

Let the People Decide: Protecting Ballot Access and Voter Choice in the Virgin Islands

“We elect the best people who run.”

That is a personal adage I have come to believe over the years.

In the past, I was one of those people who would be deeply disappointed at the end of an election cycle when my preferred candidate did not win. I would argue, second-guess and quarrel with the result. But one year, I took time to reflect more honestly on the candidates who won, why they won and where the gaps in my candidate’s campaign may have cost them the election.

Usually, when you look at reputation, work ethic, preparedness, messaging, and public appeal, it is not difficult to understand why the winners were elected.

I also used to believe that we should create more criteria for people to get on the ballot and perhaps even apply civic tests to determine whether candidates truly understood how government works. What a limited field that would be.

Additionally, I once supported requiring more petition signatures for individuals to run for Governor. At the time, I believed, as many others did, that increasing the number of required signatures would limit unserious candidates, reduce legal challenges and make more room for real candidate messaging.

We can clearly see that this strategy is not working.

As the years passed, however, I became more open in my view of democracy and more convinced that the people have the right to choose the representatives they desire. Every citizen of this community should have a fair and reasonable opportunity to offer themselves for public service and to represent the Territory.

That belief is grounded in two principles.

First, our community is diverse. We are people of different cultural, socioeconomic, educational and national backgrounds. All deserve to be heard. All deserve the opportunity to be represented. With that in mind, we should make it as easy as

possible, within reason, for qualified individuals to get on the ballot and seek public office.

That is the American way. It is the way of the Constitution that has guided this nation for more than 200 years. No citizen should be forced to bear the burden of hiring an attorney, if they can even afford one, or traveling from district to district in an unnecessarily difficult quest to gather petition signatures just to be eligible to participate in an election.

We should never create a system where wealth, education, race, religion or access to legal resources becomes a barrier created by the election process itself.

Look closely at the politics of the last few years. Too often, elected officials have supported laws that create more barriers to entry onto the ballot. Recently, I vetoed a bill that could have disqualified a person from seeking office based on mental illness. Imagine requiring candidates to produce medical or psychological histories and allowing those deeply personal records to become part of public political debate.

Someone who seeks routine counseling could be portrayed unfairly as someone with serious psychological issues, simply to bias the electorate against them.

That is not how we should eliminate candidates from public consideration. The voters should make that decision.

Another restrictive measure is preventing government employees from continuing to work while they campaign. Think about that. A majority of our elected officials are career government workers, and many were able to collect their government pay while they campaigned for office. Yet the law restricts new candidates, particularly first-time candidates and working-class candidates, from doing the same.

Why should people who are already in the system be allowed to benefit from government employment while campaigning, while new candidates are forced to choose between earning a living and offering themselves for public service?

Attempts to repeal this law have failed at least three times.

Furthermore, a majority of our legislators are retired from government service. They are allowed to collect a government retirement while also collecting their legislative salary

and accruing a second government pension. No other public office has that same benefit.

You see the pattern here. Laws are being created or maintained in ways that give an unfair advantage to people who are already elected or already positioned within the system. That protects the status quo. These practices create an uneven playing field, and they should be discontinued.

My second point is rooted in my original belief: we elect the best people who run. Ultimately, it is costing us more money, more time and more legal expense to keep people off the ballot than it would to let voters decide. What does it really cost to add a name to a ballot compared to months of debate before the Board of Elections and weeks of litigation in court?

The people of the Virgin Islands deserve a wide selection of candidates from which to choose. Choice gives new candidates with different views the opportunity to be heard, to be rejected or to be elected. That is democracy.

I would also argue that, in a place as small as ours, we are already limited in the number of people who are truly prepared and willing to make decisions on behalf of our people at the highest levels of government. Think about it. Our budget this year is \$1.7 billion, with approximately \$11 billion in active projects. How many people do we truly have who have the experience to manage \$1 million, much less \$1 billion? Of that group, how many are willing to endure the campaign trail, subject themselves and their families to public ridicule, take a significant pay cut and still show up prepared to vote their conscience for the betterment of this community?

Let me help you: not many.

That is not a dismissal of our people, their talent, their skills or their abilities. It is a statement of fact about the size of our population and the unique conditions of this moment in our history.

I have full faith in the voters of the Virgin Islands to make the best choices from the candidates placed before them. Because of that faith, I believe we should give every citizen the fairest and clearest road to the ballot, and every voter the choices and options they deserve when selecting their representation.

We should do more to ensure that we are not erecting unnecessary barriers to representation and choice. We must stop personalizing every policy decision and start looking at policymaking objectively.

Pay close attention to what is happening in our great nation. As Virgin Islanders, we are already denied full voting representation at the national level. We should not compound that injustice by limiting democratic choice here at home.

At the end of the day, and certainly at the end of Election Day, the voters will choose the representation they deserve.

Let the people decide.

Albert Bryan Jr.
Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands