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Wake-Up Call: Up to 50,000 NC Voters Silenced by New Rules, Confusion, Poor Preparation at the Polls

New voting restrictions and unprepared poll workers kept as many as 50,000 North Carolinians from voting in this fall’s general election, according to an analysis by the elections watchdog group Democracy North Carolina.

Although most voters reported that casting a ballot was easy and election officials generally responded quickly to fix a broken machine, there is mounting evidence that a shorter early voting period, confusion caused by new election rules, and strong turnout pushed many Election Day polling sites to the breaking point.

Democracy North Carolina analyzed 500 reports from poll monitors in 38 counties and 1,400 calls to a voter assistance hotline. It found that voters in over a dozen counties stood in very long lines on Election Day, some for three hours. Monitors reported that thousands left without voting.

The analysis found that election officials were not prepared for the extra time voters needed due to the loss of straight-party voting, a provision that had allowed voters to mark one choice for all the candidates of a political party. Polling places were understaffed and under-equipped, and many poll workers were confused about how to apply the new rules about provisional ballots.

"I have waited 1 hour 35 minutes just to get within an hour of the voting booth," said a hotline caller in Winston-Salem. "It’s so sad that probably 25 percent of the voters gave up and left after the first hour or so of waiting."

The analysis cites local Republican and Democratic officials who complained about the long delays. "We had to snake the line so drastically around the [Taylors] precinct that it was up to a three-hour wait," said Wilson County Republican Party Chair Gary Proffitt.

Even after enduring long lines, thousands of voters were turned away because they were in the wrong precinct, the report says. It notes that nearly 6,000 voters cast valid out-of-precinct ballots in the 2010 midterm election, but less than 500 were accepted this year under the new rules.

Similarly, more than 21,000 voters successfully registered and voted on the same day during the 2010 early voting period, but that option is no longer available.

The analysis says election officials worked diligently to help voters, but it also cites field reports and hotline calls about poll workers mistreating voters with disabilities, not giving voters provisional ballots that likely would count, misapplying the ID rules, showing apparent bias against African American voters, and redirecting voters to the wrong precinct.

The report concludes the 2014 election "should be a wake-up call for intensified voter education, dramatically improved training of poll workers," and better equipped polling places. "If the 2013 law is not overturned, large-scale changes will be needed to avert a disaster in the 2016 presidential election."