

How to Advocate for a 2020 General Election Early Voting Plan in Your County

This 2020 guide to Early Voting advocacy will help you influence the hours and sites your county offers when most North Carolina voters cast a ballot this fall. Given the new realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, without a robust Early Voting plan, lines at the polls could be longer than usual, deterring voter participation and potentially endangering voters' health. Strong Early Voting plans, with weekend voting hours and sites that work for our communities, are the key to making sure this year's elections run more smoothly.

What is an Early Voting Plan?

All 100 county boards of elections create their Early Voting plans and submit them to the State Board of Elections in the months leading up to Election Day. **Each county's elections are managed by a five-member board** – with three members from the governor's party and two from the other party having the highest number of registered voters. No more than three members can be from the same political party.

NOTE: if the board members fail to approve the Early Voting plan unanimously, any member can submit an alternative plan (also called a non-unanimous plan) to the State Board of Elections, which has the final authority to decide the plan. **The power of one Board member to submit an alternative plan is an important point of leverage to make a county's plan better.**

How Can I Influence My County's Early Voting Plan?

To better influence the Early Voting process, it's important to attend county board of elections meetings, get to know the board members, and speak out in favor of options that work for your community. Here are guidelines for actions, based on time available.

The Impact of COVID-19 As the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear: this year's elections will be different. The public health crisis means many counties will be making hard decisions about how to fund this year's elections. These realities make it even more important that Election Advocates actively participate in Early Voting planning, assist board members with sites — including those that can support high turnout, maintain sanitary conditions, and allow for physical distancing — and help reduce long lines by educating voters about their in-person (and main-in) voting options this fall.

The Basics (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 and if you can see it.

- **Review previous plans** and think about what you'd like for a good plan, including things like maintaining the same amount of sites as similar election years, recognizable polling locations with good access for underrepresented voters like historically-Black communities or campuses, and options that allow for hours beyond 9 to 5). **Visit demnc.co/evadvocacy to review prior county plans.**

- **Attend** board meetings with others, even if a discussion of Early Voting isn't on the agenda. Organize a diverse group to go with you (e.g., take faith or campus leaders to push for Sunday voting or campus sites).
- **Speak out** about the importance of things like weekend voting hours, especially if the county had weekend options like Sunday voting before. Advocate for additional hours or sites only if you are confident they will be used, since poor use can set a bad precedent and make it harder to advocate for more in the future. If you have more time (below), see “ask for help” for ways to get valuable information on what’s likely to be used.
- **Take notes about the discussion.** Pay special attention to anything you hear about Early Voting plans, Early Voting locations, or combining precincts. Tell others what you learned (**see online report form at demnc.co/evreportform or printable, faxable report form below**).

The Advanced (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 a Sunday afternoon during the Early Voting period; and (4) what might persuade them to open sites for extended Saturday hours and on Sunday.
- **Organize:** Share this intelligence with supporters, friendly community groups, and your other allies. What do you think about the preliminary plan or plans in previous midterm elections? (See the "Review previous plans" section 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 and a diverse group of your allies in support of this plan. Ask if key members would be willing to submit a non-unanimous plan with better options if other members don't agree.
- **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 meeting should be open to the public. 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 in favor of good options at key meetings to show diverse support (e.g., faith leaders who support Sunday voting and students who support campus sites).
- **Use the media:** Let your local media outlets 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. Write letters to the editor in support of the hours and sites that you support and share why others should help them too.
- **Ask for help:** Democracy NC, a nonpartisan group, has helped community groups and individuals secure more Early Voting sites for their counties. Email elections@democracync.org or call 888-OUR-VOTE (888-687-8683) for advice. We can connect you with a regional organizer and send you county-specific data.

Talking Points for Your Early Voting Advocacy

PROS: Some reasons for a robust Early Voting plan:

- **Limit 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.

△ Amid COVID-19: reducing long lines will be especially important as voters attempt to physically distance and minimize contact with poll workers and others.

- **Provide More Opportunity for Working Voters:** Early Voting sites provide flexible opportunities for working voters, by opening on weekends and evenings after regular work hours. Saturday and Sunday voting have the highest use per hour.

△ Amid COVID-19: more options for working voters are especially important as voters attempt to avoid long lines and apply social distancing.

- **Data Backs the Site:** A college campus can have as many students and staff as a city. By the numbers, it should have an Early Voting site (with public parking).

△ Amid COVID-19: large polling places with substantial parking, like those typically found on college campuses, allow for more curbside and physical distancing.

- **One-Stop Solves Problems:** 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.

△ Amid COVID-19: Voter registration numbers have plummeted. Combined with mass voter removals, voters will rely on same-day registration — available only during Early Voting — as a vital safety net to vote.

CONS: Reasons you'll hear NOT to 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 enough to be available at new hours. Your group could offer to help recruit election workers, too.)

△ Amid COVID-19: New law changes could allow for counties to hire more poll workers from out-of-precinct.

- **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 Election Day sites, so good EV plans will save money.)

△ Amid COVID-19: a new law should allow for more funding for safe and sanitary in-person voting.

• **The Plan is Done:** The board has already made its decision about locations and times for Early Voting. *(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. Counties can – and do – submit revised plans to the State Board of Elections in the months ahead of the election.*

△ Amid COVID-19: People will be upset if a premature decision means they have to wait hours to vote in a busy election where physically distancing is desired.

• **Sunday Voting is Anti-Religious:** Opening the polls on Sunday disrespects the church and its worshippers. *(Response: Ministers are leading 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.)*

△ Amid COVID-19: More people vote per hour on the weekends, including Sundays. These days will be crucial to relieve stress on other voting days — including Election Day — and will be even more important this year to allow for the physical distancing voters need.

• **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.*

△ Amid COVID-19: The reality is this pandemic will impact our elections. Counties should do everything they can to make voting accessible.

Tips for Assessing Prior Early Voting Plans

Information from prior election cycles is one of most critical tools you have for developing an Early Voting plan for your county. **Prior plans can be found at demnc.co/evadvocacy.**

The following questions can help guide that vital work.

1. Is the prior presidential election plan similar to the one coming up? For 2020, it would be helpful to look at 2008, 2012, and 2016 plans, (i.e., the most recent presidential election cycles), to determine an ideal number of voting sites and hours. Presidential elections see higher turnout than midterm cycles – so keep that in mind when asking for hours, sites, and reviewing plans.

NOTE: While Primaries are lower turnout and Primary plans may host fewer sites, you can also review your county's 2020 Primary plan to see what sites might also be available for the fall.

2. Keep changes in Early Voting days in mind when reviewing previous plans. North Carolina has seen several recent attempts to limit Early Voting. For example, 2012 was the last presidential election year with 17-days of Early Voting 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. If you think having full access to Early Voting sites during the 17-day Early Voting period is important, push for your county to do better for the 2020 General.

3. Were any of the same decision-makers on your county Board of Elections when the last plan was decided? Probably not. Effective 2019, County Boards of Election members are appointed every two years, and all county Boards of Elections have a new structure – five (5)-member county Boards of Elections split along partisan lines, with three Democrats and two Republicans. 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 2008, 2012 and the 2016 General? Ask:

- Were any locations 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 using GPS?
- Is there enough parking? Is there enough lighting? (Remember, it will get dark early in the fall.)
- Are the locations near public transportation hubs? Colleges? Other population centers?
- What neighborhoods are the Early Voting sites in? All different kinds of voters should be able to access the locations easily.

NOTE: Because it was the last presidential election cycle (when the highest number of voters turnout), for many Early Voting locations used in 2016 may be most familiar to voters.

5. What was the schedule for Early Voting in 2012 and 2016? Did it include weekend hours? The 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).

NOTE: Also consider whether there's anything unique about voters' work schedules in your county that make having other voting hours important.

6. Are voting sites large enough to accommodate social distancing? Lessons from recent primaries show the need for safe in-person voting options that allow for physically distancing. When reviewing past and current plans, ask: is this site large enough to allow for high turnout expectations and to safely space voters, poll workers, and voting equipment?

With this list of questions and copies of your county's Early Voting plans from prior years, you and your community can begin thinking through what kind of Early Voting plan you would like to see in 2020.

Questions? Contact us at elections@democracync.org or 888-OUR-VOTE (888-687-8683).

Early Voting Advocacy Report Form

If possible, submit your responses to the questions below at: demnc.co/evreportform

*Thank you for monitoring your local County Board of Elections (BOE) meeting! Please use the following form to capture notes during the meeting. **Please submit your meeting notes online at demnc.co/evreportform within 24 hours of the meeting.** If you cannot submit your notes online, you may return the form via email (elections@democracync.org) or by mail (see address below).*

Volunteer Name _____

Volunteer Email _____

Volunteer Phone (Mobile Preferred) _____

County _____

Meeting Date & Time _____

of Board Members Attending _____

Was the meeting in-person, telephonic, or by video stream? _____

Was public comment allowed? If so, how? _____

Did the Board members mention whether BOE offices had reduced hours or closed completely due to COVID-19? If so, what, if any, office hours were mentioned? Other ways to contact the staff?

Was it mentioned whether the county commission voted on funding Early Voting or any other election-related expenses for the 2020 General Election? (If so, what is that budget? If not, was there a discussion of when it might be approved?)

Was there any mention of absentee ballot preparedness, election staffing issues or poll worker recruitment, sanitization or other health-related precautions, or budget-related concerns? Please explain any and all discussions.

Did Board members mention whether the county has provided drop boxes for voter registration or absentee request forms?

Was Early Voting for the General Election discussed at the meeting? Circle Y/N

Were possible Early Voting locations mentioned (Yes/No)? 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 budgeting or hours (Yes/No)? 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 the 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. (Yes/No)? If "Yes," please describe.

What is the date and time of the BOE's next meeting on Early Voting: (MM/DD/YY) ____/____/____
@ ____:____PM/AM

Please submit your responses using our online report form: demnc.co/evreportform

If you CANNOT use the online report form, email your completed form to elections@democracync.org
or mail to: Democracy North Carolina, 3000 Aerial Center Parkway, Suite 160, Morrisville, NC 27560.