

OUR VIEW

N.C. voters have choices for a change

StarNews Editorial Board

A lot of state legislators got a free pass in 2016. Of the 170 members of North Carolina's General Assembly, 73 essentially ran unopposed, or at least had no major-party opposition.

That won't happen this year. Following the end of candidate filings Wednesday, it looks as if only one Honorable will go unopposed this election year.

Old-timers at the Legislative Building say nothing like this has happened since 1925 at least.

County and congressional races seem just as competitive. And among local legislators, state Sen. Ted Davis and Rep. Frank Iler will have to sweat competition in their party primaries.

This can only be good for our democratic-republic (note the lowercase) way of government — the will of the people gets expressed not directly, but through elected representatives. Unless someone thinks one candidate can somehow reflect the views of everyone, having actual competitive elections is the way the system is supposed to work.

For an “off” year — there's no presidential, gubernatorial or U.S. Senate races at the top of the ballot in North Carolina — the 2018 election could be one of the hottest in recent memory.

There's a good reason elections have cooled off lately, of course. Thanks to the wonders of modern computer software churning through voter rolls, politicians are able to custom-tailor their districts to fit, ensuring that an incumbent has a built-in advantage.

North Carolina, for example, is a “purple” state. Statewide, Democratic and Republican votes are very close. Yet Republicans enjoy veto-proof margins in both the state House and Senate.

Much of this — though not all — is accomplished by segregating black voters (who tend to lean Democratic) into as few legislative districts as possible. Federal judges reviewing a challenge to a North Carolina legislative redistricting plan said it “represents the most extensive unconstitutional racial gerrymander ever encountered by a federal court.”

State Rep. David Lewis, chief architect of a new congressional map, acknowledged that his goal was a political gerrymander: “I think electing Republicans is better than electing Democrats, so I drew this map to help foster what I think is better for the country,” Lewis said. “We used (redistricting) criteria to gain (political) advantage.”

He went on to say that he gave his fellow Republicans a 10-3 advantage only because he couldn't come up with a map that made it 11-2. Note: He wasn't joking.

And maybe he's right — maybe electing Republicans is better for the country. Call us old-fashioned, but we think the voters should make that call and in elections that are fair. Not to mention, if it's so obvious to Lewis that Republicans are the best choice for North Carolina, why does he feel the need to rig the game? The role of the legislature, after all, is to draw the districts, not decide the outcome.

That case, by the way, is inching its way toward the Supreme Court. In the meantime, it's been hard to find qualified Republicans willing to run in a “blue” district or Democrats in a “red” one.

Why should they? The incumbent has a built-in vote advantage. Contributors aren't likely to support them since they'd be throwing money and energy away on a hopeless cause.

Is that really what we want? Is that what our state and federal constitutions require?

Eventually, the Supremes will hand down some ruling on the gerrymandering issue. It would be better for democracy, though, if voters could clean up this mess themselves, rather than relying on unelected judges to do so.

Let the games begin.

N.C. Rep. David Lewis, R-Harnett, knows what's best for North Carolina. Voters in fair elections would just get in the way.

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