

Transcription

Alyssa Rodriguez: Welcome to Built By Us. A podcast created by Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to building a political system that works for all. My name's Alyssa Rodriguez. I'm your host and you're about to hear our second episode. And this episode, I'm joined by Taylor of course, and two wonderful guests. I can't wait for you to hear to talk about flexible early voting options for North Carolina voters. We heard a lot of really interesting stories from north Carolinians all over the state and I can't wait for you to hear them. So without further ado...

Alyssa Rodriguez: Did y'all know that last year the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill that instituted uniform weekday early voting hours and removed the last Saturday of early voting?

Taylor Moss: The truth is, most people don't know that, so you don't have to feel bad.

Alyssa Rodriguez: This bill is called S325, The Uniform And Expanded Early Voting Act, and could quite possibly disenfranchise hundreds of North Carolinians that rely on flexible early voting schedules.

Taylor Moss: So we know everyone uses early voting, but our research shows that there are more Latinx and black voters using early voting, especially that last Saturday. So there is a conclusion to be drawn here about why the general assembly would be taking away the last Saturday and the flexible hours.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And basically the conclusion is that they just want to make it more difficult to vote during the early voting period because that's all this bill does. It makes it more difficult. So this bill requires a 12 hour 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM Weekday early voting schedule in all 100 counties in North Carolina and in eliminated voting on the popular final Saturday before Election Day.

Taylor Moss: This law was then clearly facing litigation because it's an expensive thing for counties to have to do and just difficult to staff. So the General Assembly knew that this would be taken to court. That's why they then made a minor exception to not let this happen in 2018 to let them midterms go as they need to.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So this means under current law, North Carolinians will not be able to vote on the heavily used last Saturday in 2020 which is when we need it the most.

Taylor Moss: So like I said, this bill puts the board of elections in a very tough spot. They're not able to use their budget in the most flexible way, which further causes them to have to one take away polling sites.

Alyssa Rodriguez: After S325, 43 counties reduced the number of early voting sites offered in 2018 compared to 2014

Taylor Moss: which then two, makes all the voting sites further away for most people.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Site eliminations and rural counties like Halifax meant that voters had to travel an average of 6.5 miles farther to get to an early voting site in 2018 rather than in 2014.

Taylor Moss: And then three, restricts voting days and hours all together.

Alyssa Rodriguez: in 2016, 51 counties reduced the number of weekdays offered and 67 reduced the number of weekend hours.

Taylor Moss: So where do we even begin with all the issues that regular people have to deal with? How does the General Assembly aspect everyday working voters to be able to get to the polls either during the workday or immediately after, like how are you supposed to stop working and then not pick up your kids from school or not start making dinner for your family? It's just really difficult.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So obviously these voters are having to use the weekend hours and without the last Saturday requirement, In 2018, 63 counties, almost two thirds of North Carolina counties would have had no weekend option for voters to cast their ballots. It's completely unrealistic and would cause voters to have to sacrifice their working time or their wages or their family just to get to the polls and cast their vote. Taylor and I talked to voters who regularly use early voting and heard their thoughts and experiences. Here's what they had to say.

Gaby Romero: Hey everyone, I'm Gaby Romero and I am the intern for the Western region of Democracy NC's 20th anniversary class. I go to Appalachian State University, go Mountaineers. And I'm a rising junior, so yeah.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So what's your experience with voting, whether it's yourself or your friends or how's that process typically look for y'all when you're in school?

Gaby Romero: Yeah, so I have been able to vote. I did early voting cause you know, I don't want to stand in those lines on election day. It was super easy. Just you know, one day I didn't have class until later in the evening. So I said okay, I'm going to go vote. I just went up to the second floor of the student union and I went with some friends, we got our ballots, we filled them out and we turned them in and got our, I voted sticker and that was super easy and I was like, wow, it's awesome that early voting is so accessible for everyone. Right? Plot twist. It's not, why could it be so easy for everyone? It's not. So yeah. Turns out in Watauga county there is only one early voting site and it is in our student union. And Fun fact, a little side note here, they've been trying to take away our early voting site in the student union for years. The only one, the only one, they want to take it away because they don't want students to vote. But that's another podcast. So yeah, and with all of this talk about, you know, more flexibility and seven to seven

voting sites, it really made me wonder, you know, what happens when people only have one voting site, one early voting site in their entire county. And so after S325, 43 of North Carolina's 100 counties eliminated at least one early voting site. So I was like, well, that's a lot of voting sites. That's a lot of voting sites across the state. So what does that mean for voters? So between 2014 and 2018 county saw almost an entire percentage point drop when voters had to travel an additional mile to get to their early voting site. And out here in the mountains, uh, it's never just one mile. It's many miles through the hills and the, and the hairpin turns. So, I mean it can even be dangerous trying to get to voting sites.

Alyssa Rodriguez: That's so sad to hear that it's so difficult for rural counties to make it to their voting sites because the top nine counties in North Carolina that use early voting the most are all rural counties.

Gaby Romero: And there's a lot of reasons why early voting is super helpful for rural counties. I'm not, there's no form of public transportation, so you either have to walk if you don't have a car yourself, you know, if you can't afford to have a car then you have to get a ride from someone or you have to walk. And those are long distances in rural counties. So you know when people are looking to get a ride, a lot of people are working all day long. So when you have a 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM schedule and you don't have any weekend hours, people just aren't going to be able to vote. And I'm sure a lot of you are listening to your podcast in the car. I mean that's what I do. And for a lot of us, it can be really hard to imagine not having a car or even knowing someone that doesn't have access to a car, but it's a reality for a lot of people, especially in the state of North Carolina. I mean, today we just met someone who is the first person in her family to own a car. I mean, in her entire family, her mom, her dad, her siblings, they weren't, you know, helping her out with rides after school or, you know, if you're too tired to walk home from the library and you ask your friend to just pick you up and take you to your dorm, you know, that's not a reality for some people. And I feel like that's important that we acknowledge it.

London Newton: My Name is London Newton. I'm a student at UNC Asheville by majoring in Mass Communications and then double minoring in Legal Studies and Political Science. I'm in Student Government at my school. So I am a Sophomore Senator and then I'm the parliamentarian for student government. And then I volunteer with Dem NC sometimes--

Alyssa Rodriguez: I don't even think lawmakers understand the effect that they're having on everyday people who rely on early voting.

London Newton: Yeah, no, I mean the first thing I thought of when I was reading this bill was that my mom wouldn't even be able to vote with these hours. She works eight to six every day. So she can't go at 7:00 AM to vote because she has to commute 40 minutes. And then once she commutes to, um, our voting site from her job, which is another 40 minutes, you're already going to have like work traffic and then it ends at seven, so she wouldn't even be able to vote. And then when you think about like myself as a student and someone who works, it doesn't make a lot of money and so they need to work, um, they're making it. So like one, my mom

won't even be able to vote and then I wouldn't be able to pay the cost of voting because if I'm working in eight hour shift at work and then you have to take the whole day off to go to the DMV because we all know that's a whole day trip. Um, and making \$7.25 that's \$58 gone and then you have to spend another day, another eight hour shift that you're losing at work to go vote. And that's another \$58 gone. And then if you don't have your id or your license, because for me there's no reason for me to have a license or an id because I have a campus id. I don't need a license because I don't have money for a car. So that means I have to go pay \$13 for an ID. And the next thing you know, you've just lost \$130 to do something that's already a right. Most people, I don't think anyone, four to five Americans are living paycheck to paycheck, have the money to lose over a hundred dollars just to go do something that's already a right.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Why should we have to choose between our lives, our livelihood, our families and participating in democracy?

London Newton: And they do that, I mean they do that on purpose because then if you disenfranchise all the people who can't afford to lose it, then they can continue to be in power and obviously \$130 is like a lot of money and that's a bill, but you're going to lose so much more in the long run. Like immediately you lose work and you lose wages, but then in the long run they continue to disenfranchise you and every time you don't vote, you let the cycle continue and it's only going to get worse. I think this is so important because of our vote wasn't powerful. They wouldn't be trying to take it away like this. This doesn't affect retirees, but it's going to affect poor people who have to work everyday jobs. It's going to affect students who, like I have classes starting at 8:00 AM and then I have friends who have classes that start at 6:00 PM, so when are they going to get there? Like we have to do it on the weekend and that's if we're not working on the weekend, which most of us do because we're doing classes during the week and that's who uses early voting. The most young people in general between 18 and 25 or four times more likely to use early voting or the last Saturday specifically. So why would we take that away from somebody who's using it so much? Like, well see my school, we have like a shuttle. We have shuttles on campus that take people from like the apartments and grocery stores around campus. And then we did party at the polls where they took everyone to the voting districts. And our campus is split in half by the way. Um, we have to put in our residence hall like room number and everything to show which district we're going to be in. Because if you're in mills hall, second and third floor, you're going to be on a different district than like the first or like I don't even know. So that already disenfranchises our vote and then on Saturdays when they do the party at the polls and so everyone gets on the shuttles and they can take us back and forth but they can't do party at the polls during the week because people have to get home during the week. So yeah, I don't know. I think because my mom always took me to vote with her growing up because she was like trying to encourage that kind of stuff. But I've never been not on an early voting day because that's when the majority of people vote and if you're going to disenfranchise the majority of people, no matter what they say, you can't say that that's not going to specifically target certain communities and that it's not being done on purpose. Especially with all the gerrymandering that's happening around us. On top of that, like it's a clear agenda to disenfranchise specific people.

Alyssa Rodriguez: This is all just creating a recipe for disaster.

London Newton: No, totally. I mean when you have gerrymandering already disenfranchising people and then you make it so that certain polling locations are closed and then the polling locations can't personalize to what people in specific communities needs so that people in those communities don't have it accessible to them. And then you shut down the early voting day, like it's clear what is about to happen. You're not encouraging people to vote or making it accessible to them. So then people won't vote. Because if they see I'm going to lose almost \$200 just voting, then they're going to think, oh, there's no point. Or they're, it's just not going to be a choice. Even though in the long run it's going to be worth it. But when you make it that way and you make it so that locations are shut down. So I can't go to the school down the street, I have to go farther away to vote. And if I don't have a car, how am I going to do that? Because not a lot of places have public transport like Asheville does. And even the public transport in Asheville is a very dependable, I mean, if I got off of work, I get off of work usually around five so if I catch the five 30 bus and then it's usually 10-15 minutes late, so that means it'll be good. It'll get there at five 45 and that I'm 20 minutes to get downtown and then early voting closes in 40 minutes by then. So it's clear that they're not working for the people.

Taylor Moss: Clearly early voting is important to North Carolina voters and vital to protecting our democracy and ensuring that everyone's voices are heard.

Alyssa Rodriguez: H893 is highlighted in our, for the people agenda as the restoration of the last Saturday of voting and flexibility in voting hours. So this would restore the final Saturday of early voting and put the flexibility to determine early voting schedules and sides back in the hands of the county board of elections where it belongs.

Taylor Moss: and we won't settle for H646 which was the compromise bill that was passed. We like parts of this bill because extended the deadline for student IDs to count at the ballot box. However, it only restored flexibility in 2019 and we need it in every single year.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Board of elections know what hours work best for their counties, so why aren't we letting them decide? We need to remove the 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM Weekday requirement, which requires county board of elections to operate during non-usable hours and in practice limits the capacity of the local boards to operate multiple sites and provide weekend hours.

Taylor Moss: At the very least, we need to restore that mandatory last Saturday for 2020 while the best option would be the one that frees county board of elections from the legislature. Info scheduling restrictions, registration of the mandatory last Saturday for future elections, we'll at least ensured that one weekend voting option for voters is there

Alyssa Rodriguez: Weekend voting options are very popular with voters. Our research shows that in 20 1887 voters cast bowels per hour on the last Saturday, which is more than double the

37 voters per hour for weekdays. And that's any weekday. And for 18 to 25 year olds, the last Saturday rate was more than four times higher than the weekday rate.

Taylor Moss: So we know that all of our students working with us this summer use this last Saturday. I know that I used the last Saturday

Alyssa Rodriguez: I use the last Saturday.

Taylor Moss: So I have voted in every single election since 2012 that means all my local elections, every midterm, you know all of it. And I've only used election date once and that was for a runoff, like really small thing. And I just happened to be able to go on my lunch break, Hashtag blessed that I could even leave on my lunch break. You know what I mean?

Alyssa Rodriguez: Yeah, most people do not have that luxury.

Taylor Moss: Exactly. So I use early voting because that means I can just go on my schedule. I work long hours so I need early voting because I need the flexibility to go on the weekend or when I happen to be to fit it into my schedule after some meeting at like you know, a random time.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And I know myself as a college student, like I need flexible voting hours. Like I have class, I have clubs, I have projects, I have work just alone at app state. This past year, almost 5,700 people used early voting on our campus site. This is why on June 26th we are taking thousands of petitions signed by North Carolinians supporting flexible voting options to the North Carolina General Assembly for our annual lobby day.

Taylor Moss: We hold a lobby day each summer so that our interns can have meetings with their representatives to tell them about what's going on in their community.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And this year we're focusing on flexible voting hours, #MoreFlex and that's why we're supporting H893.

Taylor Moss: If you want to be a part of the thousands of North Carolinians that support flexible voting options, then please go to demnc.co/moreflex and sign the petition.

Alyssa Rodriguez: We hope you sign this petition and join us in creating a North Carolina that is Built By Us.

Taylor Moss: Thanks for listening to this podcast that is made Of, By, and For the people.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Bye.

Taylor Moss: Bye.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Connect with us on social media. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @DemocracyNC or you can visit our website at Democracync.org