



**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
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For more information,
call Jack Betts
at 919-832-2839

NEWS RELEASE

**Center Recommends Improvements in Voter Registration
and Elections Process**

Less than three-fourths of North Carolina's eligible population registers to vote, and even fewer -- barely four out of every 10 voters -- go to the polls regularly, says the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research in a study released today. In the latest issue of its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight, the Center makes 10 recommendations to improve the state's voter registration and election process and boost participation in elections.

"If you wanted to discourage people from voting, just do what North Carolina did in the 1990 election," says Jack Betts, editor of the magazine and author of the article on election law changes. Betts' article recounts long lines in urban areas like Raleigh and Charlotte, not enough registration books in some precincts in Guilford County, machines that wouldn't work in Durham County, a shortage of ballots in Orange County, mishandling of voter registration, attempts at intimidation, last-minute court orders to keep polls open late, and a handful of lawsuits.

"No wonder more people don't vote," adds Betts. "We've made it too hard to register and too hard to vote in North Carolina. In the computer age, we should be finding ways to make voting easier, not harder -- and faster, not slower."

The last election highlighted the problems with voting participation and process in the state. Turnout appeared to be fairly good for a non-presidential election -- 62 percent of registered voters -- but only two-thirds of those old enough to vote are registered. That means that only about 41 percent of the state's voting-age population voted in 1990. In the most recent presidential election (1988), turnout was little better -- 43.4 percent, or 47th in the nation. North Carolina's voting-age population -- citizens at least 18 years old -- totaled more than 5 million in the 1990 census, but only 3.3 million citizens are actually registered voters.

The Center reports that voting rates nationally, regionally, and in North Carolina have been declining steadily for 30 years. But North Carolina's voting rate trails the average for the South as well as for the rest of the country. And the United States' voting rate usually ranks low among democratic nations.

One reason for the relatively poor voter registration level is that it's not easy to register in North Carolina. States with higher voting rates use such devices as postcard registration and automatic registration at state motor vehicle departments (called motor-voter registration). Some states allow election-day registration, and one state, North Dakota, requires no voter registration at all.

Another reason for North Carolina's relatively low voting rate is that the state doesn't have a uniform system of voting. Five different methods of voting are allowed -- paper ballots, electronic machines, lever machines, punch cards, and optical scanners -- and some counties use more than one method. There is no statewide standard for how many voter registration books or voting machines must be in each precinct, and not one county in North Carolina has made use of the latest computer system technology in registering and voting.

"The last time we had a uniform system of voting in North Carolina was when we had only paper ballots," observes Alex K. Brock, the long-time director of elections and executive secretary of the N.C. State Board of Elections. Adds William B.A. Culp Jr., supervisor of elections for Mecklenburg County, "There are 100 different elections systems in North Carolina" -- one for each county.

Based on the practices of other states and on the experience of state and local officials in operating North Carolina's elections -- but recognizing the current budget problems facing the state -- the Center recommends 10 steps the state should take to achieve two goals -- (A) stimulate voter registration, and (B) increase citizen participation in elections and improve the elections process. Voter registration recommendations include:

Goal A. The N.C. General Assembly should enact legislation to stimulate voter registration.

1. **The General Assembly should enact legislation allowing mail or postcard registration for new voters.** Twenty-six states register voters by mail, and the results in those states have been good. In the 1988 election, the top 10 states in terms of voter turnout all had mail registration programs. House Bill 106, which provides for postcard registration, is pending in the House Appropriations Committee. The General Assembly's Fiscal Research Division estimates postcard registration would cost about \$116,000 in the 1991-93 biennium.

2. **The N.C. General Assembly should approve appropriations to revive the Computerized Voter Registration File begun in 1987 in the Department of the Secretary of State and transfer it to the State Board of Elections.** The General Assembly should consider whether the file would work better as a part of the independent State Board of Elections, because the file would assist state election officials in clearing up any questions about mail registration. State Elections Director Brock has said a central registry would be needed to simplify administration and prevent fraud in mail registration, and the Computerized Voter Registration File would be vital to a successful program of mail registration. The computer file remains authorized in state law, but would require new appropriations to breathe life into it. The Secretary of State's Office said two years ago that it would need \$35,000 in new state funds to determine how to improve the file, and \$60,000 to provide assistance to the counties to set up the file properly.

3. **The legislature should improve the state's existing motor-voter program by making voter registration applications a part of the license and vehicle permit process.** House Bill 105, pending in the House Appropriations Committee, would make this change. The Fiscal Research Division estimates that expanding the motor-voter program would cost \$166,200 in the 1991-93 biennium. States with motor-voter registration programs have shown good results in recent elections. In the 1988 election, two of the top three states in terms of voter turnout had motor-voter registration, and North Carolina's existing motor-voter program has become a

significant source of new registrations, state officials say. "The greatest single producer of new registrations is now DMV [Division of Motor Vehicles]," says Brock.

But the program could do a better job enrolling new voters by making a voter registration application a part of the same government form that is used for driver's license and motor vehicle permits. The General Assembly also should make voter registration services available to any citizen who goes to Division of Motor Vehicle offices, regardless of whether those persons have other business with DMV. Under the current program, citizens can register to vote at DMV offices only if they have other business with the division, such as a driver's license exam, renewal, or change of address.

4. The state should enact legislation extending voter-registration programs by requiring public agencies -- such as county departments of social services and public health -- to offer registration assistance, and provide funds to pay for personnel to offer that service. North Carolina has already extended its voter registration programs to motor vehicle offices and to public libraries, and would benefit from extending them to other public agencies as well -- including all schools, social services offices, health departments, and similar public agencies. Thirteen states have such programs. Of the top 10 voting states in the 1988 elections, five were states that registered voters at such public offices. In extending voter registration services, however, the state will incur some expenses in personnel time and staff training for those who will perform the registration services.

5. The General Assembly should move deadlines for registering to vote closer to elections -- preferably from the current 21 days prior to an election to either seven or 10 working days prior to an election. This would allow registration by those voters who get motivated to vote in an election only during the final days of the campaign. Sixteen states have shorter registration deadlines than North Carolina. Four of the top-10 voting states in 1988 either allowed voters to register as late as election day, or did not require registration at all, while two other of the top-10 voting states had deadlines of 10 days or fewer. Senate Bill 485, passed by the Senate and pending in the House Courts Committee, in part would provide for 15-day deadlines for registering. **Also, motor-voter registrars and other public agency registrars should be required to offer voter registration services using the same deadlines for registration.**

"These recommendations are aimed specifically at improving the voter registration process," says Betts. "But there are key steps the state should also take to improve the voting process itself and make it easier for our people to vote." The Center's voting process recommendations include:

Goal B. The N.C. General Assembly should adopt new legislation to improve the voting process and increase citizen participation in elections.

6. The General Assembly should create a new state elections policy that would phase in a uniform system of casting votes in each of the 2,416 precincts spread over the 100 counties, while maintaining substantial local control of elections. State Elections Director Alex Brock has recommended on four occasions that North Carolina adopt a uniform system of voting, and has called on the state to provide half the funding. Brock estimates such a system would cost the state at least \$30 million and the counties an equal sum. **Because of limited funds in 1991, the legislature should consider ways the state can assist counties, in financial and other ways, to switch to a uniform system over an eight-year period, so that by the general election**

of 2000, the state will have its first uniform system of voting since the 1940s when all 100 counties used paper ballots. Such a system should include a statewide standard for registration books, voting machines, and other equipment and materials to be available in each precinct on voting day.

7. The General Assembly should create a study commission -- comprising members of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, local elections officials, local government officials, and the general public -- to study what sort of election system would be best for North Carolina in the 21st century, and how high-technology applications might improve the voter registration and voting process. This study commission should report to the 1995 General Assembly. And the state should adopt a goal of registering 90 percent of voting-age North Carolinians by the year 2000 and of increasing presidential election-year turnout to 65 percent of the voting age population.

"We've got a lot of rules and procedures designed to make sure that it's not easy to register and not easy to vote," notes Betts, "but our problem is too few people trying to register and vote -- not too many."

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study public policy issues facing North Carolina and evaluate state government programs. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Other funding comes from seven other foundations, 120 corporate contributors, and more than 600 individual and organizational members. In addition to publishing North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center has conducted studies on disparities in funding among rich and poor school districts in North Carolina, campaign finance, mountain-area land-use and management, and a comparison of the formal powers of all 50 governors.

Copies of the issue of Insight magazine containing the research on voter registration and elections can be obtained from the Center for \$6.30, plus \$1 for postage and handling. Call (919) 832-2839, or write the N.C. Center, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, N.C. 27602.

For more information, call Jack Betts at the Center at 919-832-2839.

Table 3. Population and Voting Statistics by N.C. County for 1990 General Election

County	Total Population	Voting Age Population	Number of Voting Age as % of Total	Number of Registered Voters	Registered Voters as % of Eligible	Votes Cast	Voters as % of those Registered	Voters as % of those Eligible
Alamance	108,213	84,538	78.1%	55,675	65.9%	36,252	65.1%	42.9%
Alexander	27,544	20,771	75.4%	18,059	86.9%	12,599	69.8%	60.7%
Alleghany	9,590	7,535	78.6%	5,912	78.5%	4,072	68.9%	54.0%
Anson	23,474	17,130	73.0%	11,352	66.3%	7,241	63.8%	42.3%
Ashe	22,209	17,406	78.4%	14,724	84.6%	9,566	65.0%	55.0%
Avery	14,867	11,529	77.5%	8,812	76.4%	5,611	63.7%	48.7%
Beaufort	42,283	31,328	74.1%	20,120	64.2%	12,451	61.9%	39.7%
Bertie	20,388	14,547	71.4%	10,831	74.5%	5,814	53.7%	40.0%
Bladen	28,663	21,057	73.5%	15,058	71.5%	8,168	54.2%	38.8%
Brunswick	50,985	38,960	76.4%	27,743	71.2%	16,850	60.7%	43.2%
Buncombe	174,821	135,886	77.7%	97,107	71.5%	59,011	60.8%	43.4%
Burke	75,744	57,937	76.5%	37,904	65.4%	24,506	64.7%	42.3%
Cabarrus	98,935	75,038	75.8%	50,822	67.7%	32,344	63.6%	43.1%
Caldwell	70,709	54,022	76.4%	34,143	63.2%	20,756	60.8%	38.4%
Camden	5,904	4,469	75.7%	3,349	74.9%	2,027	60.5%	45.4%
Carteret	52,556	40,749	77.5%	26,289	64.5%	16,461	62.6%	40.4%
Caswell	20,693	15,774	76.2%	10,902	69.1%	6,842	62.8%	43.4%
Catawba	118,412	90,127	76.1%	59,000	65.5%	38,796	65.8%	43.0%
Chatham	38,759	30,073	77.6%	22,292	74.1%	14,988	67.2%	49.8%
Cherokee	20,170	15,599	77.3%	12,844	82.3%	6,675	52.0%	42.8%
Chowan	13,506	9,970	73.8%	6,729	67.5%	3,851	57.2%	38.6%
Clay	7,155	5,540	77.4%	5,434	98.1%	3,787	69.7%	68.4%
Cleveland	84,714	63,940	75.5%	38,984	61.0%	24,181	62.0%	37.8%
Columbus	49,587	35,986	72.6%	28,584	79.4%	16,330	57.1%	45.4%
Craven	81,613	59,570	73.0%	33,687	56.6%	20,071	59.6%	33.7%
Cumberland	274,566	197,792	72.0%	87,376	44.2%	50,399	57.7%	25.5%
Currituck	13,736	10,242	74.6%	6,374	62.2%	3,709	58.2%	36.2%
Dare	22,746	17,657	77.6%	12,304	69.7%	7,888	64.1%	44.7%
Davidson	126,677	96,357	76.1%	60,866	63.2%	37,946	62.3%	39.4%
Davie	27,859	21,333	76.6%	14,983	70.2%	10,263	68.5%	48.1%
Duplin	39,995	29,441	73.6%	19,619	66.6%	11,898	60.6%	40.4%
Durham	181,835	140,425	77.2%	103,502	73.7%	64,984	62.8%	46.3%
Edgecombe	56,558	40,539	71.7%	29,406	72.5%	18,619	63.3%	45.9%
Forsyth	265,878	205,470	77.3%	143,015	69.6%	89,580	62.6%	43.6%
Franklin	36,414	27,577	75.7%	17,681	64.1%	11,811	66.8%	42.8%
Gaston	175,093	130,910	74.8%	76,748	58.6%	46,797	61.0%	35.7%
Gates	9,305	6,932	74.5%	5,066	73.1%	2,790	55.1%	40.2%
Graham	7,196	5,499	76.4%	5,593	101.7%	3,610	64.5%	65.6%
Granville	38,345	29,108	75.9%	16,335	56.1%	10,709	65.6%	36.8%
Greene	15,384	11,391	74.0%	7,572	66.5%	4,965	65.6%	43.6%
Guilford	347,420	269,703	77.6%	199,856	74.1%	118,169	59.1%	43.8%
Halifax	55,516	40,191	72.4%	25,959	64.6%	15,152	58.4%	37.7%
Harnett	67,822	50,536	74.5%	25,550	50.6%	16,616	65.0%	32.9%
Haywood	46,942	37,196	79.2%	27,153	73.0%	15,555	57.3%	41.8%
Henderson	69,285	54,708	79.0%	39,914	73.0%	24,016	60.2%	43.9%
Hertford	22,523	16,416	72.9%	13,462	82.0%	7,007	52.1%	42.7%
Hoke	22,856	15,878	69.5%	8,554	53.9%	5,329	62.3%	33.6%
Hyde	5,411	4,052	74.9%	3,226	79.6%	1,795	55.6%	44.3%
Iredell	92,931	70,496	75.9%	47,320	67.1%	29,671	62.7%	42.1%
Jackson	26,846	21,434	79.8%	15,495	72.3%	8,822	56.9%	41.2%
Johnston	81,306	61,203	75.3%	37,820	61.8%	24,040	63.6%	39.3%

County	Total Population	Voting Age Population	Number of Voting Age as % of Total	Number of Registered Voters	Registered Voters as % of Eligible	Votes Cast	Voters as % of those Registered	Voters as % of those Eligible
Jones	9,414	6,911	73.4%	5,172	74.8%	3,377	65.3%	48.9%
Lee	41,374	30,618	74.0%	18,588	60.7%	10,908	58.7%	35.6%
Lenoir	57,274	42,389	74.0%	26,428	62.3%	16,167	61.2%	38.1%
Lincoln	50,319	37,809	75.1%	27,361	72.4%	18,222	66.6%	48.2%
Macon	23,499	18,834	80.1%	14,481	76.9%	8,712	60.2%	46.3%
Madison	16,953	13,256	78.2%	10,912	82.3%	7,464	68.4%	56.3%
Martin	25,078	18,384	73.3%	11,774	64.0%	7,095	60.3%	38.6%
McDowell	35,681	27,153	76.1%	17,804	65.6%	10,255	57.6%	37.8%
Mecklenburg	511,433	387,980	75.9%	281,392	72.5%	179,086	63.6%	46.2%
Mitchell	14,433	11,324	78.5%	10,284	90.8%	5,482	53.3%	48.4%
Montgomery	23,346	17,325	74.2%	12,375	71.4%	7,543	61.0%	43.5%
Moore	59,013	45,677	77.4%	32,377	70.9%	22,151	68.4%	48.5%
Nash	76,677	57,107	74.5%	36,646	64.2%	23,192	63.3%	40.6%
New Hanover	120,284	92,923	77.3%	60,644	65.3%	35,814	59.1%	38.5%
Northampton	20,798	15,595	75.0%	12,624	80.9%	7,547	59.8%	48.4%
Onslow	149,838	113,534	75.8%	31,734	28.0%	19,256	60.7%	17.0%
Orange	93,851	76,104	81.1%	57,458	75.5%	37,772	65.7%	49.6%
Pamlico	11,372	8,662	76.2%	6,521	75.3%	4,468	68.5%	51.6%
Pasquotank	31,298	22,829	72.9%	13,526	59.2%	7,602	56.2%	33.3%
Pender	28,855	21,742	75.3%	14,752	67.9%	9,355	63.4%	43.0%
Perquimans	10,447	7,875	75.4%	5,365	68.1%	3,066	57.1%	38.9%
Person	30,180	22,761	75.4%	13,323	58.5%	8,571	64.3%	37.7%
Pitt	107,924	81,820	75.8%	52,188	63.8%	31,592	60.5%	38.6%
Polk	14,416	11,623	80.6%	9,737	83.8%	5,466	56.1%	47.0%
Randolph	106,546	80,829	75.9%	50,585	62.6%	30,576	60.4%	37.8%
Richmond	44,518	32,745	73.6%	21,349	65.2%	12,726	59.6%	38.9%
Robeson	105,179	72,903	69.3%	53,874	73.9%	26,543	49.3%	36.4%
Rockingham	86,064	65,632	76.3%	40,138	61.2%	23,652	58.9%	36.0%
Rowan	110,605	84,409	76.3%	52,647	62.4%	32,470	61.7%	38.5%
Rutherford	56,918	43,037	75.6%	27,029	62.8%	16,603	61.4%	38.6%
Sampson	47,297	34,852	73.7%	26,156	75.0%	17,493	66.9%	50.2%
Scot and	33,754	23,823	70.6%	15,288	64.2%	6,654	43.5%	27.9%
Stanly	51,765	39,064	75.5%	26,752	68.5%	18,199	68.0%	46.6%
Stokes	37,223	28,146	75.6%	21,468	76.3%	14,044	65.4%	49.9%
Surry	61,704	47,583	77.1%	30,083	63.2%	17,662	58.7%	37.1%
Swain	11,268	8,413	74.7%	8,010	95.2%	3,722	46.5%	44.2%
Transylvania	25,520	19,948	78.2%	16,293	81.7%	10,476	64.3%	52.5%
Tyrrell	3,856	2,792	72.4%	2,140	76.6%	1,321	61.7%	47.3%
Union	84,211	61,201	72.7%	39,926	65.2%	24,925	62.4%	40.7%
Vance	38,892	28,497	73.3%	18,588	65.2%	11,322	60.9%	39.7%
Wake	423,380	325,565	76.9%	231,053	71.0%	152,018	65.8%	46.7%
Warren	17,265	12,916	74.8%	10,385	80.4%	6,642	64.0%	51.4%
Washington	13,997	10,116	72.3%	7,514	74.3%	4,242	56.5%	41.9%
Watauga	36,952	30,630	82.9%	24,818	81.0%	14,871	59.9%	48.6%
Wayne	104,666	77,296	73.9%	38,592	49.9%	24,757	64.2%	32.0%
Wilkes	59,393	45,423	76.5%	35,371	77.9%	20,201	57.1%	44.5%
Wilson	66,061	48,833	73.9%	31,722	65.0%	18,895	59.6%	38.7%
Yadkin	30,488	23,648	77.6%	15,679	66.3%	9,855	62.9%	41.7%
Yancey	15,419	11,985	77.7%	11,604	96.8%	8,163	70.4%	68.1%
TOTAL	6,628,637	5,022,488	75.8%	3,347,635	66.7%	2,069,585	61.8%	41.2%

Sources: Population figures from 1990 census; registration and voting figures from certification by the State Board of Elections.

Prepared by David Tomberlin, North Carolina Center intern

**Table 6. Ranking of States Based on Voting Age Population (VAP)
Turnout, 1988 Presidential Election**

Rank	State	% VAP Voted 1988	Rank	State	% VAP Voted 1988
1	Minnesota	66.3	26	Alaska	52.0
2	Montana	62.4	27	Louisiana	51.3
3	Maine	62.2	28	Delaware	51.0
4	Wisconsin	62.0	29	Wyoming	50.3
5	North Dakota	61.5	30	Pennsylvania	50.1
tie	South Dakota	61.5	31	Mississippi	49.9
7	Utah	60.0	32	Maryland	49.1
8	Iowa	59.3	33	Oklahoma	48.7
9	Vermont	59.1	34	Virginia	48.2
10	Oregon	58.6	tie	Kentucky	48.2
11	Idaho	58.3	36	New York	48.1
12	Massachusetts	58.1	37	New Mexico	47.4
13	Connecticut	57.9	tie	California	47.4
14	Nebraska	56.7	39	Arkansas	47.0
15	Colorado	55.1	40	West Virginia	46.7
tie	Ohio	55.1	41	Alabama	45.8
17	Missouri	54.8	42	Arizona	45.0
tie	New Hampshire	54.8	43	Nevada	44.9
19	Washington	54.6	44	Florida	44.8
20	Kansas	54.3	45	Tennessee	44.7
21	Michigan	54.0	46	Texas	44.2
22	Illinois	53.3	47	North Carolina	43.4
tie	Indiana	53.3	48	Hawaii	43.0
24	Rhode Island	53.0	49	South Carolina	38.9
25	New Jersey	52.2	50	Georgia	38.8

Source: Committee for the Study of the American Electorate