

OUR VIEW

Census figures skewed by ECI

Inmates shouldn't be included in minority voting district

The Voting Rights Act was adopted in 1965 to codify the 15th Amendment's guarantee that throughout the United States, no one

In summation

District 1 has not elected an African-American member to the Somerset County Commissioners in part because a whopping 42 percent of the district's population is made up of ECI inmates.

shall be denied the right to vote on account of race or skin color. Considered one of the most successful pieces of civil rights legislation every adopted by Congress, it was extended in 1970, 1975 and again in 1982.

You would not think that legislation was needed to ensure that the terms of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution will not be violated, but if you believe that, you are not taking into account the extreme emotions and prejudices that still accompany that issue.

In 1986, a Voting Rights Act lawsuit settlement in Somerset County included creation of District 1, the so-called minority district, to encourage the election of at least one African-American to the County Commissioners. In a county with a population that is roughly 42 percent African-American and 2 percent Hispanic, never once has that happened.

Here's at least part of the problem: Eastern Correctional Institution is included in District 1, and its inmates account for two-thirds of the total district population. With another U.S. Census year on the horizon, a citizens task force in Somerset County is seeking to exclude the inmate population from the District 1 tally — but only for purposes of creating voting districts.

This Somerset County district, however, is different because it was created as part of a court settlement. The purpose of the district's existence is to enable the election of an African-American member to the County Commissioners; its lines were drawn specifically to support that goal.

Creation of the district itself predated the existence of ECI by about a year.

The fact that 42 percent of the total population of District 1 is not eligible to vote at all should be taken under special consideration in this case, since that fact is likely skewing the numbers and possibly preventing the district from achieving the goal for which it was created.

ECI inmates should, of course, be included in the census, by virtue of the fact they are U.S. citizens and residents. But in a voting district created for a specific purpose that is likely not being achieved because the prison population skews the numbers to such a high degree, a separate population breakdown that excludes the inmates would be a more fair and reasonable way to achieve that end.