

HB1405 Testimony – House Political Subdivisions Committee – 1/26/2023 10:00 AM

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Chairman Longmuir and House Political Subdivisions Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB1405. For the record my name is Mike Blessum. I am a small business owner, husband, and father from District 5 in Minot. I would like to thank Representative Jeff Hoverson for introducing this bill.

In the 2021 session more than 40 election related bills made their way through the legislature. As of this week there are 32 bills this session. I believe the people of our state have concerns about election integrity and have asked their representatives to tighten our laws.

I served as an election judge in the 2022 primary and general elections at the State Fair Center in Minot. HB1405 modifies several sections of ND Century Code related to elections based on issues I saw at our vote center.

1. Poll books must be disconnected from all internet or cell networks. To facilitate this, mailed ballots received in the last few days before election day must be set aside and counted at canvassing.
2. A qualified elector may vote at only one precinct based polling place or vote center within a county.
3. Counties must lay out polling places or vote centers such that they have no more than 5 precincts or ballot types in each vote center.

I'd like to paint a bit of a picture of what happened in our vote center during the last election cycle. For both elections we had approximately 12 election clerks, 6 judges, and 1 inspector that worked a 14-15 hour shift. It was a wonderful team of Republicans and Democrats united to do a great job for the voters of our county. Because all eligible electors in the county could vote at any of the polling places, we had more than 40 different ballot types in the June election and more than 20 in November. As a judge I matched the paper slip printed from the poll book to the ballot type for each elector based on the ballot code in June and the ballot name in November. I'd like to think of myself as a relatively competent person, but I know that I personally handed at least 2 incorrect ballots to electors in those elections because the voters brought them back to me.

At the end of election night we go through a series of steps to close the polls and tie out all of our various counts. The voter count from the poll books must match the number of ballots counted in the tabulation machines. This count must also tie out to the number of total unvoted, spoiled, and set aside ballots as well. In both elections our counts were off (1 vote in June and 5 votes in November). I believe this issue was due to internet communication errors between the electronic poll books and the central voter file.

You may ask why this matters. Isn't 99%+ accuracy enough? In the case of the June primary election this bill's sponsor led on election night by 1 vote. After canvassing the final difference stood at 8 votes. Regardless of whether the outcome of the election is impacted every elector deserves to have their vote counted accurately.

Now let me give you a picture of a better system that this bill sets us on a path to achieve. Rather than county wide voting centers, I'd love to serve as a judge at Edison Elementary a few blocks from my house. I'd like to serve on a team of 5 that could man that voting center serving a group of voters that number somewhere in the 400-800 range rather than the thousands that come through our huge voting centers now. I'd likely know a large number of these voters because they are my friends and neighbors that live nearby.

Somewhere along the way we decided that it was too hard to conduct elections in this manner. It was too hard to find election workers. It was too hard to manually count ballots or deal with paper poll books. We chose to implement technology, add mass mail in voting, and consolidate our vote centers. All of this removes the human element from our election systems and opens them to many potential issues. I know that county and state election officials would like you to believe that North Dakota doesn't have any election issues. I would ask that you show the voters of North Dakota that you care about how our elections are conducted and return a do pass recommendation on HB1405.

Thank you Chairman Longmuir and members of the committee. I am happy to stand for any questions you may have.