

# What is Provisional Voting?

## What is a provisional ballot?

A provisional ballot is a “failsafe” or safety net option for voters when there is a question about their qualification or eligibility to vote. These questions can come up for a variety of reasons, including going to the wrong precinct, moving, or some other problem with the voter record. However, **federal law requires that anyone who presents to vote be given the opportunity to vote**, and provisional ballots guarantee that every voter is given that chance.

## How do voters cast provisional ballots? What happens to them?

1. The most common way someone ends up voting a provisional ballot is if a poll worker cannot find a voter’s registration record at the time of check in at the polling place. If that occurs, the voter will be directed to the help desk.
2. Once at the help desk, the voter should find out the problem with their registration, to the extent they are able.
3. If the problem is out-of-precinct voting (meaning the voter is in the right county, but the wrong precinct) the voter has the **choice between voting a provisional ballot at the polling place where they are, or going to their own precinct where they will be able to vote a regular ballot**. In other cases, a provisional ballot is the voter’s only option for casting a ballot that day.
4. **Regardless of the issue, the voter should be offered a provisional ballot to vote.**
5. If the voter decides that a provisional ballot is the best option (they cannot get to their correct polling location before polls close, or there is another issue where a provisional ballot is the only option), the help desk worker will give them a form, called a “provisional ballot application.” After filling out the form, the voter will be given the ballot and vote it.
6. Then, the form and the ballot will be placed in a sealed envelope and sent to the Board of Elections for review after the election. The voter will be given a phone number and PIN they can use to find out if their ballot was counted.
7. Following the election, nonpartisan Board of Elections staff will review each provisional ballot and conduct research to determine whether the voter was properly registered and if the ballot can be counted, in whole or in part.
8. Even for voters whose votes do not ultimately count, casting a provisional ballot will get them registered for the next election.

## Do provisional ballots count?

Many provisional ballots count. No official election results are final until every provisional ballot is reviewed. In 2016, just under half of all provisional ballots counted entirely or partially (44%). But for voters who cast provisional ballots because they were at the wrong precinct (called “out of precinct” voting), or because they moved within county and did not update their registration, **more than 90% of ballots counted in whole or in part**.

*Note:* An out-of-precinct voter’s ballot will count in all state and county-wide races, and in many other races at the top of the ticket. But, because an out-of-precinct voter is voting a ballot different from the one at their own precinct, there may be some local races where their vote doesn’t count.

**Still have questions? Call Democracy North Carolina at 888-OUR-VOTE or visit [www.ncvoter.org](http://www.ncvoter.org) to learn more about voting in North Carolina.**