

Democracy North Carolina

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Surge of New Voters & Competitive Races Could Jam Election Day Polls

Voters could be facing three-hour long lines at the polls in November if local election officials don't make plans now to hire more staff and open more early voting sites, a nonpartisan watchdog group declared today.

"You can look ahead and see this horrible traffic jam, but it can be prevented if election officials take steps to add more opportunities for voting before the Election Day crush," said Bob Hall, executive director of Democracy North Carolina, a Durham-based research and advocacy center.

In the next few weeks, county boards of elections will finalize plans for how many polling sites to open during North Carolina's 17-day "early voting" period from October 16 to November 1. State grants are available to open more sites, and several counties – including Wake, Durham, Forsyth, Guilford, Cumberland, and Mecklenburg – already plan to extend weekend hours in anticipation of record turnout.

Hall said other counties slow to act need to recognize the unusual nature of this election cycle. He noted that 2.1 million voters cast ballots in the May primary – *double* the previous record for a North Carolina primary – and all the key factors boosting turnout will be present again in November.

Those factors include North Carolina's first competitive presidential election in a generation, other hotly contested races, a surge in voter registration, the wild card of same-day registration and voting, and new levels of enthusiasm among young and African-American voters.

"We could have 700,000 or even one million more voters than the 3.5 million who cast ballots in 2004," Hall said. "There are already 700,000 more registered voters than there were in July 2004 and we've often seen 200,000 new voters added in the final months before an election."

A county-by county analysis prepared by Democracy North Carolina showed that voter registration has jumped from 5,604,000 on January 5 to 5,861,000 as of July 19, 2008. The pace quickened just before the May primary, with 100,000 voters added in April, and it is picking up again after the June runoff. [See: <http://www.democracy-nc.org/nc/VotRegJuly08.xls>]

Democrats have added eight times as many new voters as Republicans since the beginning of the year. In fact, there are fewer registered Republicans today than in January in 15 counties, including Durham, Buncombe, Watauga, Orange, and Guilford.

One third of the new voters are black, two out of five live in the state's six largest counties, and 10,000 identify themselves as Hispanic – a 25% increase in this relatively new category.

The State Board of Elections is offering counties technical assistance and grants funds to help them prepare for the record turnout. The new state budget, combined with federal funds,

provides more than \$2 million for counties to open additional early voting sites, for more days, with increased staffing to handle same-day registration.

“We’ll be providing grants and other support to a substantial number of counties to help them accommodate the largest number of voters in North Carolina history,” said Gary Bartlett, executive director of the State Board of Elections. “Each person who votes at an early voting site means one less person in line on Election Day. We also welcome new voters at the early voting sites who wish to register and vote for the first time.”

Hall noted that nearly 50,000 citizens used a new law to register or update a registration and vote on the same day during the early voting period. (Note: Same-day registration is not available on Election Day). Campuses, civic groups, candidates, and political parties are expected to promote same-day registration heavily this fall.

“North Carolina is the only state in the South and the largest in the nation that offers a version of same-day registration and voting,” Hall said.

An analysis by Democracy North Carolina shows that African Americans and young adults made greater use of this “new tool for civic empowerment,” compared to other segments of North Carolina’s electorate. Those are the groups that are increasing registration in large numbers as the fall election heats up.

“I think we could have 1.3 million people using early voting this year – that’s a 30 percent jump over the record set in 2004,” Hall said. “Officials need to use all the resources available to hire more staff so poll workers get relief during the week, as well as open more sites so voters have relief from the stress of Election Day lines.”

Democracy North Carolina is working with ministers in Pitt, Wayne, Nash, Edgecombe and others counties to encourage officials to open sites on at least one Sunday afternoon during the early voting period.

Similar efforts recently led boards of elections in Cumberland and Guilford counties to approve a Sunday voting opportunity, despite opposition from the elections directors about the added workload on their staff.

“We recognize that Sunday is a special day, but leaders of the faith community are saying they want their members to be engaged in their communities,” said Tia Stanley, a Democracy North Carolina organizer working with a coalition that wants Sunday voting in Pitt County. “The record in North Carolina shows that more people vote per hour on Sunday afternoon than even on Saturday, so it’s a popular option that should be considered.”

Pitt is one of 40 counties that must submit its plan for early voting sites to the U.S. Justice Department in accordance with the Section 5 pre-clearance requirements of the Voting Rights Act. The federal government could take up to 60 days to review the plan – another reason why county boards of election need to make decisions in the next few weeks, Hall noted.

“The deadline for recruiting poll workers is also fast approaching,” he said. “We encourage members of civic clubs, retirees familiar with computers, college students, and other citizens to contact their local elections board or political party to serve as a paid poll worker. We all need to do our part to make the 2008 election a positive experience for voters.”