

THE CIVICS OF JUSTICE

"[V]oting is just one of those many choices that we have access to in this time. It feels like an act that honors the legacy of my ancestors who fought and died, just to show up to the ballot box... **I'm showing up to vote for Black Lives.**"


— CJ Suitt, Chapel Hill, NC Poet Laureate


"Right now the nation is going through a transformation. The transformation consists of police accountability everywhere. **We must continue to advocate for people – no matter who, what, when, where, how.** This is why we need to make sure the power of the vote [is there] for the people."


—Kathy Greggs, Fayetteville PACT, Fayetteville, NC

Communities of color are fed up with being targeted, profiled, and disrespected by federal, state and local justice systems. In 2020, frustration specifically with police brutality and the tragic loss of Black lives has led to major uprisings across the United States and the world.

North Carolina is not immune to racially-biased policing. Over the years, there has been a clear pattern of disproportionate enforcement, particularly for nonviolent and traffic offenses.

 Based on a UNC-Chapel Hill analysis of NC traffic stops from 2000-2016, **Black drivers were 63% more likely to be stopped by police than white drivers** even though, as a whole, Black people drive 16% less. Taking into account less time on the road, Black drivers were about 95% more likely to be stopped. **Black drivers were also 115% more likely than whites to be searched at a stop.**

 According to The Washington Post, at least 154 people have been killed by NC police since 2015. **Black men make up approximately 10% of the population but 32% of those killed by police in that time.**

 This pattern of injustice reaches beyond policing; it also corrupts our democracy. In 2016, the Sentencing Project estimated that **91,179 North Carolinians were disenfranchised due to a felony conviction – almost half of whom were Black.**

Frustration with racial bias and inequity is driving pushback and policy changes across North Carolina. Using the tools of democracy, people are fighting back. Case studies – from Asheville to Fayetteville – featured in Democracy NC's Civics of Justice Toolkit (demnc.co/justice) illustrate how organizing, voting, showing up at public meetings, and contacting elected officials can build power.

CASE STUDY: GREENSBORO, NC

In 2018, eight Greensboro Police hogtied and killed Black, houseless Greensboro resident Marcus Smith. Community members called for Greensboro City Council to support citizen-led initiatives in lieu of police activity. Two years later those demands are being echoed with urgency following the death of George Floyd. Community organizations like Greensboro Rising have held demonstrations and press conferences calling for justice for Smith, among other demands. As a result, the judge in Smith's case has denied a motion to stay discovery, a move the community described as an "attempt to delay justice." **Greensboro Rising continues to organize, even beyond city limits, and call for city council to divest from the police, invest in the community, and implement "policies that will provide for the safety, justice, and well-being of Black people and all of Greensboro."**

In response to organizing from Greensboro Rising, the City Council voted on August 18th to draft a motion requiring written consent in all police searches and stops. Greensboro Rising's latest digital advocacy effort is mobilizing city residents to urge the City Council to pass this policy into law at their September meeting.

THE POWER OF DEMOCRACY

Engaging at all levels of our democracy can help break the tangle of oppressive practices and policies. Working at the local level is especially powerful because those representatives are most directly accountable to you.

Start from the bottom and move up your ballot in 2020, for example:

- ✓ **NC Mayors** normally pick the city or town's police chief to manage law enforcement.
- ✓ **NC City/Town Councils and County Commissions** fund local law enforcement.
- ✓ **NC's Governor** ensures public safety and oversees agencies that implement justice and public safety programs, including state police, corrections, and juvenile justice.
- ✓ **NC's Attorney General** is the state's leading law enforcement officer, the A.G. heads the NC Dept. of Justice, which protects consumers from fraud, provides legal representation to State agencies, and is a resource for local district attorneys.
- ✓ **NC Legislators** are responsible for defining what is a crime, procedures for responding to crimes, sentences, and funding agencies that deal crimes.
- ✓ **US Congresspeople** can reform the justice system, create federal laws, and confirm US Supreme Court Justices.
- ✓ **US Presidents** appoint US Supreme Court Justices and the Attorney General who leads the Dept. of Justice, and enforce federal laws and administer justice.

SPOTLIGHT: NC Judges are on the ballot in 2020. **Judges are powerful.** They decide cases that save lives and uphold and overrule laws that affect every aspect of your life. They make decisions in disputes on everything from the cost of electricity, to your right to vote, to who gets the death penalty. You will find judicial candidates near the middle of your ballot — another reason to vote the whole ballot, top to bottom.

➔ **NC Supreme Court** is the state's highest court. Three of the seven seats are on the ballot.

➔ **NC Court of Appeals** judges hear appeals of criminal and civil cases from the District and Superior Courts, North Carolina's trial courts. Five of the 15 seats are up for election.

➔ **Lower Court Judges** determine sentencing for crimes and who ultimately goes to prison.

We must do more than tell people to vote — particularly when many of the people at greatest risk of illness and violence in this year's elections have also been subjected to policies explicitly designed to make it harder to cast a ballot that counts. Instead, help people understand how barriers to democratic participation result in harm to people we know and to society as a whole. **Provide options that will bring the responses we need and build the more just society we want, such as:**

Voting as a start.

Turnout tells elected officials that your community is active and aware. Elected officials pay closer attention to neighborhoods and constituencies that vote. Since local elections can be decided by smaller margins, know and share that one vote really will make a difference. You have power. Use it!

Contact elected officials.

Elected officials are in office to serve you and your fellow citizens. Let them know your thoughts about the policies that most affect you and your community. Make sure to keep the pressure on, especially after the election.

Talk to your friends, family, and neighbors about these important issues. Help them make their voices heard too.

Show up at public meetings.

Meetings where elected and appointed officials make decisions that affect you are public so that you and your community can monitor the policies and laws that are being passed. Show up, speak up, and keep an eye on what's going on in your government.