

How to Advocate for a Strong Early Voting Plan in Your County

This guide will help you influence the hours and locations your county offers voters during Early Voting. Without a robust Early Voting plan, lines at the polls could be longer than usual, deterring voter participation. Strong Early Voting plans, with evening and weekend voting hours (including Sunday), are the key to making sure major elections go smoothly.

What's an Early Voting Plan?

All 100 County Boards of Elections create their own Early Voting plans that are generally submitted to the State Board of Elections two to three months before Election Day. Currently the structure of the county and State Boards of Elections is up in the air. The NC General Assembly passed a law in 2017 that changed the make-up of county Boards of Elections from three members, with the majority of seats belonging to the governor's party, to four members, with equal numbers from both major political parties. However, the law is still being working its way through the courts and no final structure has been adopted for either the State or county Boards of Elections.

Regardless of the number of Board members, if the county's Early Voting plan is not approved by all of the Board members, any Board member can submit an alternative plan to the State Board of Elections, which has the final authority. **The power of one Board member to block a reduction of hours or submit an alternative plan is an important point of leverage for you.**

What Can I Do?

It's vitally important to attend Board meetings, get to know the Board members and speak out! Here are guidelines for actions, depending your time to organize.

The Basics (If You Have Less than a Week to Prepare)

- **Find out** when your County Board of Elections meets and what's on the agenda. Ask a staff or Board member if there's a preliminary Early Voting plan being discussed and if you can see it.
- **Attend** the Board of Elections meetings with others, even if discussion of Early Voting isn't on the agenda. Organize a diverse group to go with you – for example, take faith or campus leaders to push for Sunday voting or for a site on or near campus.

- **Review previous plans** and think about what you'd like for a good plan: locations with good access for under-represented voters, with hours beyond 9 to 5. See <http://demnc.co/earlyvoting> for previous plans.
- **Speak out** about the importance of evening and weekend voting hours, especially if the county had them previously. **See the talking points on the next page.** However, it is important not to advocate for additional hours or sites unless you are confident they will be used, since poor use can set a bad precedent and make it harder to advocate for additional sites and hours in the future.
- **Take notes** about the discussion. Pay special attention to anything you hear about Early Voting plans, Early Voting locations, or combining precincts. And then **tell others** what you learned.

The Advanced Version (If You Have More Time)

- **Gather intelligence:** Contact one of the members of the County Board of Elections, or the executive director, or another staff member with whom you have the best relationship. Ask them (1) what preliminary plans exist for Early Voting sites; (2) what is the schedule and process for making a decision; (3) will they consider or support opening some Early Voting centers on the Sunday afternoon during the general election Early Voting period; and (4) what would persuade them to open sites for extended Saturday hours and on Sunday.
- **Organize:** Share this intelligence with supporters, friendly civic groups, and your other allies. What do you think about the preliminary plan or plans in previous midterm elections? (See "Review previous plans" above for links to those plans.) Develop a goal for a good plan for locations, days and hours. Conduct a campaign to win your goal, like you would for other issues. Consider holding a meeting with each Board member with a diverse group of your supporters.

- **Follow the process:** County Boards of Elections are required to announce their meetings and agenda, including any discussion or vote regarding the Early Voting plan. The discussion and vote should be held in a public meeting. Ask the staff to include you on the email or media list for all notices of meetings. By the time of the vote, you should have a sense of what will happen, based on your meetings.
- **Show Broad Support:** Choose a good mix of people to speak at key meetings to show diverse support.
- **Use the media:** Let your local newspaper and TV station know that the County Board is holding a public meeting that will determine how easy or difficult it will be for voters to cast ballots.
- **Ask for help:** Democracy North Carolina, a non-partisan group, has helped NAACP branches, student groups, and others get more Early Voting sites for their counties. Call the Democracy NC Office at 919-286-6000 for advice. We can connect you with a local Democracy NC staff person and send data about the success of Sunday voting or earlier Early Voting plans.

Talking Points for Your Early Voting Advocacy

PRO: Some reasons for a strong Early Voting plan:

- **Long Lines:** When more voters have the chance to vote early, it can relieve long lines and stress on election officials on Election Day. Early Voting can also reduce the need to divide precincts or open more Election Day polling sites.
- **More Opportunity:** Early Voting centers provide flexible opportunities, especially for working voters, by opening on weekends and evenings after normal work hours. Saturday and Sunday voting have the highest use per hour – with Sunday being the highest.
- **Data Backs the Site:** A college campus has as many students and staff as a city! By sheer numbers, it should have an Early Voting site (with parking for the public.)
- **One Stop Problem Solving:** Voters who have moved within the county or changed information can update their registration at any Early Voting center, which cuts down the need for provisional ballots on Election Day.

CON: Reasons you'll hear to NOT open more sites:

- **Staff Needs a Rest:** Elections officials already work day after day and deserve a break; being tired could lead to mistakes. (*Response:* But other counties [and stores] have learned to stagger workers so enough are available at new hours. Your group could offer to help recruit elections workers, too.)
- **Not Enough Money:** The budget is fixed and there's no money for more sites. (*Response:* Most budgets have some flexibility. Early Voting sites relieve pressure on precinct polling places on Election Day. It costs more

money to divide precincts and operate more Election Day sites, so a good EV plan will actually save money.)

- **The Plan is Done:** The decision about locations and times for Early Voting centers has already been made. (*Response:* We hope there's an opportunity to revisit the decision, especially after seeing local support for a better plan and seeing plans offered by other counties. People will be very upset if a premature decision means they have to wait hours to vote in a busy election. Counties can – and do – submit revised plans to the State Board of Elections right up to several weeks before the election.)
- **Sunday Voting is Anti-Religious:** Opening the polls on Sunday shows disrespect to the church and worshippers. (*Response:* Ministers have led the efforts for Sunday afternoon voting; they want their members engaged in civic life – "Souls to the Polls." The Jewish Sabbath is on Saturday, so Sunday is their weekend day to vote.)
- **It's Easy to Vote:** Registration and voting are easy enough; people shouldn't participate if they can't take more initiative. (*Response:* Voting is a constitutional right in NC, not a privilege for the "qualified." We should do what we can to ensure that all eligible citizens vote.)



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