



HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR A 2022 EARLY VOTING PLAN IN YOUR COUNTY



This 2022 guide to Early Voting advocacy will help you win the hours and sites that your county needs to host safe and secure elections this spring and fall. Often, early-voting plans used in the primary election are carried over to the general election. Given the ongoing concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, without a robust Early Voting plan, lines at the polls could be longer than usual, deterring voter participation. 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 nonunanimous 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.

The Impact of COVID-19 & Election Date Changes

With rising COVID cases, concerns for the safety of voters during the pandemic continue to be an ongoing concern. Some counties may choose to take precautionary measures, while others may revert to Pre-COVID standards. These realities make it even more important that Election Advocates actively participate in Early Voting planning, ensuring that board members have a robust emergency response plan if cases continue to rise – and that voting sites can continue to support high turnout, maintain sanitary conditions, and allow for physical distancing. Additionally, with election date changes voters will need to be educated on shifting deadlines, and their in-person and mail-in voting options.

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 BASICS (Less than a Week to Prepare)

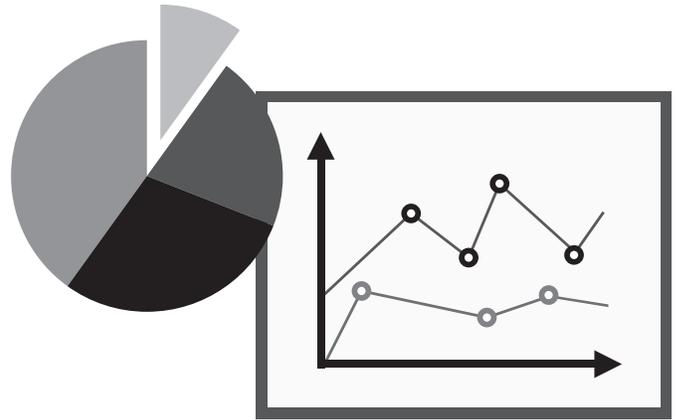
- ✓ **Find out** when your county board of elections meets and what's on the agenda. Ask a staff or Board member if there's a preliminary Early Voting plan and if you can see it.
- ✓ **Review previous plans** and think about what you'd like for a good plan, including things like maintaining the same 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.



DEMOCRACY NC

- ✔ **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 for advice. We can connect you with a regional organizer and send you county-specific data.

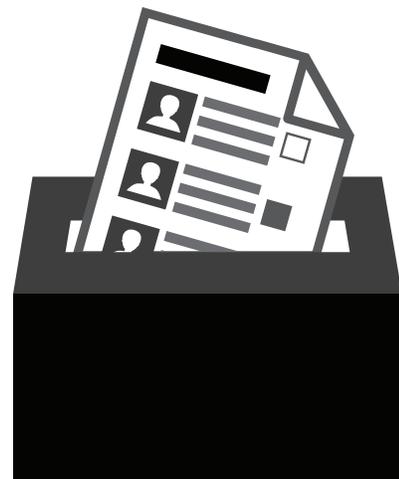
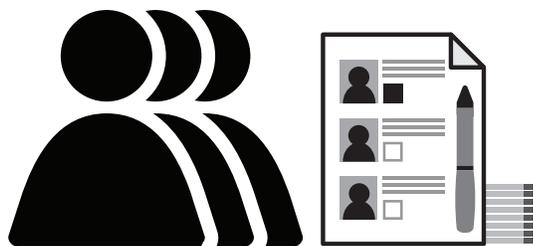
TALKING POINTS FOR EARLY VOTING ADVOCACY

PROS: Some reasons for a strong 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.
- ✔ **Provide More Opportunity for Working Voters:** Early Voting sites provide flexible opportunities for working voters, by opening on weekends and evenings after normal work hours. Saturday and Sunday voting have the highest use per hour. More sites also allow voters to travel shorter distances that might have limited time or access to transportation.
- ✔ **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).
- ✔ **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.

CONS: Reasons you'll hear NOT to open more sites:

- ✔ **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. Site closures have also been shown to disproportionately impact voters of color in under-resourced communities, making the burden of driving further distances to an early voting site greater.
- ✔ **The Plan is Done:** The decision about locations and times for Early Voting centers has already been made.
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 before the election. Additionally, if the county provided little notice of the EV meeting and little time to provide feedback, that could also be referenced.
- ✔ **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.
- ✔ **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.



TIPS FOR ASSESSING EARLY VOTING PLANS

Information from prior election cycles is one of the 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 2022, it would be helpful to look at 2010, 2014, and 2018, plans, (i.e., the most recent midterm election cycles), to determine an ideal number of voting sites and hours. NOTE: While Primaries are lower turnout and Primary plans may host fewer sites, many early voting sites used for the primary are carried over to 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 2022 Primary and General election.
- 3. Were any of the same decision-makers on your county Board of Elections when the last plan was decided?** Probably not. 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 2010, 2014, and 2018?** How has redistricting possibly changed precinct locations for voters? Ask: NOTE: In 2022, many voters may be voting at a polling site or precinct they have never voted at before due to redistricting. Distance, transportation access, and education around such changes are both factors that should be accounted for.
- 5. What was the schedule for Early Voting in 2010, 2014, and 2018?** 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?** With ongoing concerns circling the pandemic, your CBOE should consider social distancing and have an emergency response plan in place in the event that COVID-19 numbers begin to rise before the election. 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? 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? 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.

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 2022. Questions? Contact us at elections@democracync.org.