requirements. The burden would fall, most pointedly, on older and younger voters, and citizens of color – Democratic leaners all.

Lawsuits in Pennsylvania and Texas have shown that hundreds of thousands of voters, or more, face new and inconveniencing hurdles under similar standards. A Pennsylvania court this month upheld its statute – but the state judge employed a standard so oddly deferential, for a voting rights case, it is unlikely to stand.

Our bill passed both houses, but was vetoed, thankfully, by Gov. Beverly Perdue. As the session ended, efforts to override fell short. So we're back at equilibrium, for now. One hopes cooler heads will recognize it's crucial, on this front, to stay that way.

It is possible, perhaps, to assume that the voter ID move is a partisan feint, not a racial one. Though the racial impact remains as true – regardless of motive. And black North Carolinians have ample experience, beyond ample, with purposeless, “neutral” restraints that happen to favor a powerful, white majority.

But, there's more. This is the right to vote. We tamper with much in the rough and tumble of partisanship. And as Franklin Roosevelt chided: “There are (always) some candidates who think they have a chance of election, if only the total vote is small enough.”

Restricting the franchise, though, presents a frontal assault on both our history and our theory of government. We literally undercut the enterprise.

We forget, somehow, the inestimable sacrifice, during Mississippi's Freedom Summer, of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney. We look past Fannie Lou Hamer's plea, after bombings and beatings and shotgun blasts, that “all we want is to be part of America ... to be first class citizens.”

We miss the echo of Lyndon Johnson's defining speech – one of the best by any American president – introducing the voting rights act of 1965. Johnson spoke pointedly “of the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy.” He appeared before the Congress, in special session, because “the cries of pain and the hymns of protest of oppressed people (had) summoned into convocation ... the majesty of the greatest nation on earth.”

“The right to vote is the most basic right – without which all others are made meaningless,” he said. The “history of this country, in large measure, is the history of the expansion of that right to all of our people.” Its fulfillment is the central component of “a promise to every citizen” to “share in the dignity of man.”

Johnson rose, famously, by repeating our words of spiritual protest: “We shall overcome.” Nothing could have horrified his segregationist opponents more profoundly. Nothing could have lifted freedom's advocates more movingly. As Dr. Martin Luther King watched the broadcast, astounded colleagues saw him, for the first time, even after all their shared travail, shed tears.

Some liberties are too sacred for mere politics. Some sins against democracy are not to be forgiven.

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