

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. 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.

The important thing to know is that 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 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 demnc.co/evtips for prior 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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Early Voting Advocacy Report Form

Thank you for volunteering to monitor the Board of Elections (BOE) in your county! From now until the end of July is a critical time for our advocates to gather intelligence on the development of Early Voting plans for the November election. Given the short timeline for decision-making on Early Voting plans, please submit your notes to the organizer in your field area within 24 hours of the meeting!

Volunteer Name _____ County _____
Volunteer Email _____ Phone (Mobile Preferred) _____
Meeting Date & Time _____ # Board Members Attending _____

Topics That Were Discussed

Was Early Voting for November discussed at the meeting? Y / N

Were possible Early Voting locations mentioned? If "Yes," take note of where, especially any discussion of campus voting sites or central locations near population hubs. _____

Was there any discussion of Early Voting hours? If "Yes," please take note of discussions about reducing hours, evening hours (after 5 p.m.) and weekend hours (ideally, a robust first Saturday with 8+ hours of voting, a second Saturday, and a Sunday). _____

Was a timeline given for finalizing the Early Voting plan? If "Yes," please note timeline and any related discussion. The decision about the plan should be made with public notice beforehand, not at a meeting that doesn't have Early Voting on the agenda. _____

Was there any discussion about other issues (such as precinct changes, moving a polling site, removing voters from the rolls via list maintenance or in response to challenges, budgetary issues, need to recruit more poll workers, plans to improve training, etc.)? If "Yes," please describe. _____

What is the date and time of the next discussion of Early Voting? ____/____/____ : ____ am/pm
(MM / DD / YY) (XX : XX)

If you have a chance to speak, ask the BOE members:

- When will the BOE be making decisions about Early Voting for general election? When is the next meeting where this will be discussed?
- Do they think the plan will be similar to 2016 or more similar to 2014 general? Or similar to 2018 primary plan?

**Please return to your local Democracy NC Organizer OR via mail, fax, or email to
Democracy North Carolina at 1821 Green St, Durham NC 27707, fax (919) 286-6023, or
elections@democracy-nc.org**

Tips for Assessing Previous Early Voting Plans

Information from previous elections is one of most important tools you have for developing an Early Voting plan for your county. The following questions can help guide your work to develop an Early Voting plan from prior elections.

1. **Is the prior election plan similar to the one coming up?** In 2018, it would be helpful to look at the 2014 and 2010 plans, the two most recent midterm election years, to determine an ideal number of voting sites and hours. Midterm elections have lower turnout than presidential cycles – typically about two-thirds the amount of people vote in a midterm as compared to a presidential election – so keep that in mind when asking for hours, sites, and reviewing plans. This year’s 2018 general election is also a “blue moon” election year, meaning that with the exception of judicial races, there is no major statewide race – like for Senate or Governor – on the ballot, which may also mean lower turnout.
2. **Keep changes in the number of Early Voting days in mind when reviewing previous plans!** North Carolina has seen attempts to limit Early Voting over the last five years. 2012 was the last federal election year with a set 17-days of Early Voting that was established at the beginning of the Early Voting planning process. In 2014, there were only 10 days of Early Voting. And in 2016, all the counties adopted plans for 10 days before a federal court restored the first week in late July of that year; counties only had two weeks to re-work their plans, and many simply chose to open the statutorily-required minimum (one site, M-F, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.) to satisfy the restored seven days. Unfortunately, there seemed to be a default to this same structure in many counties during the 2018 Primary. If you think having full access to Early Voting sites during the entire 17-day Early Voting period is important, push for your county to do better for the 2018 General!
3. **Were any of the same decision-makers in place on your county Board of Elections when it was decided?** County Boards of Election members are appointed every four years and in 2018 all county Boards of Elections have a new structure – 4-member county Boards of Elections split along partisan lines, with two Democrats and two Republicans. New Board of Elections members were appointed in your county in 2018, so this cycle will be the first time this particular county Board of Elections reviews and makes decisions on Early Voting plans. This is also first time Early Voting plans have been adopted by this kind of equally-split 4-member county board, and there is a high potential for gridlock and tie votes. All this means that, while previous Early Voting plans can still inform your advocacy, you don’t have any guarantee that this particular Board of Elections will act in the same way as prior Boards.
4. **Where were the Early Voting sites in your county located in 2012, 2014 and the 2016 Primary?**
 - Are there any locations that were the same in all four cycles? Those are likely to be used again!
 - Are the locations well-known in the community?

- Are the locations easy to find from the street and/or using GPS?
- Is there enough parking?
- Is there enough lighting? Remember, it will get dark early in November!
- Are the locations near public transportation hubs? College campuses? Other population centers?
- What neighborhoods are the Early Voting sites in? All different kinds of voters should be able to easily access the locations.
- Because it was the last presidential election cycle (when the highest number of voters turnout to vote), Early Voting locations used in 2016 have the advantage of being familiar to voters.

5. **What was the schedule for Early Voting in 2014 and 2016? Did it include hours outside of the typical work week (M-F, 9-5)?** The whole point of Early Voting is to make voting easier and more convenient for working people. Has your county historically done a good job of offering evening and weekend hours? If not, that's something you want to push for this year – although you want to balance your advocacy with the turnout realities explained above in Tip #1. Consider whether there's anything unique about the work schedules for folks in your county that make having other voting hours important. For example, maybe it's important to have early morning hours available as an option for people who work the graveyard shift.

With this list of questions and copies of your county's Early Voting plans from previous years, you and your community can begin thinking through the details of what kind of Early Voting plan you'd like to see in 2016. Questions? Contact Isela Gutierrez at (919) 908-7918 or isela@democracy-nc.org.