

NewsRoom

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Hattiesburg puts finishing touches on divisive mayoral election sequel

Hattiesburg's election saga is finally over. Saturday, while normal people were preparing to watch Alabama play Ole Miss, the Hattiesburg election commission was finishing its final count in the mayor's race. I spent most of last week watching, first in person on Tuesday, and then by email and phone.

Mayor Johnny DuPree was certified as having garnered 207 more votes than Dave Ware, and as a result, will be the mayor again. The final tally was DuPree, 7,512 and Ware, 7,305. Turnout increased more than 50 percent over the votes recorded in June.

The fact that voters tuned in and came out is a real silver lining on a four-month saga that captivated observers across the state.

Otherwise, I cannot help feeling that the process produced more losers than winners.

The June 4 election, in which a mere 37 votes separated the candidates, was marred by irregularities and a complete breakdown in the way absentee ballots were handled. During the ensuing election contest, witnesses testified to lapses by absentee voters, the clerk's office, poll workers, and notaries. Witnesses testified to voter impersonation, disenfranchised felons voting, and unlawful witness intimidation.

Not a pretty picture. And then the trial itself ended in a mistrial, after the jury initially reached a verdict, in light of uncontested evidence, for Ware. Considering the problems with the absentee ballot process in particular, the judge eventually ordered the special election that occurred Sept. 24.

Looking back, it was like ripping off a Band-Aid to reveal a corrupt process, as well as deficiencies in Mississippi's election laws, including the contest provisions. All politics is local, as they say, and local politics gets personal. Hattiesburg has some serious healing to do.

I hope that happens. While this election mess unfolded there, the same problems persist in too many other communities.

Maybe there is cause for optimism. Based on what I saw last Tuesday, the special election was a big improvement over the first attempt on June 4.

It took several painful days to get the results, but that was largely because it was a razor-close election.

I was a poll watcher in the Rowan precinct for much of the day, and almost all of the night. There has been a lot of intrigue about Rowan, as it was the infamous last precinct to report, five hours after the polls closed. The ballot box also arrived with no seal, an important violation of **Mississippi** election law. And, it was the box that gave DuPree his margin of victory.

As a result, there have been some reckless rumors and reporting about the Rowan box. I observed what happened. While there are certainly some things that could have been, and should have been, done better, the final numbers matched the ones I recorded as they unfolded.

During the day though, there were moments.

U.S. Department of Justice observers, there to guard against "voter suppression," interviewed voters who were turned away for not being on the rolls. Given that all the poll workers were African-American, it was unclear who the observers thought was doing any intimidating. They might spend less time chasing agendas that aren't there, and more time investigating the voter fraud and other irregularities that came out at trial.

Those same observers also might spend less time suing states to block voter ID, as Attorney General Eric Holder again announced they were doing in North Carolina on Monday. I think most of the mostly black Rowan voters came with IDs already out, ready to show. No intimidation observed. But facts have never deterred the Obama administration when politics could be played.

But what of the five-hour delay in reporting results from Rowan?

The cause was more ignorance (probably genuine, not willful) of election procedures than conspiracy. There are a lot of precincts just like Rowan across the state. Five precincts yet again failed to process absentee ballots properly on election night, which mostly explains why the counting went on at City Hall until Saturday.

Rowan would have been a sixth. I loaned one of the poll workers my copy of the training manual, complete with absentee ballot checklist. If I hadn't, we might still be there. Other poll workers spent more than an hour trying to close out the voting machines; still others simply sat and waited like the rest of us. Our training has a ways to go.

But the process, mostly in compliance, lumbered on to completion in painstakingly slow fashion. I had the headache at midnight to prove it.

Cory Wilson is a Madison attorney who represented Dave Ware in the Hattiesburg election contest, and during the Sept. 24 special election. The views here are his own. Contact Cory at cory@corywilson.ms

--- **Index References** ---

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