

Testimony of LaTasha Ward

Regarding Reform of the Political Appointment Process

Honorable Chair and Committee Members

My name is LaTasha Ward, and I served on the Democratic Central Committee from 2014 to 2018. I am here today to advocate for reforming the current process of appointing individuals to fill vacant legislative seats. My experience on the Central Committee and as a candidate for Delegate in District 24 in 2018 and 2022 has shown me the shortcomings of the current system, which often fails to serve the best interests of the people.

During my time on the Central Committee, I witnessed firsthand how senators exerted disproportionate influence over appointments. Committee members were often pressured into voting for candidates preferred by the senator, rather than the most qualified or representative individuals. The fear of political consequences led many members to comply, leaving their conscience and the will of the people behind.

When I ran for Delegate in 2018 and 2022, I had the privilege of earning the support of many voters in my district, coming in fourth place out of twelve candidates each time. However, when former Delegate Erek Barron vacated his seat, the appointment process failed to reflect the voices of the voters. Despite initially receiving support from Senator Joanne Benson, my candidacy was ultimately set aside in favor of Faye Martin Howell, a family friend of the Senator. Ms. Howell had not run for the seat, nor had she sought the approval of our district's voters.

I firmly believe that the power to represent a district of over 80,000 people should not rest in the hands of a single senator or a small group of committee members. The appointment process as it stands does not reflect the democratic values we claim to uphold. Those who are appointed are often beholden to the senator who selected them, rather than to the constituents they are supposed to serve.

Instead, I propose two alternative solutions to ensure fairness and accountability in filling vacant seats:

1. Special Elections: When a seat becomes vacant, a special election should be held to allow the voters to choose their representative. This process ensures that candidates must earn the support of the people through outreach and campaigning, rather than relying on political connections.

2. Next Highest Vote-Getter: If a vacancy occurs mid-term, the seat could be awarded to the candidate who received the next highest number of votes in the most recent election. This approach respects the will of the voters and ensures that the position is filled by someone with demonstrated community support.

The current process disenfranchises voters and undermines public trust in our democratic institutions. I have seen community members discouraged by appointments that prioritize political favoritism over merit. When I sought support from Central Committee members for the appointment, many expressed privately that they wanted to vote for me but feared retaliation. This culture of intimidation and favoritism must end.

Our representatives should be chosen by the people they serve, not by a single individual or a select group. I urge you to consider reforming the appointment process to ensure that it reflects the democratic values of fairness, accountability, and representation.

Thank you for your time and for considering this important issue.

Sincerely,

LaTasha Ward