

Opinion

NC Republicans suddenly are OK with easing voting rules

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

As Hurricane Helene's devastation complicates voting in Republican-heavy western North Carolina, the GOP is showing an uncharacteristic approach to elections. Suddenly, the party that made voting harder in the name of "election integrity" is in favor of making voting easier in western counties where accessibility to polling places and mail service remain disrupted. Two Republican members of the State Board of Elections joined the board's three Democratic members in voting to make the changes. No Republicans appear to be complaining about these changes, unlike their

complaints then and now about mid-election changes made in 2020 because of COVID. Indeed, on Wednesday Republican legislative leaders rolled out legislation that will expand the changes in election procedures from the 13 counties named by the State Board of Elections to 25 counties included in the original disaster designation. The GOP's softening on voting rules may be out of respect for the right to vote. Certainly it is correct to adjust election rules after the loss of polling places, the displacement of many people and a shortage of poll workers. But Republicans may also be open to the changes because western North Carolina is their

party's base. Two of the affected counties, Mitchell and Avery, have the first and second highest concentration of Republican voters in the state. Former President Donald Trump, who carried North Carolina by only 1.3 percent of the vote in 2020, will need to win big in the western counties to carry the state in November. The GOP's statewide candidates for governor, attorney general and other offices and judicial seats also can't afford a falloff of votes from rural western counties. Under changes approved Monday by the State Board of Elections, local election boards in the 13 counties can by a bipartisan majority vote change voting sites and

when sites will be open during early voting days. Absentee ballots will be accepted at any county board of elections office — not just the one in the voter's home county. The deadline for requesting absentee ballots is extended to the day before Election Day, rather than a week before. The legislation, according to a Republican Senate news release, also "Establishes procedures for spoiling and reissuing absentee ballots and for curing deficiencies to accommodate voters who have been displaced by the hurricane." These and other changes will help voters affected by Helene's flooding. But some Republican lawmakers may wish

they hadn't done so much to restrict voting in the first place. They may regret the new requirement for voters to present an authorized photo ID because some Republican voters may have lost their driver's license along with other possessions in the flood. Given Helene's effect on mail delivery, Republican lawmakers may wish that they hadn't eliminated the three-day grace period for the receipt of absentee ballots postmarked on or before Election Day. Sen. Warren Daniel, a Burke County Republican who co-sponsored the legislation that ended the grace period, said at the time of the bill's passage in 2023 that "Every day that passes after Election Day with votes still coming in creates the possibility of distrust in the process." What will create distrust in the process is a stream of mail-in ballots going uncounted because

closed roads and other obstacles delayed their delivery. Republican lawmakers may also be sorry they empowered partisan observers at polling places. That could lead to an increase in challenged votes in western counties as voters show up at new locations and some vote from outside their home county. Finally, Republican lawmakers may wish they had given the State Board of Elections all the funding the board said it needed to run an ordinary election, let alone one complicated by a natural disaster. There is no problem with voter fraud in North Carolina. There is a problem with voter suppression. Now, only temporarily and only in certain counties, Republicans are willing to make the voting process what it should always be for everyone: Easy to do.

Kamala Harris had to answer to '60 Minutes'

BY DEBRA J. SAUNDERS  
Creators Syndicate

WASHINGTON Asking Kamala Harris about the historic surge at the southern border during most of President Joe Biden's tenure, "60 Minutes" anchor Bill Whitaker wondered if it was "a mistake to loosen the immigration policies as you did." Harris has this way of talking when she knows she can't say what she really thinks. So when Whitaker remarked that border arrivals quadrupled during the first three years of the Biden/Harris administration, she responded, "Solutions are at hand. From day one literally we have been offering solutions." And: "The policies that we have been proposing are about fixing a problem, not promoting a problem." Short word salads with no nutritional value. If you were hoping for the vice president to admit that Biden's border policies were a colossal blunder during the CBS interview, which was televised Monday night, well, your best move would have been to change the channel. When Harris tried to blame Republicans for failing to pass a big immigration package, Whitaker pointed out that Biden invited a "historic flood" of migrants when he took office. For once, a major journalist pushed back on Harris' lame finger pointing. I exhaled. "60 Minutes" made a big deal about Trump turning down its interview request. Be it noted, Harris turned down an invitation to a Fox News sit-down. But I guess that's different. My one big beef: There is no question Harris knew about Biden's declining cognitive abilities before he halted his reelection campaign. It becomes ever more important that Harris is asked about this because Biden is supposed to occupy the Oval Office

until Jan. 20. At one point, Harris reminded Whitaker: "This is an election for president of the United States." Then she added, "No one should be able to take for granted that they can just declare themselves a candidate and automatically receive support." It was an odd statement coming from a Democrat who was handed the top of her party's ticket without a single ballot cast. When Whitaker asked Harris why she completely flipped her positions on the border, fracking and Medicare for All, Harris responded that she has spent the past four years going across the country and talking to people from various backgrounds, so she came to value compromise. Short, truer version: "We're not just in California anymore." Politically, that's a good thing. Yet when Whitaker asked Harris how she accounted for the fact that millions of Americans support Trump, whom she calls a racist, Harris had no answer, only talking points. "I believe that the people of America want a leader who's not trying to divide us and demean. I believe that the American people recognize that the true measure of the strength of a leader is not based on who you beat down, it's based on who you lift up," she said. The "60 Minutes" segment included a cameo appearance by Liz Cheney, who actually spoke at a Harris/Walz rally. Cheney and her father (former Vice President Dick Cheney) are part of the Republicans for Harris movement. That makes Cheney the latest winner in the race for irrelevancy. Don't get me wrong, I respect Republicans who won't vote for Trump because of his election denial that led to Jan. 6. I just wish they understood that their vote isn't about their rectitude; it's about who the next president will be. It's about the country.



PHOTO FROM FACEBOOK USER LIFTING LOVE REACTS  
The football field at Freedom High School in Morganton was left underwater after the remnants of Hurricane Helene blew through the area last week

Helene presents leaders with a choice on western NC schools

BY BRYAN PROFFITT

As the tragedy facing Western North Carolina continues to unfold, our state faces a critical choice about its future. As public school educators, we know that challenging life events like divorce or the loss of a loved one can stunt a student's learning, growth and happiness. Young people living in the wake of Hurricane Helene's havoc will face immeasurable stress, as will the public school staff who love and serve them. In the coming months, our state's elected leaders have the ability to relieve a great deal of that stress. For years, members of the North Carolina Association of Educators have advocated for resources to remediate crumbling infrastructure in our schools across the state. From sweaty trailers, freezing classrooms, and libraries with mold, we have asked for those resources because our students deserve better. Our public schools are the centers of our communities. Beyond the bonds we build at Friday night games and Saturday per-

formances, our public schools serve as sites of refuge when things go wrong. Throughout our mountain region, we have seen neighbors gathering at public schools for showers, water and cell service. Educators have called through class rosters, offering support and love to students and their families. Public schools in counties around the state have already started to welcome displaced families into their communities. Schools keep more of us connected on a regular basis than any other institution in our community. A storm won't change that. This storm will, however, create a moment of choice for our elected leaders. We can keep neglecting our constitutionally-guaranteed public schools, or we can prioritize safe and stable public schools as we rebuild for the future. We can start by protecting our public school employees. They need their pay, leave and benefits until it is safe to go back to work. They should be able to focus on rebuilding and supporting their families through this trauma,

not stress over finances. School districts should have what they need too. As we did during COVID, we can keep funding schools as their student populations fluctuate. Thousands of students will be displaced, and some will bounce from county to county as their families seek stability. Public schools, as the most stable institutions in our communities, need resources for the long haul. They need to be ready to welcome our kids home. We also need the resources to help them thrive. Too many students and staff have been dealing with substandard schools. To serve as stable centers of our communities, we need modern, safe and sturdy schools that can withstand the kinds of disasters that Eastern North Carolina families have been accustomed to. Rebuilding schools with updated infrastructure, in and out of the current disaster area, keeps our kids and communities safer and invests in the future of our state. Legislative action can also provide free stu-

dent meals. Before Helene, the General Assembly was considering giving away more than \$400 million of public tax dollars this year, and more than \$4 billion over the decade, to private school vouchers. Those vouchers cannot be the priority right now. Instead, let's allocate those same resources to relief, rebuilding and resourcing safe and stable public schools as the center of Western North Carolina communities. Every day, our students and staff accomplish incredible things in public schools across the state. In the coming months, many public school communities will accomplish more than they ever imagined. Not only will they serve every student, regardless of background, ability, or income, public schools will also keep our communities safe, our families fed, and all of our lives a little more stable. Our kids deserve a strong and resilient state—let's rebuild Western North Carolina with a recognition that our public schools are at the heart of what makes that possible.

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