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Policy Research Center Says North Carolina Must Improve Voter Participation and Accuracy

North Carolina ranks among the nation's laggards in an area where it should be a leader – in turning out to vote on election day, says the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research. The state ranks 34th in turnout of the voting age population. The Center today issued a study of the state's voter turnout record since 1960, compared North Carolina's election laws with 49 other states, and documented the voting methods used in all 100 N.C. counties. The Center also outlines a series of reforms aimed at boosting turnout and making sure state elections officials can produce an accurate count once ballots are cast.

"North Carolina is not the worst, but we're far from first in voter turnout," says Mike McLaughlin, editor of the Center's *North Carolina Insight* magazine in which the study appears. "Our first challenge is getting more people out to the polls on election day. Our second challenge is assuring that once ballots are cast, every vote counts."

The Center offers eight recommendations to encourage voter participation, including an education campaign to stimulate interest in registering *and* voting. The campaign would have dual goals of *registering* 90 percent of North Carolina's voting age population and increasing *turnout* among the voting age population to at least 65 percent by 2008. This would place the state in the top 10 in voter turnout. In addition, the Center recommends gradually moving the deadline for voter registration closer to election day and then allowing election-day registration in 2006. The Center also endorses legislation to guarantee employees time off to vote. Of the top 10 states in voter turnout, seven offer some time off for state employees, private sector employees, or both without penalty of losing their pay or job. And, the Center recommends more aggressive experimentation with voting by mail and via the Internet.

To ensure the accuracy of the count, the Center offers four recommendations. The most significant one is to replace the current patchwork system of five different methods of voting with a uniform system that employs direct recording electronic devices, the latest technology. The Center also recommends lengthening the terms of members of county boards of elections and precinct election judges from two years to four years and more training for local elections officials by encouraging completion of the state Certification in Elections program for all members of county board of elections.

"North Carolinians need a reminder that they have a civic duty to inform themselves about the candidates and then vote in elections," says the Center's McLaughlin, author of the report. "That's part of having a vibrant democracy. If North Carolina can aspire to have the nation's best public schools, universities, and collegiate basketball teams, then we can shoot for the top 10 in voter participation too."

N.C. Voter Participation Better, But Still Has Room To Improve

The new study follows up on the Center's previous study of voter participation published in 1991. At that time, the state ranked 47th in turnout. The Center then made nine recommendations to improve turnout, five of which were adopted in whole or in part, and the state now has moved up to rank 34th in voter turnout. In the 2000 Presidential election, 50.2 percent of the voting age population cast ballots. However, the national average is 51 percent, and North Carolina's record of voter turnout in non-Presidential elections is especially poor. In the 2002 general election, even with an open U.S. Senate seat on the ballot, only 36.4 percent of North Carolina's voting age population went to the polls.

The North Carolina Progress Board, in its "North Carolina 2020" report, called on the state to improve its voter turnout to 85 percent of *registered* voters by the year 2020. That's a huge jump from the 58.2 percent of *registered* voters who cast ballots in the 2000 presidential election or the 46.2 percent of *registered* voters who cast ballots in the 2002 general election. Also advocating for improvements in the state's conduct of elections, the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham recently gave North Carolina an overall grade of C on such issues as registration rate, registration deadline, voter turnout, and uncounted votes. Only one state in the South, Louisiana, received a B, and Mississippi got an F.

Advocates for higher election-day turnout see a movement toward greater civic participation as holding the potential to strengthen democracy. Sen. Fletcher Hartsell (R-Cabarrus) says, "I'd rather have an informed voter, but the nature of democracy is, whether you are informed or not, you ought to vote." One Center recommendation that may help inform the electorate is a Voter's Information Guide to be published by the State Board of Elections that would be sent to the household of every registered voter. Such nonpartisan publications provide unbiased information on issues and candidates and are characteristic of many high-turnout states. Voter Information Guides are distributed in Alaska, California, Oregon, and Washington, as well as parts of Minnesota, New York, and Texas.

North Carolina has greatly increased its number of registered voters, but the result has been an increased gap between the number who register to vote and those who actually vote. North Carolina's voter registration numbers exceeded the national average at 81 percent of the voting age population for the 2000 presidential election. However, only 50.2 percent of the voting age population actually cast ballots.

Rep. Martha Alexander (D-Mecklenburg) is among those who believe that new registrants may not be making the connection between registering and voting. "If I had never voted before and never registered, it might just go right over me," she says. "There's not a connection there." She says registration drives should also include a nonpartisan plea that the registrant actually vote, as well as guidance on how to do so. She is one of the principal sponsors of legislation to implement election-day registration in North Carolina.

Characteristics of States With High Voter Turnout

The Center's year-long study examines all 50 state election laws and focuses on characteristics and laws that the states with high voter turnout have in common. First, these states generally found ways to make voting easier, while some of the lowest performing states – many of them in the South – had a history of putting up obstacles to voting.

Of the top 11 voter participation states in the 2000 election, five have election-day voter registration – Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. One state, North Dakota, does not require voters to register at all. In North Carolina, would-be voters must register at least 25 days, or more than three weeks before the election. In addition, two of the top four voter participation states (Alaska and Minnesota)

offer *state* employees time off to vote and three of the four (Alaska, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) offer *private* sector employees time off to vote. North Carolina offers neither. Some of the states with high voter participation also experiment more with ways to help people become informed and vote, allowing such innovations as voting by mail (Oregon) and experiments with Internet voting (Alaska).

“The top performing states in voter turnout share a mindset of wanting people to vote, and that mindset is reflected in their policies,” says the Center’s McLaughlin. “It may be election day registration. It may be time off with pay to cast a ballot. It may even be a willingness to experiment with casting a ballot by mail or over the Internet. But their common goal is to have more people informed and voting.”

Making the Process More Voter Friendly

The Center praises the legislature and the State Board of Elections for the enactment and implementation of laws allowing voter registration at drivers license offices and introducing one-stop, no excuse absentee voting. According to the N.C. State Board of Elections, approximately 393,000 North Carolina voters (13.5 percent of all voters) used the one-stop option in the November 2000 elections, the first time it was available. In the 2002 non-presidential general election, 7.1 percent of North Carolinians voted no-excuse, one-stop. The total rose to 9.1 percent when all mail-in ballots were included.

Gary Bartlett, executive director of the State Board of Elections, believes the move toward increased convenience in voting represents the wave of the future. “I think in time these early additional voting sites will take the place of the [conventional] polling place and stay open through the election,” says Bartlett. “People will go to a big voting center or do a mail ballot or eventually will have the opportunity to vote by Internet.” Already, he says, overseas military personnel are taking advantage of the opportunity to vote using a combination of fax and e-mail correspondence as distinguished from traditional mail-in ballots. Bartlett anticipates that such convenient voting methods will become an increasingly large share of the electorate until it takes over altogether. Still, says Bartlett, “we want to be on the leading edge, not the bleeding edge” of reforms.

Although not uncommon in venues like corporate elections, where stockholders typically vote by mail, voting by mail as a means to increase participation in statewide or national elections is a relatively new phenomenon. Currently, only Oregon uses the mail as its primary means of casting a ballot. One benefit of voting by mail is the opportunity it gives voters to become well informed about all of the issues on the ballot. The ballot typically arrives weeks before election day, giving voters a chance to study the issues and candidates on the ballot and make more informed decisions. Voters also receive an issues pamphlet distributed to everyone who is registered and in multiple languages. The pamphlet includes biographies of the candidates, their own descriptions of their positions on the issues, and the pros and cons of any referenda or other questions on the ballot. Oregon’s voter turnout rate of 60.5 percent of the voting age population using vote-by-mail exceeds North Carolina’s 50.2 percent. The Center recommends experimenting with vote-by-mail to determine if it holds potential to increase voter turnout.

Ensuring Accuracy in Counting Votes

In addition to efforts to increase voter turnout, the Center examines ways to assure that votes could be counted accurately in a close election. Currently, North Carolina has a patchwork of five different methods of voting used in its 100 counties. The dangers inherent in such a system were exposed in the 2000 presidential election in Florida, where the world watched while elections officials attempted to decipher the results of an election that was too close to call.

Can an Election Debacle Like Florida in 2000 Happen Here?

The State Board of Elections points out that North Carolina has four safeguards that Florida lacks. First, North Carolina does not use butterfly ballots. Second, North Carolina allows provisional ballots so that people whose names do not show up on the registration rolls can go on and cast their ballot on election day, with their eligibility checked later. Third, all appeals here follow the same path – first to the State Board of Elections and then to Wake County Superior Court – whereas Florida allows appeals to courts in any county, increasing the likelihood of conflicting opinions. Fourth, North Carolina's State Board of Elections has the authority to call for a new election – the only board with such authority in the nation.

Many of the 2000 election problems focused on Palm Beach County, Florida, where a punch card voting system using a poorly designed “butterfly” ballot left the voter's intent unclear on thousands of ballots. Issues such as what type of voting machine to use typically are decided at the county level in Florida and in North Carolina. However, one lesson for North Carolina that could be drawn from Florida's experience is that states with wide variations in voting systems could confront problems in a similarly close election.

North Carolina uses five different voting systems. These include hand-counted paper ballots (two counties), mechanical lever devices (four counties), punch card devices (eight counties), direct recording electronic devices (35 counties), and optical scan systems that read a ballot (51 counties). Lever machines are no longer manufactured, forcing counties to use Q-tips, toothpicks, and garbage bag twist ties to hold them together. Bartlett says the State Board of Elections considers voting machines in 18 of the state's 100 counties to be in need of replacement and facing immediate risk of failure.

Direct recording electronic devices, which can be programmed like banks' automatic teller machines, currently represent the state of the art in voting equipment. However, many counties find the price tag too high. Given disparities in wealth among counties, some states are taking it upon themselves to provide uniform systems of voting. Georgia, with a population slightly larger than North Carolina's, spent \$52.3 million to outfit all of its precincts with direct recording electronic voting equipment in 2002. Bartlett says he was impressed with the cost savings Georgia was able to realize by equipping the entire state through a single vendor. Maryland and Oklahoma have taken the same approach.

The Center recommends that the North Carolina General Assembly take the most cost-effective route to move all North Carolina counties toward a uniform system of direct recording electronic devices by 2008. The cost could be spread by providing full funding in 2005 to the two counties using paper ballots, four counties using mechanical lever devices, and eight counties using punch card systems. By 2007, the Center says the state should provide full funding to pay for direct recording electronic voting equipment in the remaining 51 counties currently relying on optical scanning to count ballots.

The Center's McLaughlin says the new federal Help America Vote Act of 2002 will push the state in the direction of the reforms recommended by the Center and will even help pay for them. The U.S. Congress already has appropriated \$1.5 billion for election reform, with more than \$31 million for North Carolina. Much of this money will be used to help bring the state's centralized voter registry into compliance with the federal requirements. This money also can be used for such purposes as replacing mechanical lever and punch card machines, increasing training for poll workers, and improving voter education.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study key public issues facing North Carolina and to evaluate state government programs. The Center receives general operating support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, 11 other foundations, 160 corporate contributors, and almost 900 individual and organizational members across the state.

In addition to publishing *North Carolina Insight*, the Center also publishes a citizens' guide to the legislature, book-length research reports, and textbooks for teachers who teach courses on state and local government. The Center recently has conducted studies on the pros and cons of state lotteries, the charter schools movement in North Carolina, and opportunities and challenges facing Eastern North Carolina. The Center currently is conducting studies on governance of public universities and on family violence in North Carolina.

Copies of the issue of *North Carolina Insight* containing the Center's research on improving voter participation and accuracy in counting votes in North Carolina are available for \$20, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or order through the Center's web site at <http://www.nccppr.org>.

For more information on the Center's study of voter participation in North Carolina, call Mike McLaughlin, editor of *North Carolina Insight*, at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

**Table 5. Ranking of States Based on
Voting Age Population (VAP) Turnout, 2000 Elections**

Rank	State	% VAP Voted	Rank	State	% VAP Voted
1	Minnesota ¹	68.8	tie	Pennsylvania	53.7
2	Maine ¹	67.4	27	Illinois	52.8
3	Wisconsin ¹	66.1	28	Utah	52.7
4	Alaska	64.4	29	Virginia ²	52.0
5	Vermont	63.7	30	Kentucky	51.7
6	New Hampshire ¹	62.3	31	Maryland	51.4
7	Montana	61.5		<i>National Average</i>	<i>51.0</i>
8	Iowa	60.7	32	New Jersey	51.0
9	Oregon	60.5	33	Florida	50.6
10	North Dakota	60.4	34	North Carolina	50.2
11	Wyoming ¹	59.7	35	Alabama	50.0
12	Connecticut	58.3	36	New York	49.3
13	South Dakota	58.2	37	Tennessee ²	49.2
14	Missouri	57.5	38	Indiana	49.1
15	Michigan	57.4	39	Oklahoma	48.8
16	Washington	56.9	40	Mississippi	48.6
17	Colorado	56.8	41	Arkansas	47.8
tie	Massachusetts	56.8	42	New Mexico	47.4
19	Delaware	56.3	43	South Carolina ²	46.5
tie	Nebraska	56.3	44	West Virginia	45.7
21	Ohio	55.7	45	California	44.0
22	Louisiana	54.2	46	Georgia ²	43.8
tie	Rhode Island	54.2	tie	Nevada	43.8
24	Kansas	54.0	48	Texas	43.1
25	Idaho ¹	53.7	49	Arizona	42.1
			50	Hawaii	40.5

¹ Six states with Election Day Registration

² Four states bordering North Carolina

Sources: Center for Voting Democracy and Federal Election Commission

**Table 1. Voter Registration and Participation Rates
in Presidential Elections, 1960–2000,
North Carolina and the Nation**

North Carolina	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Percent Registered	n/a	n/a	63.6	66.5	65.4	64.9	71.2	69.9	73.2	78.2	81.0
Percent VAP ¹ Voting	52.9	52.3	54.4	42.8	43.0	43.4	47.4	43.4	50.1	45.6	50.2
Nation											
Percent Registered	58.2	64.6	67.9	69.1	69.0	68.7	71.2	69.2	70.8	74.4	76.0
Percent Voting	62.8	61.9	60.8	55.2	53.6	52.6	53.1	50.1	55.1	49.1	51.0

¹ VAP Voting = Voting Age Population

Sources: Federal Election Commission, Center for Voting and Democracy,
North Carolina State Board of Elections.

**Table 6. Participation Rates of Voting Age Population in
Presidential Elections (1960–2000) of Seven States with Election Day
Registration or No Registration Compared to U.S. and N.C.**

	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
<i>United States</i>	62.8	61.9	60.8	55.2	53.6	52.6	53.1	50.1	55.1	49.1	51.0
North Carolina*	52.9	52.3	54.4	42.8	43.0	43.4	47.4	43.4	50.1	45.6	50.2
Minnesota	76.4	75.8	73.8	68.7	71.5	70.0	68.2	66.3	71.6	64.1	68.8
Maine	71.7	65.1	66.4	60.3	63.7	64.5	64.8	62.2	72.0	71.9	67.4
Wisconsin	72.9	69.5	66.5	62.5	66.5	67.4	63.5	62.0	69.0	57.4	66.1
New Hampshire	78.7	72.4	69.6	63.6	57.3	57.1	53.0	54.8	63.1	57.3	62.3
North Dakota**	78.0	72.0	70.0	68.3	67.2	64.6	62.7	61.5	67.3	56.0	60.4
Wyoming	73.3	74.3	67.0	64.4	58.6	53.2	53.4	50.3	62.3	59.4	59.7
Idaho	79.7	77.2	73.3	63.3	60.7	67.7	59.9	58.3	65.2	57.1	53.7
Average for these seven states (excludes N.C.)	75.8	72.3	69.5	64.4	63.6	63.5	60.8	59.3	67.3	60.5	62.6

* North Carolina requires voters to register at least 25 days before elections.

** North Dakota does not require voters to register before casting their ballots. Election day registration took effect in 1974 in Maine and Minnesota, in 1976 in Wisconsin, and in 1994 in Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming.

Source: Federal Election Commission

Table 7. Holiday Voting and Time-Off-With-Pay, by State, 2000

Rank	State	% VAP Voted 2000	Election Day Holiday? ¹	Give State Employees Time Off To Vote?	Give Private Employees Time Off To Vote?
1	Minnesota	68.8	N	Y	before noon
2	Maine	67.4	N	N	N
3	Wisconsin	66.1	N	N	max 3 hrs
4	Alaska	64.4	N	Y	as needed
5	Vermont	63.7	N	N	N
6	New Hampshire	62.3	N	N	N
7	Montana	61.5	Y	Y	N
8	Iowa	60.7	N	max 3 hrs	max 3 hrs
9	Oregon	60.5	N	reasonable amount	reasonable amount
10	North Dakota	60.4	N	Y	employers encouraged
11	Wyoming	59.7	N	max 1 hr	max 1 hr
12	Connecticut	58.3	N	N	N
13	South Dakota	58.2	N	max 2 hrs	max 2 hrs
14	Missouri	57.5	N	N	max 3 hrs
15	Michigan	57.4	N	N	N
16	Washington	56.9	N	N	N
17	Colorado	56.8	N	max 2 hrs	max 2 hrs
tie	Massachusetts	56.8	N	N	N
19	Delaware	56.3	Y	N	max 2 hrs
tie	Nebraska	56.3	Y	Y	N
21	Ohio	55.7	Y	N	N
22	Louisiana	54.2	Y	Y	N
tie	Rhode Island	54.2	N	Y	N
24	Kansas	54.0	N	Y	max 2 hrs
25	Idaho	53.7	N	N	N
tie	Pennsylvania	53.7	N	N	N
27	Illinois	52.8	N	Y	max 2 hrs
28	Utah	52.7	N	Y	max 2 hrs
29	Virginia	52.0	N	N	N
30	Kentucky	51.7	N	max 4 hrs	max 4 hrs
31	Maryland	51.4	Y	Y	max 2 hrs
	<i>National Average</i>	<i>51.0</i>			
32	New Jersey	51.0	N	Y	N
33	Florida	50.6	N	Y	N
34	North Carolina	50.2	N	N	N
35	Alabama	50.0	N	N	N
36	New York	49.3	Y	Y	max 2 hrs
37	Tennessee	49.2	N	max 3 hrs	max 3 hrs
38	Indiana	49.1	Y	Y	N
39	Oklahoma	48.8	N	Y	max 2 hrs
40	Mississippi	48.6	N	N	N
41	Arkansas	47.8	N	Y	max 3 hrs
42	New Mexico	47.4	N	Y	max 2 hrs
43	South Carolina	46.5	Y	Y	N
44	West Virginia	45.7	Y	Y	max 3 hrs
45	California	44.0	N	max 2 hrs	max 2 hrs
46	Georgia	43.8	N	N	max 2 hrs
tie	Nevada	43.8	N	max 3 hrs	max 3 hrs
48	Texas	43.1	Y	max 2 hrs	max 2 hrs
49	Arizona	42.1	N	N	N
50	Hawaii	41.0	Y	Y	max 2 hrs
	Total Number of States		11	31	27

¹ No state has a holiday that requires public and private employers to grant a full paid day off, and observation requirements for state and private employers vary. For example, Texas allows a state or private employee two hours to cast a ballot and return to work, though election day is a state holiday.

Source: Federal Election Commission

**Table 8. Voting Equipment Used in 2000 Elections in
North Carolina by County**

Optical Scanner (51)¹ 48%	Direct Recording Electronic Devices or DREs (35) 40%	Punch Card (8) 9%	Mechanical Lever Device (4) <2%	Paper Ballot (2) 0.3%
Alexander	Alamance	Cabarrus	Chowan	Hyde
Anson	Alleghany	Duplin	Hoke	Tyrrell
Ashe	Bertie	Forsyth	Scotland	
Avery	Bladen	McDowell	Swain	
Beaufort	Brunswick	Mitchell		
Caldwell	Buncombe	Onslow		
Camden	Burke	Vance		
Catawba	Carteret	Watauga		
Chatham	Caswell			
Clay	Cherokee			
Cleveland	Craven			
Columbus	Davidson			
Cumberland	Davie			
Currituck	Gaston			
Dare	Greene			
Durham	Guilford			
Edgecombe	Henderson			
Franklin	Jackson			
Gates	Lenoir			
Graham	Macon			
Granville	Madison			
Halifax	Mecklenburg			
Harnett	Moore			
Haywood	Pamlico			
Hertford	Pasquotank			
Iredell	Pender			
Johnston	Perquimans			
Jones	Pitt			
Lee	Polk			
Lincoln	Rutherford			
Martin	Stanly			
Montgomery	Surry			
Nash	Transylvania			
New Hanover	Union			
Northampton	Wilson			
Orange				
Person				
Randolph				
Richmond				
Robeson				
Rockingham				
Rowan				
Sampson				
Stokes				
Wake				
Warren				
Washington				
Wayne				
Wilkes				
Yadkin				
Yancey				

¹ Key:

Number of counties using the specified voting system in parentheses.
Percent of total registered voters (statewide) using the system listed
below the system name. Percents do not add up to 100 due to
rounding.

Source: State Board of Elections.