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Subject: The State: Richland County voting fiasco demands criminal probe

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<http://www.thestate.com/2012/11/15/2519807/ballentine-richland-county-voting.html#.UKTtI7RUPfg#storylink=cpy>
By NATHAN BALLENTINE

Richland County, SC — I was one of the first in South Carolina to endorse Mitt Romney for president, and I think many shared my excitement about his presidential campaign and the future of our country. On the other side, President Obama certainly had many local supporters here in the Palmetto State, and I know they were anxious as well to do their civic duty on Nov. 6.

Unfortunately, instead of proudly casting their votes for president and leader of the free world, voters in Richland County experienced a nightmare. Excitement was dashed by long lines caused by an inadequate number of voting machines and, in many cases, voting machines that worked improperly.

How did it get this way? What happened and why?

Senior citizens were asked to stand in line in some cases for five hours or more. Many frustrated voters faced with the choice of voting or missing work had to leave the lines and go back to work. Many parents were forced to leave long lines to care for children at home. Citizens were standing in line hours and hours into the night, many enduring freezing cold weather. The sad thing is that this never had to happen.

State law mandates a voting machine must be available for every 250 registered voters, or about 950 machines in Richland County. Yet the county deployed just 729 of its machines — nearly 100 fewer than it used in the non-presidential election of 2010. It was the only county in the state to so drastically misallocate voting machines.

If the Richland County Elections and Voter Registration Office had only followed state law and run the simple math, these problems could have been avoided.

Many voters are convinced this fiasco is a result of some broad conspiracy for special interests to pass the penny sales tax increase. Others think it was a result of plain incompetence. They point to the high number of machines the county owned and the time it takes to do the simple math to ensure each precinct has enough machines and conclude that this epic failure is just a sign of the times when government can't get anything right. I can understand their frustration and sympathize with their concerns but believe we should withhold judgment until we know more facts.

What I do know for sure is that Dutch Fork Middle School was seriously underequipped on Election Day, with only four booths, one of which wasn't working. When I spoke with the director of Elections and Voter Registration that afternoon, she told me we had 2,900 registered voters at that precinct. I asked her to do the math, and she knew we didn't have sufficient machines. She sent four additional machines (still below the number required by law); but that was close to 4 p.m., after many voters had given up and left. Many told me they expected and planned to wait two hours but could not wait four and five hours.

Last year the large Democratic majority on our county legislative delegation was convinced that consolidating the staff of the election and voter registration offices was the most efficient way to proceed. As one of only four Republicans on the delegation, I knew the outcome already had been decided on who the new head of this combined office would be and could not stop that process. Sadly this is how almost every appointment is made in Richland County, by the Democratic majority, with no member of the minority party on the "appointments committee."

It is imperative that we treat this matter seriously and investigate it thoroughly. Given the gravity of the situation and the political nature of elections, we must get answers for our voters without letting politics get in the way. The public trust in the voting process must be restored with no prejudice towards parties, candidates or ballot referendums.

I believe state law enforcement should investigate this matter fully, and if any laws were broken, those responsible should be prosecuted and punished. Though many questions still need answers, one thing is for certain: This can never be allowed to happen again. Richland County voters deserve better.

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