

Early voting for the primary election begins today, February 12, and ends February 28. Election Day will be March 3. Put another way, the election process will move quickly, with some races settled on March 3 rather than in November. Unfortunately, a number of county positions will have no opposition in the November general election, but that should not be construed as a reason to stay home and not vote.

I hope all registered voters will cast ballots in both the primary and general elections. The way the primary system works, if you are a registered Republican or Democrat, you have to vote in that party's primary. If one is registered as an independent, that voter can choose the party primary that they want to vote in. If a voter has any questions about voting, they can contact the Macon County Board of Elections prior to voting.

Again, my request is that everyone registered who lives on the Highlands Plateau go to the polls and vote. We are a small precinct, but our vote does have an impact on county elections. I recall an election years ago in which a school bond referendum was on the ballot. It was a tight vote, and the Highlands precinct was the last to report its vote totals. The voters on the plateau rejected the bond referendum by about 100 votes, but that small margin was enough to change the outcome.

Also, any registered Macon County voter who works in Highlands can vote in early voting at this or any other precinct in the county. On Election Day, a voter does have to vote in his or her assigned precinct.

Some people have expressed concern to me about election candidate signs proliferating throughout the town. They say, "Mayor, the town should limit where signs can be placed." My response is that we do so in accordance with state election law. Those laws prohibit signs from being placed in town road right-of-ways. Also, on state highways, election signs have to be placed a specified number of feet from the edge of the roadway. But if the signs are on private property and the property owner has given permission, the candidate signs are allowed to place the signs. For instance, property owners' yards or businesses have the right to display signs during an election.

The town allows candidate signs at the recreation department, which is the township's precinct. There are state-law limitations that restrict signs within a certain distance of the voting area. We allow candidates to place signs at the entrance of the recreation center on a first-come, first-served basis, although my experience has been that candidates are somewhat accommodating and allow opponents space, too. That is the way it should be, everyone gets an opportunity to make their case to the voters.

At a recent meeting of elected officials, I asked Dr. Chris Cooper, a professor of political science at Western Carolina University, about the impact of yard signs and folks campaigning at polling places. I thought those tactics really had no major impact, that people already had their minds made up about who they were voting. Dr. Cooper replied that research indicates that such practices can make a difference in an election, especially in town and county races where a voter may not be familiar with a candidate. Having yard signs and local residents advocating for a candidate can influence undecided voters heading to the polls.

So, in summary, I accept the proliferation of campaign signs and hordes of supporters during an election season as being part of the American way. I can be sometimes unsightly and irritating to some, but it is a small price to pay for free and open elections.

I also want to express my appreciation and support for all the volunteers who work at the polls during early voting and on Election Day. It is long and hard work, and I hope every voter will be courteous and appreciative of their fellow citizens who are willing to make this important commitment to the community and country.