

Democracy North Carolina

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NC Counties Ranked for Voter Activism; Both Major Parties Can Claim Victories

North Carolina's record turnout in the 2008 election made it the state with the biggest increase in voter participation over 2004 and helped Barack Obama win a narrow victory, but a new analysis shows that five of the 10 NC counties with the most intense voter activism favored John McCain.

"The counties that experienced the highest rates of voter turnout or the heaviest use of early voting did not uniformly line up to hand one candidate or one party a clear victory," said Bob Hall, director of Democracy North Carolina, the nonpartisan election reform group that conducted the study. "They are the counties where voters of both parties, unaffiliated voters, blacks and whites, and new voters, all get involved. They illustrate why North Carolina will likely be a hotly contested state in 2010 and beyond."

The county-by-county study examined new voter registration, voter turnout by party and race, early voting, and other factors to produce a "Voter Activism Index" for the 2008 election. The analysis is part of a 5,000-item database by Democracy North Carolina, available at:

<https://democracync.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NCVoterActivismByCounty2008.pdf>

The top 10 counties on the Voter Activism Index include five that supported Obama – Chatham, Wake, Forsyth, Orange and Durham – while five others favored McCain – Person, Moore, Davie, Transylvania, and, by a thin margin, Nash.

At the bottom of the scale are several counties that sided with Obama – Scotland, Hoke and in last place, Robeson – and several backing McCain – Cherokee, McDowell, Swain, Onslow and Avery.

Fast-growing Chatham County, with a history of contentious local elections, led on four of the indicators in the report: It ranked first for overall turnout of registered voters (with 78% casting a ballot), first for turnout among white voters, first for turnout among Democrats, and first for turnout among unaffiliated voters.

Wake County, Number 2 on the scale, scored in the top six for each of those four indicators and ranked 15th for the percent of new voters added in 2008. Three of four registered voters cast ballots, and an estimated 91% of adults are registered.

Person County, Number 3, had the highest turnout rate (80%) for registered black voters of any county with a significant African-American population, as well as the second highest turnout for Democrats, but it went for McCain by a 54% to 45% margin.

Meanwhile, in tri-racial, poor and disengaged Robeson County, more than half the voting-age adults sat out the election – one in four adults are not even registered and only 58% of those who are registered voters bothered to cast ballots.

Hall said Robeson is "the buckle for a belt of Southern counties with chronically low voter participation" that includes Columbus, Hoke, Scotland, Richmond, and Anson. Bladen broke from

the pack this year with a large use of early voting (63% of all ballots) and a 76% rate of turnout among black registered voters.

The statewide totals highlight several significant features of the 2008 election, Hall noted.

- Democratic and Republican voters turned out at virtually identical rates, 72%, but unaffiliated voters lagged far behind, with only 62% casting a ballot.

- Turnout among black registered voters [72%] exceeded the white turnout rate [69%] for the first time since the beginning of the Jim Crow era more than 100 years ago.

- More than half of all 4,354,571 ballots were cast before Election Day – 56% through in-person voting at Early Voting centers and another 5% through mail-in absentee ballots. The 12 counties where the highest percent of ballots were cast during Early Voting split 6 for McCain, 6 for Obama.

- All 7 of the big urban counties, each with more than 170,000 voting-age adults, favored Obama and swayed the state toward the Democrats. Except for Wake and Forsyth, they did not have strong turnouts, but they accounted for 300,000 of the 650,000 net new voters added to the rolls in 2008. (Nearly one million new voters signed up in 2008, but after changes due to deaths, moves, etc., the net increase was 654,000.)

- While blacks make up 21% of the voting-age population, they were 36% of the 253,000 voters who cast ballots through the use of the new Same-Day Registration law, which allows a citizen to register (or update an old registration) and vote at the same time during the Early Voting period.

- Military and university counties posted the biggest percentage gains in registered voters.

The study uses data from the State Board of Elections and Census Bureau to rank counties on 10 indicators. The rankings produced a composite score that Democracy North Carolina used to give the counties a final rank for overall voter activism in 2008. The ten indicators, and the top five counties in each one, are:

1. Percent of registered voters casting a ballot: Chatham, Davie, Moore, Forsyth, Alleghany
2. Percent of voting-age population casting a ballot: Watauga, Orange, Martin, Polk, Durham
3. Percent of voting-age population registered: Watauga, Graham, Orange, Madison, Martin
4. Percent of net gain in voter registration during 2008: Pitt, Durham, Cumberland, Orange, Hoke
5. Percent of registered whites who voted: Chatham, Davie, Greene, Moore, Wake
6. Percent of registered blacks who voted: Alleghany, Person, Davie, Lee, Granville
7. Percent of Democrats who voted: Chatham, Person, Wake, Lee, Greene
8. Percent of Republicans who voted: Davie, Moore, Alleghany, Yadkin, Forsyth
9. Percent of Unaffiliated who voted: Chatham, Wake, Moore, Transylvania, Davie
10. Percent of ballots cast using in-person Early Voting: Durham, Lee, Pender, Pasquotank, Orange

A county's ranking on the first two indicators were double counted and added to rankings on the other eight to produce a composite score and overall voter participation ranking for each county. (Not all the rankings in the group's database are included in the score, just the 10 named above.)