

Democracy North Carolina

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Group Deplores Racial Ads, Wants Investigation of Deceptive Phone Calls, And Announces “Election Protection” Hotline

A voting rights group today sharply criticized the use of racially-charged messages in political ads in North Carolina, and also called for an investigation of an automated phone message that it says is designed to depress participation by black voters in North Carolina’s May primary.

Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan elections reform organization, also announced it would team up with the national Lawyers’ Committee For Civil Rights Under Law to operate an “Election Protection” hotline for the primary.

“We’re seeing the signs of nasty campaigning that could easily move into illegal activities aimed at confusing or intimidating voters and suppressing the votes of North Carolina citizens,” said Bob Hall, executive director of Democracy North Carolina.

“We deplore the use of ads by the North Carolina Republican Party and by Democratic gubernatorial candidate Richard Moore which use racially charged images to manipulate voters. The consultants for these groups may wish to make money with this kind of deception, but the responsible clients and the broadcasters should recognize the damage they do and just say NO.”

Hall said his group has also received reports of automated or “robo” telephone calls to black neighborhoods that tell people that they need to fill out a registration form being mailed to them before they can vote. The calls are allegedly from “Lamont Williams,” who sounds like he wants to help people “make your voice heard.” But he instructs them to fill out, date, and return a registration application being mailed to them, and “then you will be able to vote.”

The deadline for mail-in voter registration has already passed, and the calls seem to be going to black voters who are already registered.

Hear the call at: <http://www.democracy-nc.org/nc/spprncall.wav>

“This is another in a long line of deceptive practices used in North Carolina and elsewhere that particularly target African-American voters,” Hall said. “In our view, this phone message plainly violates North Carolina law. We ask the Attorney General, State Bureau of Investigation, and the State Board of Elections to investigate, expose, and prosecute the sponsors of these calls.”

He noted that under North Carolina General Statute 163-275(17), it is a Class I felony for any person “to misrepresent the law to the public through mass mailing or any other means of communication where the intent and the effect is to intimidate or discourage potential voters from exercising their lawful right to vote.”

Because of concern about interference that may occur on Election Day, Democracy North Carolina will team up with the Lawyers’ Committee For Civil Rights Under Law, based in Washington, D.C., to operate a hotline to receive complaints from voters. The toll-free numbers are 888-OUR-VOTE or 866-OUR-VOTE.

“The State Board of Elections does a tremendous job, especially given the limited resources they are given, and so do local boards,” Hall said. “This national hotline, which first gained popularity in 2004, is a way to have more eyes and ears on the ground, ready to help if voters experience problems. We don’t want any eligible voter to feel intimidated or be disenfranchised. We ask the media to help publicize these toll-free numbers and the State Board’s hotline: 866-522-4723.”

[The message on the automated calls is: “Hello, This is Lamont Williams. In the next few days, you will receive a voter registration packet in the mail. All you need to do is sign it, date it and return your application. Then you will be able to vote and make your voice heard. Please return the voter registration form when it arrives. Thank you.”]