



Election Official Intimidation and Harassment

*Since the 2020 General Election, violent threats, dis- and misinformation, partisan pressure, and the workloads of Election Officials have dramatically increased around the country and in North Carolina (1). **More than 1 in 3 local Election Officials report experiencing threats, harassment, or abuse** (2). Many threats go unreported, fail to be escalated or followed up on by law enforcement, creating serious gaps in protecting Election Officials (3). Intimidation and harassment of Election Officials is a threat to fair, free, and safe elections.*

Who are Election Officials?

- The term “election officials” is broadly defined and includes all those involved in the election process including but not limited to: Precinct Judges, Poll workers/Assistants at the polls (early voting and Election Day), County Board of Elections (CBOE) staff and board members, and State Board of Election (SBOE) staff and board members (4).
- In North Carolina, Election Officials typically must be registered voters in either the precinct or county they wish to serve. Some are professionals, hired year-round or part-time to work on daily election administration tasks, like maintaining voter roles, securing voting equipment, answering voter questions, and recruiting poll workers.

What Threats Are Election Officials Receiving in North Carolina?

- Three Democratic members of the NC State Board of Elections were personally targeted in an ad campaign paid for by the “Fair Election Fund” after they voted to continue investigating whether voters who signed petitions for new political parties were misled before a final vote to recognize them (5).
- In Onslow County, after the polls closed on 2024 Primary Election Day, a voter attacked poll workers, creating a hostile environment where the Sheriff was required to respond (6).
- The Surry County Republican Party’s Chair aggressively confronted the local Elections Director, threatening to get her fired or have her pay decreased on multiple occasions after he demanded illegal access to the County’s vote tabulators (7).



- Although NC law prohibits modems in voting machines, the NC General Assembly’s “Freedom Caucus” has threatened the NC State Board of Elections to provide them with illegal access to open and inspect voting machines to see if they can connect to the internet (8). The Freedom Caucus has also threatened to bring armed law enforcement to the Durham County Board of Elections for the same purpose (9).
- In 2020, election officials in Wake County reported facing stalking, attempts to enter restricted areas where precinct workers were returning results, and harassment while walking to their cars and through emails (10).
- Wayne County’s Elections Director called law enforcement after a person insisted on staying at the office to watch ballots being counted even though there was no ballot counting happening at that time (11).

What Legal Protections Exist to Keep Election Officials Safe in North Carolina?

- NC State and County Board of Elections members are required to take an oath to faithfully uphold and support state and federal law (12). Every Election Official working at the polling place, from Chief Judges to ballot counters, must also take an oath similar to Election Board members, including that they cannot “persuade or induce any voter to vote for or against any particular candidate or proposition.” (13)
- NC State law prohibits any act to intimidate or threaten an Election Official in their duty to register voters or conduct an election (14).
- The Chief Judge and Judges have broad powers to enforce “peace and good order” at the polling place, including to request law enforcement to help them enforce the law and, when needed, order the arrest of any person violating election laws (15).
- Any person who disturbs the legal duties of any Election Board member or any Chief Judge or Judge and/or points a firearm at any person (either in fun or otherwise) may face criminal penalties (16).

What Actions Are the Federal Government and Other States Taking to Protect Election Officials?

- Federal Laws, like the “Ku Klux Klan Act,” protect Election Officials from force, intimidation, or threats preventing them from carrying out federal election duties (17).



- In the Summer of 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice launched a Task Force to address threats of violence against Election Officials (18)
 - Since its creation, the Election Threats Task Force has reviewed over 1,000 reports from election officials and workers who have received various hostile or harassing activities (19).
 - At least 16 people have been held accountable who threatened to harm and use violence against Election Officials and their families (20).
- Several state legislatures have introduced and/or passed legislation to protect Election Officials from harassment and intimidation:
 - Washington, Maine, and Oregon have increased fines and incarceration periods for offenders of election official intimidation (21).
 - Vermont proposed legislation that would make prosecution of offenders easier by eliminating barriers that typically exist for accusations of harassment (22).
 - Arizona, Oregon, Washington, and California protect election workers' private information, hiding their home addresses from public records and being included in other confidentiality programs (23).
 - Maine requires election officials to be trained in de-escalation tactics (24).

What Actions Can North Carolina Take to Protect Election Officials?

- **Pass the Safeguard Fair Elections Act.** In North Carolina, new legislation seeks to provide increased protections for Election Officials from intimidation, prevent unauthorized interference with the election process, and provide funding for security training and tracking threats (25).
 - Introduced in 2022 and 2023, the Safeguard Fair Elections Act (Senate Bill 313), if it becomes law, will create new protections for the personal information of Election Officials and their immediate family by allowing them to request that information, including addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses be prohibited from public disclosure.
 - The bill adds protections for Election Officials, who act in good faith, to prevent election interference or preserve ballot access.
 - It also requires the NC Department of Justice and Public Safety to track and prevent threats to Election Officials.



- **Fully Fund Our Elections.** Providing robust and consistent funding to the State Board and County Boards of Elections is a critical tool in protecting election officials.
 - In recent years, funding for staff and election security specialists has decreased while election administration costs have drastically increased, like postage, facility rentals, and voting equipment.
 - Sustained funding is needed to provide election officials with livable wages that reflect the reality of the job duties and responsibilities (26).
 - Polling shows “more than 4 in 5 local election officials need their budgets to grow to keep up with their administration and security needs.” (27)
 - Estimated costs nationwide for local election officials to purchase key card access restrictions and camera surveillance systems is \$102 million (28).
- **Report Mis- and Disinformation.** The persistent spread of mis- and disinformation puts Election Officials at risk of baseless attacks and damages the public’s trust in elections.
 - Election Directors have expressed concern about the effect of mis- and disinformation on voters and named it as a contributing factor to a hostile and high-pressure work environment (29).
 - Deceptive messages, like robocalls or robotext, and political advertisements with AI-generated content, may target election officials as bad actors when carrying out their job duties as required by law (30).
 - The public can report deceptive messages and misinformation to the NC Department of Justice and NC State Board of Elections, and lawmakers must pass protective legislation that requires a disclaimer for when political advertisements and digital and social communications use AI-generated content.



End Notes

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14. N.C.G.S. § 163-175(11).
15. N.C.G.S. § 163-48; *see also* “Voter Intimidation,” NC State Board of Elections, <https://tinyurl.com/bdddc588>.
16. N.C.G.S. §§ 163-472(5), 14-34; *see also* “North Carolina Preventing and Responding to Illegal Armed Voter Intimidation and Election Interference,” EveryTownLaw (2020), <https://tinyurl.com/2t8t9bx>.
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