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Linn County Auditor Joel Miller visited Hampton on Wednesday, January 12 during his campaign for Iowa Secretary of State. (Submitted Photo)

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A candidate aiming to become Iowa's next Secretary of State stopped by Hampton on Wednesday, January 12 to meet with residents and generate support for his campaign.

Linn County Auditor Joel Miller, a Democrat, has been serving in office for fifteen years and is now looking to challenge Republican Secretary of State Paul Pate for his position.

An Iowa native, growing up on a dairy farm north of Independence, Miller worked in law enforcement as a young adult, including three years in the Army as an MP, before going back to school and getting his degree in Electronics Engineering and Technology. After another 12 years working in the telecommunications industry while also participating in local government as a council member and mayor of Robins in Linn County, he decided to run for the auditor's office, where he has served since.

Miller is now seeking a higher office in response to the 2020 election and the resulting impact it has had across county auditors in the state.

"One of the motivators was getting sued by Trump in the 2020 election," said Miller, who was among the county auditors sued by the former president's campaign over distributing pre-filled absentee ballot request forms ahead of the November election.

That incident, followed by the state passing new laws that restrict access to voting, has motivated Miller into taking action. Last year the state legislature passed laws that reduced the state's early voting period, shortened polling hours, and tightened the window of when absentee ballots must be received in order to be counted. The law also curtailed local auditor's ability to establish satellite in-person voting sites or take proactive measures in distributing ballot requests.

Miller has criticized these new laws as political responses to the allegations of widespread voter fraud in various swing states during the 2020 election.

"They didn't base them on what happened in Iowa. They based them on what they thought happened in other states, which was proven to not have happened," said Miller. "I have worked for my entire tenure as county auditor to increase voter turnout. I took the measures that they passed as really anti-voter."

As county auditor, Miller has seen the impact of the new legislation first hand, stating that 234 voters in his county missed the new deadline for absentee voting during the last election and, of those, 110 ended up not voting at all.

"They've made it very inconvenient for people to vote by mail and we've seen in the last election how that really hurt people," said Miller. "I think that's what the legislature wanted. They wanted people to give up and not vote."

Likewise, Miller has also already seen ballots that would have previously been counted become invalidated due to not being delivered to the auditor's office before the new mailing deadlines, as absentee ballots no longer count if they are not delivered to the auditor before polls close on election day, regardless of when they were postmarked.

"That didn't prevent fraud. That prevented legitimate voters from casting legitimate ballots in an election they wanted to participate in," said Miller.

Miller also criticized the law's new restrictions on ballot drop boxes, which are limited to one location per county, regardless of that county's population.

"How is that fair when I have 161,000 voters in Linn County and Adam's County has 2,100 voters?" said Miller. "That's ridiculous."

While Miller has issues with the state legislature, he also assesses some responsibility to Secretary of State Paul Pate, criticizing his leadership and passive acceptance of the new laws.

"The current Secretary of State stood by and just let those laws happen. That bill had everything to do with his office and he didn't say a word one way or another," said Miller. "At the very least, I would have expected him to be on the bully pulpit, putting voters first and saying what the impact would be for voters. He did nothing."

As Secretary of State, Miller intends to be more proactive in ensuring access to ballots, including making sure ballot request forms are distributed across the state and sending out mass mailings to keep voters informed about deadlines and requirements.

Miller also wants to see more communication between the state and county offices so that auditors can stay informed and have their questions answered.

"Normally, when I find out something from the Secretary of State's office, it's because there was a press release," said Miller.

As a former IT director, Miller didn't think his background in electronics engineering would be all that applicable to being a county auditor, however that skill set has continued to prove relevant.

"It turns out that's a pretty good skill to have," said Miller. "I consider myself to be pretty technically savvy and I think that's a good thing to have these days when it comes to running elections."

Miller is concerned about the security of Iowa's iVoter system, which is what all 99 Iowa counties use to manage voter registration across the state, and has been unsuccessful in getting information from Secretary Pate about how that system is being maintained and secured.

Stopping at La Frontera to meet with local Democrats, Franklin County is the 31st county Miller has visited as he collects signatures to get on the ballot. Along with other election restrictions, just getting on the ballot has become more challenging in Iowa as the number of signatures required has also increased from 1,500 to 2,500. Miller isn't concerned about meeting that threshold, but did say that it creates a high barrier for both mainstream party candidates and third parties alike.

"That's a pretty a pretty steep hill to climb. It was obviously put into law to keep third party candidates from getting on the ballot," said Miller. "While I'm running as a Democrat, I don't think it's fair that we snuff out the ideas of third party candidates."

Announcing his candidacy last September, Miller is one of two county auditors currently aiming for the Secretary of State's office. Once enough signatures are collected to get on the ballot, Miller will face off against fellow Democrat Clinton County Auditor Eric Van Lancker in the June primary.