

## Ep 3: Voter ID & Me

### July 17, 2019

Gaby Romero: We had to fight for our right to vote.

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 what you're about to listen to is an episode that Taylor and I recorded with Gaby Romero, a Democracy Intern in the Western region about voter ID laws in North Carolina and how that affects the state and voters in many different ways. I learned about a lot of really interesting stories and experiences during the recording of this podcast and I hope you all learned something too, so let's get right into it.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Yeah, Taylor, so right off the bat, do you want to tell us a little bit about what Gaby's fighting for?

Taylor Moss: We had a monster law, that's what we called it, a monster voting law enacted back in 2013 that included a lot of stuff, not just voter id. So that was the first time that we had a photo voter ID enacted here in North Carolina and it was really strict. It was, you know, pretty much only a North Carolina DMV, North Carolina id card, passport, tribal card or military card. That was it. Which seems like it covers all the bases, but it really doesn't, you know, there's no student cards, um, it doesn't accept out-of-state ids for people who, you know, moved here recently and just haven't changed it. Uh, so there's a lot that was missing there and also did a bunch of other stuff so it stopped the ability to preregister 16 and 17 year olds. And we know that's helpful because a lot of times they don't move before they're 18 because a lot of people have turned 18 by the time they're still in high school. Right. So they could be voting when they're seniors in high school, but if they're not registered proactively, then it may not happen. They had taken away or same day registration during early voting, which was a huge deal for us. We fought really hard and got that back quickly. Um, compared to some of this other stuff though, it also made early voting shorter. So it cut to 10 days, which cut a whole week out, which we use a lot here in North Carolina. And then it had a lot of problems with dark money, so it increased the contributions cap. And then there was just a lot less transparency when it came to having to disclose where money's coming from, how much of it. And that is a big problem in just general American politics, right? We need to know where this money's coming from so that we can track the special interests that are buying out our politicians. So we worked really hard on making sure that we could win back as many of these protections as possible and help our friends at other organizations to fight this in the courts. So it was being litigated for quite some time. Uh, thankfully it did get struck down in the middle of 2016 which was still confusing. That wasn't great. Right? So in the primary 2016 people had to use their ids to vote, and then in the general they didn't. So a lot of people didn't show up to vote in the general in 2016 because they didn't think they could because they didn't have an ID. So that was not great to begin with, but it

was a win for democracy because we were able to help our friends who are litigating in court because we had a bunch of research from our 2016 election protection program where we had all of our volunteers across the state, there are about 2000 of them, at polling sites all over to help people who are having trouble voting. And we found at least 1000 people could not cast their vote. So because we ran that program and kept really good data from it, we were able to send that to the litigators as well as we wrote a quick brief about some other stuff that we found. The courts found that this law was enacted to restrict voting and registration in at least five different ways and all of which disproportionately affected African-Americans. So our research and those communications were able to show that they were targeting this specific group of people which was with racial intentions, which is unconstitutional and super illegal. So that was a huge one for us and it was amazing that we were able to get that done. But the lawmakers who originally put that in place just really wouldn't stop until unfortunately last year in 2018 they were able to slip in the idea of a constitutional amendment. We as an organization at Democracy NC were very forthcoming and outright with the fact that we were opposing this constitutional amendment, but a lot of other groups and individuals wouldn't work on it with us because it was polling against us. That constitution amendment was written in such a way that they were going to decide later which ids counted, which is just terrifying because they could be as narrow as they wanted it to be. And we're dealing with that rulemaking right now. We didn't, unfortunately, we didn't win, which is why we have to deal with this id law right now, but us being the only organization doing it by the time it passed, it only pass it 55% so we made that approval rating go way down to something where we only needed five more points than we would have won. So people just need to understand what it is that they're looking at and why it is a voter suppression tactic and why it's a voter suppression tactic that's mostly for black and brown people and poor people. So that's why we continue to fight during rulemaking to make sure that as many ideas count as possible. We still are not for an ID law, but we're dealing with what we have right now and doing what we can.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Thanks so much for that background, Taylor. So Gaby, how did you start working with voter ID and student Id?

Gaby Romero: So you know, I'm walking the student union the same place where I was able to early vote a few months before and I ran into this internship fair and Darlene Azarmi. She is my supervisor right now in the West was tabling. They're trying to recruit people for this very internship program that I'm in right now. And I was like, Democracy North Carolina. Do you guys do anything with voting rights? She was like, yeah, that's what we do. We're a voting rights group and we got to talking about the law. And Darlene was like, how do you guys know so much about something that just passed and you know a lot of young people were busy with other stuff or not diving into the minuscule details of you know, state legislation. She's like, how do you guys know so much? And because we had to, cause no one else wanted to tell us what was going on. And we had a fight for our right to vote.

Taylor Moss: Actually as we're recording this podcast right now, the North Carolina State Board of elections just released when they're going to seek public comment for the ID rulemaking. The rules around how voter ID is getting implemented is extremely important so that no one gets turned away at the polls. So Gaby, a big piece of the rule making with id is this quote unquote reasonable impediment, which is when you go to show your id to the poll worker, do you look like your picture? Does your name match who you say you are? Like is your identity, verifiable. I know you have done some work around this while you are working on your student ids at school. Can you talk more about it?

Gaby Romero: Yeah, of course. So when it comes to reasonable impediments and photo identification, I know for myself I've had trouble making sure that my identification papers necessarily match my other identification papers. Uh, in a lot of Latin American countries, people use two last names. They use their father's last name and then they use their mother's maiden name. And for a long time I had trouble getting, you know, my passport and my driver's license and my university registration and all these different forms to look exactly the same because you know, sometimes the last, the second, last name would get cut off. Sometimes one of them would be misspelled. Sometimes they'd pick the wrong one and then not include the other. It was a mess. It's super confusing and I was able to figure it out. But it was really hard. And that's just one little piece of it. You know, a couple of misspelled names, mismatched documents. If you have to deal with additional prejudice from any form of legal system, then the stuff gets a lot harder. Uh, in North Carolina fun fact or not so fun fact, you can only legally change your name once. So if you are someone who identifies as trans, if you're someone who identifies as gender nonconforming, it can be really hard to get your appropriate name to match your legal documents. And if you go to the polls and you present your identification and someone says, I don't think this is you, it can be a very difficult and invasive process trying to convince people that you are who you say you are. And I think we need to acknowledge that that's kind of the point of these photo ids to make it harder for certain to vote.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So Gaby, I know back at Appalachian you were doing a lot of work involving ids and students and their names. What was all of that about? Like what does that all entail?

Gaby Romero: Yeah, so at app for a long time, your name on your app card, that's our student ids. It had to match your legal name. So for example, online it says Maria instead of Gaby, you know, Gaby is just a nickname for me. But for a lot of people it's deeper than that. For a lot of people, the name that's on their app card isn't reflective of who they are as a person. Uh, for a trans students, for gender nonconforming students, it was really difficult for them to have to see this card all the time that had a name that wasn't reflective of them. And I mean we've all heard the stories of the danger that people can get into when something like a piece of identification doesn't have a name that is usually attached to those gender that you present as. So we had been working for a long time on trying to make sure that students who needed their appropriate name on their student ids were able to get it all. That came to a halt when all of a sudden all of

our IDs at a university system had to match some legal requirements that North Carolina General Assembly put on us.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So how did that process end up working out?

Gaby Romero: Basically what we decided was, yes, we're going to make it so that students can put their appropriate name on their ID cards. So not a nickname, but like an appropriate name. And that just meant that they wouldn't be able to use them to vote. So these students are having to choose between living their authentic real lives, with their appropriate name and having easier access to voting. You can request to have your appropriate name put on your ID card. And in that process you will be informed that the ID card is no longer eligible to vote because your full legal name has to be on your voter registration form.

Alyssa Rodriguez: I feel like as an Appalachian student, it really sucks that we have to make that choice between validating our identities and participating in our democracy. It just really makes me want to keep working so that we can find a better compromise for this.

Gaby Romero: Yeah. And one way that we can work towards that is, going back to that public comment that Taylor mentioned, is send in your experiences, send in what you know about your own personal life. I mean it's okay that you don't know a lot about North Carolina's voting laws and all of that, but if you know that, hey, my name and who I am doesn't match a piece of paper that the government gave me, then you need to tell our legislators and you need to make it known that hey, this is going to hurt me and people like me.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So it's one thing when our documents aren't reflective of our identities, but it's another thing to know if we need to bring them in the first place. Have you all ever had any issues with people just not knowing what they're supposed to do in general or the rules not being clear because nobody really tells people.

Taylor Moss: During the 2016 primary, I was a poll monitor myself with them. And before I worked here, I volunteered and I was at the UNC Chapel Hill polling site, which is not on campus unfortunately, but it's close. Um, so most of the students go there. Um, and so I was outside, you know, talking to folks after they voted, um, or after they came out of the building to see if they voted and how their experience was. Um, and I talked to this one, one student, I think she was a sophomore. She came out and she like, she just looked confused and so I was like, okay, for sure she needs some help. So I asked her what happened and she told me that, you know, she just walked here from class, um, before she had to go to work. And she said that she couldn't vote because she didn't have her driver's license and she was upset because she had her student ID with her because their-- you know your one card you use to get into the dining halls and into the gym and all that. You know, she wasn't carrying around her driver's license with her because she didn't have a car on campus. She wasn't driving there. And so she didn't have it with her and I was talking to her, I was like, can you get back to your dorm? Um, and come back? and she was telling me her schedule and she was really flustered. She just like

really didn't have time to do this whole process because she had work and then she had a club meeting. I remember she just had this whole, this whole scenario and I was trying to talk to her about some of the other days that were left in early voting, but it was, it was near the end of the week. So it was a really stressful thing for her and she felt really bad. And, and she also just like, it was hard for me to experience with her because she felt dumb and I felt bad that she felt stupid for not knowing what she needed to bring with her. And that happens a lot with our young people, like no one is spending the time to talk to young people in particular about what they need to do, you know, teach them how to register, tell them what it's going to be like in their first time going in there to vote. And so they have to pretend like they know what's going on and this like facade that they have to put up and act like they know what they're doing when, if it's the first time they're doing it, like they're going to be confused. And that's normal.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Taylor, that's a scary story because given the law right now, that could happen again. But hopefully in 2020 all of the UNC system, student ids will count and we won't have to worry about that problem. So what I'm learning is implementing this voter id laws really difficult. And how are non-students handling this? How are counties and cities handling this?

Gaby Romero: Well, every county has a board of elections first of all. And in this law, those counties were mandated that they have to provide free forms of photo identification for anyone who's eligible and who needs it. So that sounds really great. Like free photo IDs

Alyssa Rodriguez: Everyone gets one!

Gaby Romero: Exactly. But that's ignoring a lot of problems that we already talked about. If you don't have a car and you live in a rural county, it's going to be really hard for you to get to the county board of elections to get your quote "free" photo id. So there's a lot of hidden costs associated with trying to obtain that form of photo id that the county is providing. And not only that, but I heard from one member of the Buncombe County Board of elections that they don't want to advertise that they have free forms of photo id because they're afraid that if they get any significant number of people, they're not going to be able to handle it. And that's really scary that, you know, here's this resource to try to at least try to enfranchise some more people and make sure that their voices are heard. And county boards of elections are afraid to advertise that resource because they don't have the capacity to honestly provide that resource. So it's interesting, but I also heard from the Henderson County board of elections that they would be willing to transport their free photo ID equipment to different locations. And that's actually something that we're looking at when we were, you know, just a bunch of students at Appstate trying to figure out how to deal with this new law is nowhere in the law does it say that it has to be located in the county board of elections building so they could take it to universities, community colleges, farmer's markets, community centers, places where people are already going. So they don't have to go out of their way to try to vote. So hopefully that's something that we can look more into.

Taylor Moss: Wow. So it totally depends on what county you're in. And that as a statewide organization for us at Dem NC is almost stressful to think about how some counties are really struggling. They don't have the money, they don't have the staff, and in some counties care so much that they're going to go out of their way to come up with these new exciting plans that they're going. You know, Henderson county might take their equipment outside of the building, which is great, but when you think back to the reason that the general assembly gives us for implementing these is for quote unquote uniformity and quote unquote having more structure, but do you see what it's doing to our counties? It's, it's creating this lack of structure and as some might say, a recipe for disaster.

Alyssa Rodriguez: That's exactly what it's doing, Taylor. Well, I think I learned a lot today, so thank you both for your stories and thank you Gaby for being here with us today.

Gaby Romero: Yeah, of course. Thank you so much for having me.

Alyssa Rodriguez: If anyone out there is interested in learning more about voter ID in North Carolina or more about what we talked about today on the show, then you can visit [demnc.co/idfacts](https://demnc.co/idfacts). That's [demnc.co/idfacts](https://demnc.co/idfacts).

Alyssa Rodriguez: We hope you'll join us in creating a North Carolina that's Built By Us.

Gaby Romero: And thanks for listening to this podcast made Of, By, and For the People.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Bye!

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