

Democracy North Carolina

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73,500 Extra Hours: More Voters, Needing More Time to Vote, Highlights Need for Strong Early Voting Plans

New figures released today show that North Carolina voters will need more time to cast ballots this fall, and they'll face longer lines at the polls if action is not taken in the next 10 days by county and state officials.

Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan voting rights group, said five indicators point to “a disastrous train wreck at the polls” if county boards of elections do not adopt more expansive early voting schedules than they used in the last presidential election.

Because of a ruling by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, counties are scrambling to adopt new plans for a 17-day early voting period by an August 19 deadline set by the State Board of Elections. County boards of elections had crafted plans for a 10-day period under the old law that the court said was unconstitutional. The old law required counties to provide at least as many hours of early voting opportunity as they did in 2012, but the court's ruling eliminates that hourly minimum.

“Based on what we've seen in Guilford and Wake counties, we're worried that short-sighted or partisan local election officials will not adopt plans that serve the best interests of voters,” said Bob Hall, executive director of Democracy North Carolina.

“Fortunately, many county boards have good leaders,” he added. “They should all recognize the indicators and conditions that point to the need for investing in strong early voting plans with weekend and evening hours that will relieve the stress on Election Day.”

The indicators include:

- **HIGH-TURNOUT SWING STATE.** North Carolina is again a swing state in the presidential race, along with hot US Senate and gubernatorial contests. Overall turnout of registered voters hit 70% and 68% in 2008 and 2012, respectively. It will likely exceed 67% again this year.
- **MORE VOTERS.** North Carolina now has 6.6 million registered voters, a gain of 275,000 over August 2012, and it will have nearly 7 million by November 2016. If just 64% of those additional 275,000 voters show up to vote, and each one takes 8 minutes to cast a ballot, that's an additional 23,500 hours of voting time elections officials need to plan for.
- **NO STRAIGHT-PARTY VOTING.** This is the first presidential election when NC voters cannot use the time-saving procedure of marking one box to choose all the candidates of one party. A surprising 2.5 million voters used straight-ticket voting in 2012, or 56% of all those who voted. Even if just 2 million voters need an extra 90 seconds to mark contests on North Carolina's

notoriously long ballot, the loss of straight-ticket voting will add at least 50,000 hours to the voting time in 2016 over 2012.

- **RELIANCE ON EARLY VOTING.** North Carolina voters love early voting – 56% of those voting in 2012 cast their ballots during the 17-day early voting period, and state election officials expect a similar percent will do the same in 2016 – if counties provide adequate locations and times for them. See: <http://demnc.co/straightticket>
- **SUPER-SIZED PRECINCTS.** Because early voting relieves the pressure on Election Day, county officials have not created new precincts with Election Day polling places. As a result, the number of precincts with more than 3,000 voters has steadily grown. Today, 48% of North Carolina’s registered voters live in precincts with more than 3,000 voters – that’s 3.2 million voters.

“We now have an election system that heavily depends on a very high use of early voting,” said Hall. “If counties don’t offer plenty of weekend and evening hours at accessible sites during early voting, we will see a disastrous train wreck at the polls.”

See county-by-county and state totals for use of Early Voting and Straight Party Voting in 2012’s general election at: <http://demnc.co/straightticket>.

See county-by-county and state totals for super-sized precincts in August 2016 at: <http://demnc.co/bigprecincts>.

Isela Gutierrez, associate research director of Democracy NC, pointed out that counties need to also invest in better trained staff and more equipment. “In 2014 and in the March 2016 primary, we witnessed the serious delays and actual disenfranchisement that result from counties having too few intake stations and poorly prepared poll workers,” she said. “Polling places will need more voting booths and machines this fall because of increased registration and the loss of straight-ticket voting.”

Democracy North Carolina is calling on Governor McCrory to release at least \$2.5 million in emergency funds to help counties finance strong early voting plans, buy more voting equipment, and train and pay for more poll workers.

Gutierrez pointed out that state leaders have spent almost \$5 million of tax money on legal fees to defend the restrictive voting law passed in 2013.

“It’s time for Gov. McCrory to stop wasting money on legal fees and start helping voters,” she said. “We’re running out of time. The State Board of Elections staff is encouraging better early voting, better training, more staff, more investment for the voters. We need county and state officials to step up now and do their part.”