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Election Commissioner Haight's decision breeds cynicism

Jonathan Becker Valley Views

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Imagine that you're a Dutchess County election commissioner. You were appointed by your party and confirmed by the county legislature "to ensure every person eligible to vote in Dutchess County has an opportunity to register and vote in all elections."

Your job is simple. Administer free and fair elections — for all. But, in exercising your duties, you have to make a choice. Where should you place the Red Hook District 5 polling site?

Would you choose a space that is regularly used by nearly 70 percent of the district's voters, that most voters can reach safely by foot, that is accessible by public transit, and that complies with handicap accessibility requirements? Or would you force voters to cast their ballots at a venue that most rarely visit, a venue that is situated on an unlit two-lane county highway with no sidewalks, that is well over a mile from most district voters, that is inaccessible by public transportation and that is poorly accessible to those using mobility aids?

If you want to fulfill your duties and serve the public interest, the choice is simple: You choose the former. If, however, you are Republican Election Commissioner Erik Haight, you chose the latter. The unelected Haight has ignored the unanimous wishes of the Red Hook Town Board and rejected the decision by Democratic Election Commissioner Marco Caviglia.

Haight's decision to make voting more difficult follows a pattern in which Dutchess County Republicans systematically attempt to disenfranchise college students or impede them from voting. Whether it was William Paroli Sr. ignoring New York state law by imposing arbitrary residency requirements on student registrations, Judge James Brands issuing a capricious Election-Day ruling forcing Bard and Vassar college students to vote via affidavit ballots instead of on voting machines, or Commissioner Haight's unilateral decision to reject student registrations if they did not fit his unusually specific and highly impractical campus address requirements (which followed his large purge of registered voters, including faculty who had been registered at their on-campus homes for more than thirty years), the goal has remained the same: Limit, and even stop, college students from exercising their constitutional rights.

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Through litigation, or the threat thereof, these decisions were all overturned. But we must recognize that it is simply unacceptable for unelected bureaucrats to push citizens into a corner, constantly forcing them to fight for their rights. Decisions by people like Haight offer horrible lessons for our youth. They breed cynicism by taking the approach that the ends justify the means. And such decisions don't just impact students: They affect our county, our tax dollars and our political system.

The polling-place issue is not about eligibility, but about access, safety and intent. In the past few years, two Bard students were fatally injured while walking in Red Hook and others were seriously wounded. Last year my 80-year-old mother, who lives less than a half mile from the current polling site, was forced to drive several miles to a location in upper Red Hook due to the density of eligible voters on the Bard campus. At a poor-visibility intersection next to her polling site, she was involved in an accident, which totaled two cars.

Thankfully, no one was seriously injured. But will we be so fortunate this coming election season?

Every election day, students can be seen walking to the polling station on River Road or 9G, both of which are extremely dangerous. The college offers shuttles, but demand during peak times outstrips supply and other inefficiencies create long lines and delays, leading students to walk back to campus. If Haight's goal is to help citizens vote in a secure environment, then the proposed polling site at Bard College is obviously a better option.

In 2000, a bipartisan county legislative committee, on which current County Executive Marc Molinaro served, concluded unanimously that not only do students have the right to vote locally, but "The Dutchess County Board of Elections should encourage the use of voting franchise among students."

It would be a pleasant change if Commissioner Haight and his enablers took this advice to heart.

Jonathan Becker is an associate professor of political studies and vice president for academic affairs at Bard College. For further information on this issue go to <http://election.bard.edu>.