

Democracy North Carolina

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2008 Recap: The Year of the Voter

An analysis of election data by Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan organization, shows that 2008 was a banner for voter participation for North Carolinians, especially for African Americans and women. Here are some findings that demonstrate the record-level of voter activism this year.

Voter Participation

North Carolina led the nation as the state with the biggest increase in voter turnout over 2004. A record 4.35 million Tar Heels cast ballots in the general election, a big jump over the 3.55 million in 2004 and a 70% turnout of 6.2 million registered voters, compared to the 64% turnout in 2004.

Turnout is often measured as a percent of voting-age population (VAP). Using that measure, North Carolina's turnout was 61.4% of the VAP in 2008 compared to 53.9% in 2004. That 7.5 point gain in turnout was the biggest in the nation.

Turnout as a percent of VAP in North Carolina has not exceeded 55% in a century, which typically put NC among the worst 15 states for voter participation. That position dramatically changed in 2008; the 61.4% turnout rate of VAP put the Tar Heel state at number 19 in the nation, the first time we've been among the top 20 states in more than one hundred years.

Early Voting

A record 2.4 million people voted at 368 Early Voting sites across the state. That's more than double the number who voted at the 250 sites opened in the 2004 general election. Another 228,000 voted through the mail with absentee ballots, bringing the total number of early voters to 2.64 million. That's an astonishing 61% of all voters in the 2008 general election, another record.

Democracy North Carolina worked with local allies across the state to increase the number of sites, hours, and days to provide greater opportunity for voters and relieve the pressure of long lines on Election Day. Early Voting sites opened for the first time on several college campuses – bringing the total to a record 20 campuses – and sites opened in 12 counties on Sundays. The State Board of Elections provided grants of over \$3 million for counties to add sites, increase staffing, and upgrade equipment, and nearly all used the funds to add early voting capacity.

Early voting does not inherently favor one party or another, but in 2008, with the substantial promotion of the Barack Obama campaign, it clearly benefited Democratic candidates. In fact, many would not have won without the large margins they carried into Election Day. There were effectively two different elections, one during the 17 days of Early Voting where Obama, Kay Hagan, Bev Perdue, and Walter Dalton each outpolled their opponents by more than 300,000 votes, and Election Day, where Republican candidates trounced those same Democrats.

Same Day Registration

In 2007, North Carolina became the first state in the South – and the most populous in the nation – that allowed registration and voting on the same day. Under the NC law, citizens who miss the normal deadline to register (25 days before Election Day) can go to an Early Voting site during the 17-day Early Voting period, show one of the required IDs, fill out a registration form, swear under penalty of a felony that they live at the address given, and vote – all on the same day.

During 2008, just over 49,000 used Same Day Registration to participate in the primary and another 250,000 used it during the general election. About half of them were first-time voters in the county, while the other half used the new law to update an old registration. Many of the latter could have voted on Election Day, but they would have had to use a provisional ballot which requires laborious research by election officials to determine their eligibility to vote.

In fact, the number of provisional ballots fell from 77,500 in the 2004 general election to 54,000 in 2008, a 30% drop even though 800,000 more people voted in 2008. As Veronica Degraffenreid of the State Board of Elections notes, “Same Day Registration allowed thousands of more people to vote, while reducing the headache of processing provisional ballots for elections officials.”

African Americans and women

More than one million African Americans voted in North Carolina in 2008. In 2004, only 59% of registered black voters turned out compared to 66% of registered whites. But in 2008, a record 73% of registered blacks voted, which surpassed the rate of whites (69%) for the first time.

African Americans make up 21% of the voting-age population in the state, but they were 31% of the new registered voters in 2008, 28% of those who participated in early voting, 36% of those who used Same Day Registration, and 23% of the total number of people voting in the general election. That record level of participation proved crucial for many candidates, beginning with Obama.

Black women outnumbered black men during Early Voting by a ratio of 3 to 2, which is one reason why women of all races made up 55% of those voting overall and why 2008 became a record year for female candidates: The state elected its first female governor, a record six women to the 10-member Council of State, and a record 44 women to the 170-member General Assembly.

“Voter-Owned Elections”

Two programs that put voters at the center of financing NC elections also posted record successes.

Eleven of the 12 candidates in contested races for the NC Supreme Court and NC Court of Appeals qualified for public campaign financing – a record 92% participation rate. All six winners enrolled, including challengers and incumbents, men and women, blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats. As of January, over 70% of judges on the two courts will have gained office by relying on public grants rather than large contributions from donors who might show up in their courts.

A new program for three Council of State positions also proved successful in 2008. The “Voter-Owned Elections” program offered candidates for state Auditor, Commissioner of Insurance, and Superintendent of Public Instruction the option of using public grants if they agreed to spending limits and demonstrated significant public support by collecting at least 750 small donations from registered voters. Nine of the 11 candidates in the primary for these three offices, and four of the six candidates in the general election, enrolled in the program.

The program aims to make it possible for candidates without significant wealth to run for office and to reduce the potential corrupting influence of large donations given by donors doing business with the office. The newly elected Insurance Commissioner (Wayne Goodwin), for example, received just 5% of his campaign money from donors tied to the insurance industry, a sharp drop from the 66% of campaign funds in his predecessor’s 2004 election.

Democracy North Carolina analysis shows that 2008 could be the breakthrough year for a new era of voter involvement in the state. “One third of the voting-age citizens didn’t vote in 2008, so we have plenty of room for improvement,” said Bob Hall, the organization’s director, “but this year showed the way toward moving North Carolina closer to a government of, for, and by the people.”