

2020 ELECTION PROTECTION REPORT



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**SOUTHERN
COALITION**
for SOCIAL JUSTICE



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

& ABOUT US

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

North Carolinians — particularly our Black and Brown neighbors — have always faced an evolving array of barriers that prevented them from exercising their freedom to vote. Last century’s literacy tests and poll taxes, used to keep Black and low-resourced voters away from the polls, have evolved into more insidious tactics like complex vote-by-mail procedures, intimidation, and felony disenfranchisement.

Each year, Democracy North Carolina and the Southern Coalition for Social Justice (SCSJ) work to identify and remove voting barriers. The 2020 Election Protection report documents our work during one of the state’s highest turnout and safest elections on record.¹

Central to our report is an analysis of 12,977 phone calls voters made to our statewide voter assistance hotline (888-OUR-VOTE) as well as from thousands of volunteers (also known as “Vote Protectors”), who observed polling places and helped voters during the 2020 elections.

¹ “State Board Certifies Election Results from Historic 2020 General Election.” NCSBE Press Releases, 24 Nov. 2020, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2020/11/24/state-board-certifies-election-results-historic-2020-general>.

KEY FINDINGS

Our evaluation of voter and volunteer experiences found:

- 1. The complexity of the vote-by-mail process remained a barrier.** Voters reported a lack of clarity around requirements in requesting, completing, and returning ballots, in addition to concerns about receiving and sending ballots in time for their votes to be counted.
- 2. Voters found registration requirements burdensome and confusing.** Voters had many questions about how to update their registration address. They also expressed confusion about changes that were made to their voter registration without their knowledge — which in some cases prevented them from voting a regular ballot on Election Day.
- 3. Too many voters reported feeling intimidated, often beyond the limited scope of the legal definition of voter intimidation.** From verbal harassment to aggressive electioneering and police presence, some voters reported feeling harassed at or inside the polls.
- 4. The digital divide affected North Carolinians’ access to the ballot.** Voters reported a lack of internet and computer access as barriers at various stages of the mail voting and registration processes.
- 5. Voters with disabilities continued to face multiple barriers to voting.** Calls from voters with disabilities or callers assisting voters with disabilities revealed concerns around mail voting, registration, and voting site operations, specifically curbside voting.
- 6. Existing problems at the polls persisted in 2020.** Hotline calls and volunteer site evaluation reports show prior challenges from earlier elections continued at some voting sites in 2020, including site accessibility, curbside voting implementation, and poll worker training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we identified nine areas of election administration which should be improved to increase access to voting in North Carolina:

1 Voting by mail should be improved by eliminating the witness requirement for absentee ballots; allowing voters to fix mistakes on their absentee ballots; offering paid postage on absentee ballots; offering secure drop boxes for returning mail ballots; allowing voters to pick up their absentee ballot from their county boards of elections; allowing voters to request their mail ballot online; allowing voters to “opt-in” to mail voting for all future elections; incorporating a mail ballot tracking process into law; and expanding the window of time when absentee ballots are accepted.

2 Early Voting should be improved by requiring weekend voting hours; allowing counties to set flexible Early Voting hours; allowing voters without a permanent residence to register at Early Voting sites; and requiring a minimum number of Early Voting sites to be offered based on population.

3 Voter registration should be improved by allowing voters to register or update their registration on Election Day; allowing every eligible voter to register online; implementing automatic voter registration; extending the voter registration deadline; providing more information to the public about registration status; and improving the state’s list maintenance process.

4 Poll worker programs should be improved by requiring uniform statewide poll worker training; establishing a standard Poll Worker Code of Conduct; lowering the poll worker minimum age from 18 to 16; allowing poll workers to work outside their county of residence; and setting a minimum hourly wage for poll workers.

5 Voter intimidation should be mitigated by updating state law to clearly define voter intimidation; providing voter intimidation training to all poll workers and election officials; require police officers to complete voter intimidation-specific training; forming an advisory group on voter intimidation; outlawing weapons at voting sites; and creating a statewide, unified system for reporting voter intimidation incidents.

6 Voter access and transparency should be improved by developing a statewide, toll-free voter hotline; developing a voter advocate program; designing a centralized online portal for North Carolina voters; releasing a document of reported voter incidents to the public following each election; and soliciting voter feedback.

7 **Provisional voting** should be improved by providing voters who cast a provisional ballot with a contact who can answer questions; allowing voters who cast a provisional ballot to see if the ballot was counted via their online voter record; requiring a mandatory statewide training on provisional ballots for every poll worker and additional training for county boards of elections; and investigating the number of voters who are denied provisional ballots each election.

8 **Voter accessibility** should be improved by developing new systems to ensure that curbside voting is properly marked, attended, and offers a comparable voting experience; expanding and improving the Multipartisan Assistance Team (MAT) program; requiring statewide training for election officials to ensure disabled voters can cast a ballot privately and independently; and making permanent a portal for blind and visually impaired voters into law.

9 **Other recommendations** include ending felony disenfranchisement and extending voting rights to all individuals who are incarcerated; creating new statewide funding sources for elections; standardizing transparency across all county boards of elections; and making Election Day a state holiday.

Our report likely shows an undercount of the full scope of issues experienced by North Carolina voters and is skewed toward voters who both had access and knowledge of the hotline and felt empowered to call. While we cannot capture the perspectives of all North Carolinians, we hope our report provides a deeper understanding of the voting experience in 2020. Together, we are building a path forward for a vibrant, inclusive, and participatory democracy that truly is of, by, and for the people.

ABOUT DEMOCRACY NORTH CAROLINA

Democracy NC works to strengthen democratic structures, build power among historically disenfranchised communities, and inspire confidence in a transformed political process that works for all, through organizing, research, and training.

DEMOCRACY NC

ABOUT SOUTHERN COALITION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Southern Coalition for Social Justice partners with communities of color and economically disadvantaged communities in the South to defend and advance their political, social, and economic rights through the combination of legal advocacy, research, organizing, and communications.



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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Democracy NC and Southern Coalition for Social Justice acknowledge that the land where our organizations are located in Morrisville and Durham, NC, respectively, occupy ancestral lands of the Lumbee, Shakoria, and Skaruhreh/Tuscarora people.

We want to acknowledge these traditional territories in relation to our goal to achieve a democracy that is transparent, inclusive, and accessible to all North Carolinians. We understand that our democracy is founded on colonialism and violence, and continues to exclude generations of Native and Indigenous peoples in North Carolina and across the United States. We know this land acknowledgment is only one step towards reconciliation and will continue to educate ourselves and the larger community on the relationship between democracy and colonialism.

To learn more about Native lands and Indigenous territories, visit native-land.ca.

DEDICATION

This report is dedicated:

To the election administrators and 57,000+ poll workers who ran one of the most successful elections in state history during a pandemic;

To the 2,236 Vote Protectors who monitored voting sites and to the 400 volunteers who answered the 888-OUR-VOTE hotline;

To the activists who have fought for and won access to the ballot throughout our state's history;

In honor of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Andrew Brown, Jr., and countless other Black Americans who have been murdered by police in the United States.

2020 ELECTION PROTECTION PARTNERS

ACLU of North Carolina
Advance North Carolina
Black Voters Matter
Blueprint NC
Common Cause North Carolina
Disability Rights North Carolina
El Pueblo
Forward Justice
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
League of Women Voters NC
National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials
North Carolina Asian Americans Together
North Carolina Black Alliance
NC Voters for Clean Elections
Self-Help Credit Union
You Can Vote

2. INTRODUCTION

Every election cycle, voters are urged by politicians, advocacy organizations, and their families and friends to cast a ballot. With so many different people urging us to vote, someone could easily believe that voting is a simple and accessible process.

However, for hundreds of years, voting laws in North Carolina and across the country have been created, repurposed, and upheld to prevent Black, Latiné, and other historically marginalized people from casting a ballot. When laws do not stand in the way, anti-democratic forces weaponize voter intimidation and misinformation to dissuade these same people.

Although many of these tactics specifically target Black and Latiné voters, every person in the country is negatively impacted when the rights of others are violated. Any attack on a single voter is an attack on democracy itself.

While administrative mistakes are inevitable, whether by human or mechanical error, and common-sense policies can dissuade voters from participating in elections, purposeful threats to voting access are real.



In North Carolina, we know threats can manifest as harmful policies that prevent certain communities from voting, such as discriminatory voter identification laws or felony disenfranchisement. We also know that certain political and media figures have used their platforms to spread misinformation that confuses voters and empowers others to intimidate them.


The 2020 election was set against the COVID-19 pandemic as well as social and political resistance and unrest, from protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd to President Trump calling election results into question, all of which directly influenced and impacted the voter experience. In each of these areas — the pandemic, police violence, and voting barriers — people in the Black, Latiné, LGBTQ+, and disability communities were disproportionately affected.


COVID-19 PANDEMIC


The COVID-19 pandemic raised fears about voter safety, presenting an unprecedented challenge to effectively administering the 2020 elections, and prompted long-overdue changes to alternative voting methods. Even with the most careful precautions and pragmatic policy changes, some voters felt confused and were ultimately dissuaded from voting.


North Carolina's primary election occurred on March 3, 2020, a week before Governor Cooper declared a state of emergency to address the COVID-19 pandemic.² **Elected officials and election administrators knew they would be hosting the general election during the pandemic, leading to:**

² "COVID-19 Orders & Directives." North Carolina Office of the Governor, 2 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nc.gov/covid-19/covid-19-orders-directives#executive-orders--2021-executive-orders-issued-by-gov--roy-cooper>.

 **In-person voting COVID-19 safety precautions.** Election officials were required to wear masks, provide personal protective equipment (“PPE”) to voters, implement social distancing, and consistently clean and sanitize polling sites.³

 **House Bill 1169.** The only North Carolina legislation dedicated to improving election administration during the pandemic, HB1169 made absentee voting more accessible, allowed poll workers to work outside of their home precincts, and provided additional funding to counties to run their elections.

 **Poll worker shortages.** An anticipated shortage in older poll volunteers and workers led the North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) to launch the “Democracy Heroes” campaign, ultimately recruiting over 57,000 poll workers to administer the election.⁴

 **Increased election funding for COVID-19 precautions.** North Carolina received nearly \$11 million in federal funds to administer the general election during the pandemic, and the state matched approximately \$2 million.⁵ However, an influx of Congressional funding was still not enough to ensure safe and efficient local election administration. As a result, almost every county (97 out of 100 counties) in North Carolina received grant funding from nonprofit organizations during the 2020 General Election.⁶

³ “Voting and Coronavirus.” NCSBE Voting Resources, 2021, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/voting-and-coronavirus#numbered-memos>.

⁴ “State Board Receives National Award for 2020 Poll Worker Recruitment Efforts.” NCSBE Press Releases, 4 Mar. 2021, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2021/03/04/state-board-receives-national-award-2020-poll-worker-recruitment-efforts>.

⁵ Bell, Karen Brinson, and Amy Strange. 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (“CARES”) Act Funds & 2020 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) Funds -- Election Administration Preparedness for 2020 Federal Elections. 15 July 2020, <https://www.buncombecounty.org/common/Commissioners/20200901/Fund%20100%20Elections%20CARES%20%26%20HAVA%20Funds%20more%20info.pdf>.

⁶ Data was collected from County budget documents and analyzed by Democracy NC. Please contact jean-patrick@democracync.org for complete methods and data.



SPREAD OF ELECTION DISINFORMATION

President Trump and his administration openly advocated to make voting harder, repeating disinformation and sowing mistrust in the electoral process by perpetuating the myth of so-called “voter fraud” before, during, and after the 2020 election.

During a campaign visit to Wilmington, President Trump encouraged North Carolinians to test the voting system by voting by mail and then in person. He stated, “Let ‘em send it in, and let ‘em go vote, and if their system’s as good as they say it is, then obviously they won’t be able to vote.”⁷ The NCSBE was forced to immediately release a statement reminding voters that voting twice is against the law and describing the many measures in place to prevent accidental and purposeful double-voting.⁸

Finally, following his loss to Joe Biden, President Trump led an effort to overturn the national election results.⁹ This culminated with a deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.¹⁰

⁷ “President Trump Encourages North Carolina Voters to Vote Twice.” CNBC, NBC, 2 Sept. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1quAJ8nIAc>.

⁸ “A Message from Karen Brinson Bell to NC Voters.” NCSBE Press Releases, 3 Sept. 2020, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2020/09/03/message-karen-brinson-bell-nc-voters>.

⁹ Sanger, David E. “Trump’s Attempts to Overturn the Election Are Unparalleled in U.S. History.” The New York Times, 20 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/us/politics/trump-election.html>

¹⁰ Healy, Jack. “These Are the 5 People Who Died in the Capitol Riot.” The New York Times, 11 Jan. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html>.

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black Minnesotan born in Fayetteville, NC, was murdered by white police officer Derek Chauvin. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes until Mr. Floyd died.¹¹ In response to yet another egregious killing of a Black person by police, nationwide protests erupted on May 26, leading to what may have been the largest protest movement in American history.¹² Impacts were felt and seen across North Carolina as well.

Asheville. In September, protests and advocacy led the City Council to reduce the police budget by 3% and reappropriation \$770,000 to "other departments or agencies to offer outreach to homeless people, community engagement efforts, response to animal and noise complaints, and technology for safety and transparency."¹³

Graham. On the last day of Early Voting, a peaceful "I am the Change" March to the polls honoring George Floyd was broken up violently, and without warning, by police officers, who pepper-sprayed a crowd including children, toddlers, and a woman in a wheelchair.¹⁴

Elizabeth City. On April 21, 2021, Pasquotank County Sheriff's Deputies murdered 42-year old Andrew Brown, Jr. The killing of Brown, who was unarmed and parked at his house in Elizabeth City, sparked months of protest in northeast North Carolina.¹⁵

Removal of Confederate symbols across North Carolina. From May through August 2020, 19 Confederate symbols were moved or removed due to an increase in pressure from residents that their governments do not glorify white supremacy and to center the lived experiences of Black people.¹⁶ In Raleigh, Governor Cooper ordered the removal of three Confederate statues on State Capitol grounds after protestors toppled two of them on June 19th.



The 2020 Election Protection report from Democracy NC and SCSJ, set against the backdrop of the events of 2020 discussed above, questions whether North Carolina elections truly guarantee the right to vote.

¹¹ "Bogel-Burroughs, Nicholas. "8 Minutes, 46 Seconds Became a Symbol in George Floyd's Death. The Exact Time Is Less Clear." The New York Times, 18 June, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/george-floyd-timing.html>

¹² Buchanan, Larry, et al. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in US History." The New York Times, 3 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

¹³ Jasper, Simone. "This North Carolina City Just Voted to Slash \$770,000 from Police Department Budget." The Charlotte Observer, 24 Sept. 2020, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/state/north-carolina/article245941850.html>.

¹⁴ Eanes, Zachary, and Carli Brosseau. "March to Alamance Polls Ends with Police Using Pepper-Spray on Protesters, Children." The News & Observer, 29 Dec. 2020, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article246861942.html>.

¹⁵ Fordham, Heather. "As Protests Continue, Community Members Make Sure All Are Included" Spectrum News, 19. May 2021, <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2021/05/19/protesters-continue-to-march-for-andrew-brown-junior->

¹⁶ Jasper, Simone. "Dozens of Confederate Symbols Have Been Removed since May. How Many in North Carolina?" The News & Observer, 14 Aug. 2020, <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/state/north-carolina/article244926442.html>.

3. PROTECTING THE

VOTE IN 2020

Democracy NC, SCSJ, and partner organizations carried out three major programs to protect and expand voting access in 2020.

VOTER HOTLINE

Each year, Democracy NC operates the state's largest nonpartisan voter hotline: 888-OUR-VOTE (888-687-8683). The hotline is a free resource provided year-round for North Carolinians who have questions about registering to vote or casting a ballot.

During election season, 888-OUR-VOTE is a coalition effort between Democracy NC, SCSJ, and state partners. The hotline is hosted in partnership with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law's 866-OUR-VOTE voter hotline.

In the lead up to the 2020 General Election, we trained 383 volunteers to answer our voter hotline. These volunteers — attorneys, law students, and others who have a thorough understanding of North Carolina's intricate voting laws — spent thousands of hours talking to voters throughout the election.

During the voting period, volunteers answered **14,135 phone calls** — more than four times as many calls as we received during the 2016 Presidential Election. On Election Day alone, volunteers answered over 2,500 calls!

Phone calls ranged from requests for general information (such as polling place location) to reports of serious problems (such as polling places running out of ballots). Serious issues were escalated to a team of election attorneys, who informed county and state election officials about problems and requested they be addressed in a timely manner.

A squad of attorneys from Forward Justice helped us take calls that flagged incidents of voter intimidation and our partners at Advance Carolina were instrumental in protecting against them. We are greatly appreciative of their work!



“This service is life changing! If there is anything I can do to support his program, please let me know.”

— Voter who called the hotline

“VOTE PROTECTOR” POLL MONITORING PROGRAM

Voting can be a confusing and isolating process – especially when it does not go as planned. The Vote Protector program trains and deploys friendly, nonpartisan volunteers to voting sites across the state to help monitor the voter experience and help voters better navigate the process.

Vote Protectors play an essential watchdog role by ensuring that each voting site is operating as it should be. During their volunteer shift, each Vote Protector completes a site evaluation. If a problem is identified – such as inadequate signage, problems accessing the voting site or curbside voting, long lines, or voter intimidation – Vote Protectors document the problem and work to solve it.



“I loved seeing people put their ‘I Voted’ stickers on, and we’d ask, “how’d it go?” With relief in their voice they would say, “really great, thank you!” or sometimes, “So good, it was my first time!”, to which we would all cheer and relish in the celebration. I will always cherish being able to make a space for those voter’s celebration, relief, and joy.”

– Molly M

Vote Protectors also interact directly with voters, offering resources and a reassuring presence.

The 2020 Vote Protector program was Democracy NC’s largest effort to date and one of the country’s largest nonpartisan poll monitoring programs. A total of **2,043 Vote Protectors** were recruited, trained, and stationed at voting sites during the 2020 General Election.



“I liked getting a civic engagement opportunity as a high schooler. It was something new for me so I was kinda nervous and didn’t know what to expect but everything went well!”

– Jordan S

Vote Protectors were “on the ground” at voting sites on three days during the 2020 General Election: the first day of Early Voting (October 15), the last day of Early Voting (October 31), and Election Day (November 3). On the last day of Early Voting, Vote Protectors were stationed **at almost every Early Voting site in the state** – covering all 100 counties. And on Election Day, Vote Protectors had a presence at **nearly one in three polling places**.



“I really enjoyed being out on election day, during this tumultuous time, feeling that I could contribute some small amount to ensure we had a safe, secure, and fair election.”

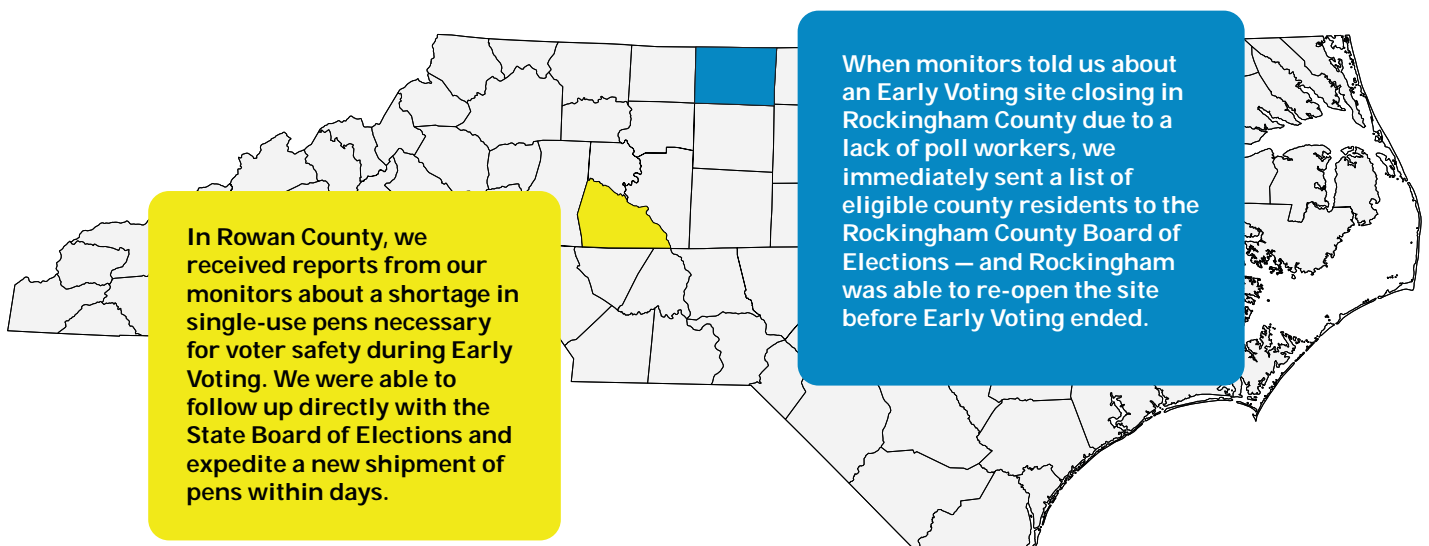
– Nina T



LOCAL ELECTION ADVOCACY

Democracy NC works with local advocates to engage with their county boards of elections. We continued – and expanded – this work in 2020, informing our advocacy through the evidence-based research and analysis provided by SCSJ.

In 2020, our local election monitors’ priorities shifted to react to the unprecedented environment created by COVID-19. Suddenly poll monitors weren’t just recruited to attend county meetings and report back, they were asked to make sure those meetings were even happening, and that meetings were safe, virtual, and allowed for online or telephonic public comment. They were asked to report on everything from how counties were responding to record absentee requests to how needs for larger in-person sites to accommodate social distancing were being discussed, debated, and met.



Advocating for good Early Voting sites and hours

Nearly 150 supporters across 64 counties advocated for strong Early Voting plans in their communities. They asked their county boards of elections for more Early Voting sites, more sites in Black and Latiné communities and near college campuses, and more weekend voting hours.



Ensuring elections were well-planned

In 2020, supporters in 64 counties engaged with their local board of elections like never before. Activists attended monthly county boards of elections meetings to ensure there were good plans for absentee voting, that in-person voting was safe, and that counties had enough poll workers.



Ensuring every vote is counted

Volunteers monitored the final vote counts in 90 counties throughout the canvass process, documenting issues and flagging them to our escalation team. “Canvass Monitors” helped ensure that absentee and provisional ballots were properly considered and counted.

4. WHAT WE LEARNED

FROM VOTERS

Each election, hundreds – and sometimes thousands – of North Carolinians call the 888-OUR-VOTE nonpartisan voter hotline. Callers ask questions about voting or registering to vote and report issues with the voting process. Researchers at SCSJ coded and analyzed the call logs – or “tickets” – from 2020 hotline calls to lift up and learn from voters’ concerns and experiences across the state.

In 2020, the hotline received calls from every county in the state, resulting in 12,977 logged conversations (“tickets”).



Fig 1: 888-OUR-VOTE hotline volunteers answered calls from every North Carolina county.

Calls to the Election Protection Hotline by County (08/10/2020 to 11/13/2020)

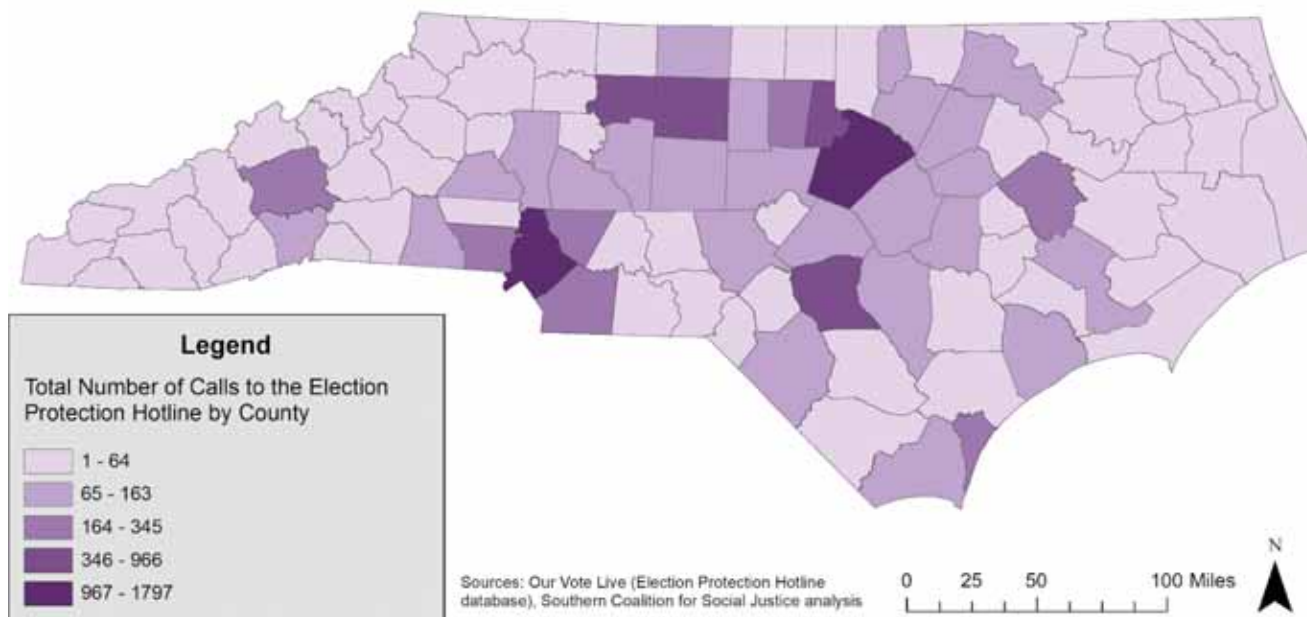
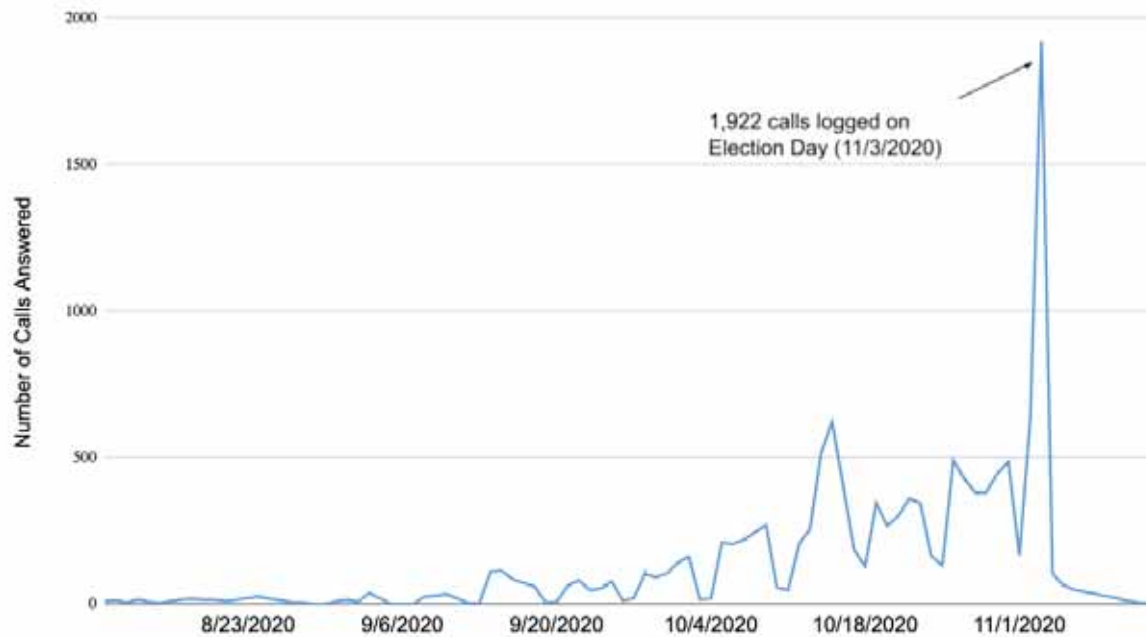


Fig 2: Volunteers logged close to 13,000 conversations with voters from August to November

Election Protection Hotline Conversations (8/10/20 - 11/13/20)



Source: *Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database)*, Southern Coalition for Social Justice analysis. Although volunteers answered 14,135 phone calls, not all of these calls resulted in conversations and “tickets.” For example, some callers were from out of state and were transferred back to the national hotline to be rerouted, some calls were dropped etc.

Section 4 provides analysis of documented calls or “tickets” created from voter phone calls, pairing data with volunteer reports from voting sites across the state. We identified specific questions voters raised and problems that voters faced, along with the prevalence of these issues by county. We also included voter stories to highlight the voices of North Carolinians impacted by voting challenges.

The results from our analysis identify issues and barriers to voting, which point to larger gaps in election law, administration, education, and access.

The questions asked and issues reported are likely an undercount of the full scope of issues experienced by North Carolina voters and are skewed toward voters who both had access and knowledge of the hotline and felt empowered to call.

Even with these limitations, this data gives us a useful snapshot of North Carolina voters’ experiences, perspectives, and concerns. Voters making these calls identified almost 20,000 questions and issues, providing essential data that inform advocacy and education proposals in Section 6.



HOTLINE CALL OVERVIEW

Most hotline callers (almost 70%) had questions about or concerns with mail voting, registration, and polling place hours and locations. Specifically, most voters called the hotline with questions or concerns about:

25%
Mail voting (25% of all call tickets), which included questions about requesting ballots, ballot completion, monitoring ballot status, and returning mail-in ballots.

24%
Registration (24% of all call tickets), including questions about registration status, how to update information, same-day registration, and issues around missed deadlines and removal from the rolls.

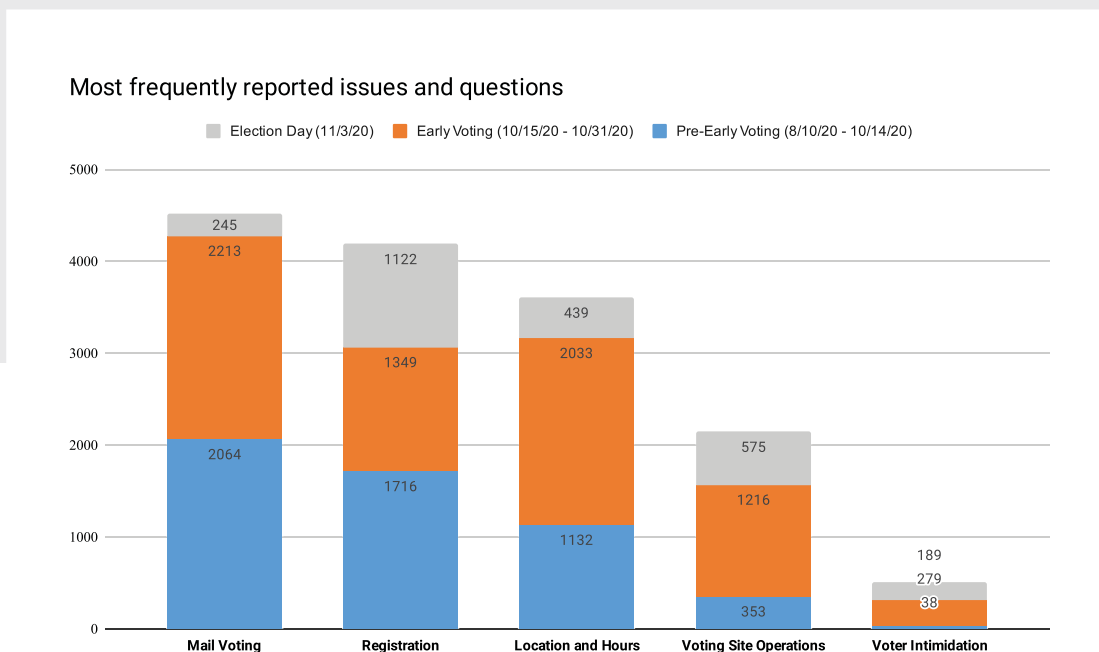
20%
Polling place location and hours (20% of all call tickets), which were primarily questions about where and when to vote, often paired with requests to look up registration status.

12%
Voting site operations (12% of all call tickets), encompassing questions and concerns about polling place operations, including curbside voting, provisional ballots, and election worker misinformation.

Figure 3: Most callers had questions about or issues with mail voting, registration, polling hours and locations, polling place operations, and – to a lesser extent – voter intimidation.

Source: Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database), Southern Coalition for Social Justice analysis, Numbers refer to codes (issues reported or questions asked), 8/10/20 - 11/3/20.

3%
Voter intimidation (3% of all call tickets), including reports on and questions about electioneering, physical intimidation, and police presence at the polls.



KEY FINDINGS

Our analysis of almost 20,000 separate issues and concerns from nearly 13,000 callers across North Carolina found:

1. **The complexity of the vote-by-mail process remained a barrier for voters.**
2. **Voters experienced registration requirements as burdensome and confusing.**
3. **Many voters reported feeling intimidated, often beyond the limited scope of the legal definition of voter intimidation.**
4. **The digital divide affected North Carolinians' access to the ballot.**
5. **Voters with disabilities continued to face multiple barriers throughout the voting process, especially with voting by mail and in-person voting.**

1. The complexity of mail voting remains a barrier.

We recorded 4,868 questions and concerns about mail voting. Voters reported:

- ☑ Confusion around requirements in requesting, completing, and returning ballots, and
- ☑ Concerns around receiving and sending ballots in time for votes to be counted.

Voting by mail in North Carolina is complex. Voters must first request a ballot in order to receive one in the mail and then find two witnesses (or a notary) to sign their ballot.¹⁷ There are rules about who can and can't serve as a witness, who can and can't help a voter complete their mail ballot, and even who can return it.

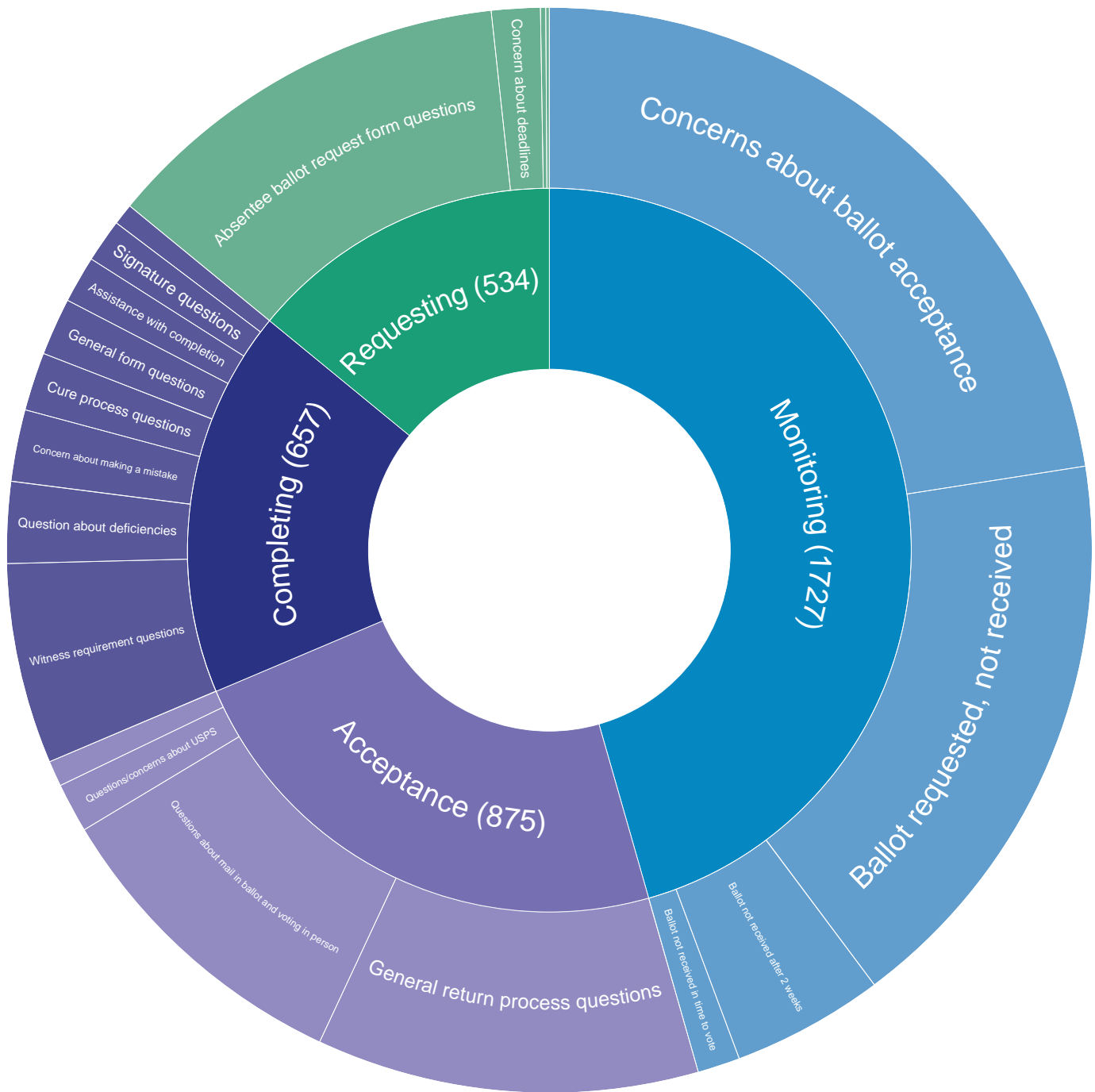
As figure 4 on the next page shows, the majority of the calls about mail voting (3,793) were questions about process — specifically the steps of requesting, completing, monitoring, and returning a ballot. Voters expressed confusion, sometimes leading to frustration or even discouragement, throughout these processes. Many callers asking about one part of the process had multiple questions about multiple parts of the process. The vast number of calls asking about the various stages of mail voting points to a lack of clarity around the requirements that have translated into a barrier to voting.

Learn more about 2020 mail voting changes in Section 5.

¹⁷ “Voters only needed one witness to sign their ballot in 2020, thanks to House Bill 1169. This provision of the bill has since expired.



Figure 4: The largest proportion of calls in each step of mail voting were questions/concerns about the mail voting processes: requesting, completing, returning, and monitoring during mail voting.



Source: Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database), Southern Coalition for Social Justice analysis. OVL tickets coded as "mail voting" and referring to questions/issues about the mail voting process.

Requesting a mail ballot

Most of the calls about requesting a mail ballot (over 450) were calls from voters who asked or expressed confusion about the absentee ballot request form. For example, voters asked how to request, who can request, and what is required to request a ballot. Some voters (about 50) either asked about deadlines or expressed concern about missing the deadline for requesting a ballot.



Caller's 84 year old aunt lives in an assisted living facility. She wants to request an absentee ballot for her aunt, but she sees that "niece" is not considered a near relative and wants to know how she can help her aunt.

*Cabarrus County,
September 9, 2020*



Caller was confused about the signature requirements for her absentee ballot request form.

*Brunswick County,
September 28, 2020*



Caller's mother is elderly and can't walk. She asked whether mail voting was still an option. I told her, unfortunately, the deadline has passed.

Lee County, October 28, 2020

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE

Completing a mail ballot

More than one-third of questions and concerns about completing a mail-in ballot (227) were about the witness requirement. For instance, many callers expressed confusion about who is eligible to be a witness to a completed mail ballot. A spouse? A child? A non-citizen? Some callers also wanted to know what to do if no witness was available to help, especially if they lived alone.

Over 60 callers had questions about the ballot form itself. For example: what kind of writing utensil was approved for completion? Close to 50 callers wanted clarification about the signature requirement. Approximately two dozen North Carolinians called after receiving damaged ballots in the mail and wanting to ensure they were able to vote a valid ballot. Almost all of these callers wanted to "get it right": to make sure their mail ballot was completed successfully and counted when submitted.



Caller wanted to know whether a family member could be a witness for their absentee ballot, and if so, whether they needed to include the family member's address on the address line.

*Guilford County,
September 24, 2020*



Caller made a mistake while completing their absentee ballot by using the wrong type of pen, but has not mailed the ballot yet. They wanted to know what to do to get a new ballot.

*Union County,
October 16, 2020*



Caller misplaced the return envelope for her absentee ballot. Wanted to know if she can mail it in a regular envelope.

*Durham County,
October 23, 2020*



VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE

Returning a mail ballot

More than half of the callers (432) with concerns or questions about successfully returning a ballot had specific questions about the return process itself. For instance, voters wanted to know who could drop off the ballot. A near relative? A neighbor? Where can the ballot be dropped off and what is required at drop off?

A large number of callers (358) were confused or wanted information on how to instead vote in person after having requested a mail ballot. Voters were worried about whether to turn in the unused mail ballot and wanted to know what to do with the ballot if it wasn't returned. Many voters also wanted assurance that it was still feasible to vote in person after requesting a mail ballot. Again, the number of calls on these topics indicates both a confusing process and profound voter concerns about ensuring they correctly follow the process.



Caller had requested an absentee ballot but wanted to know if she could vote early if she didn't get her ballot in time. I told her she could vote early or on election day even if she received the ballot so long as she destroyed the absentee ballot without voting it.

*Mecklenburg County,
October 12, 2020*

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



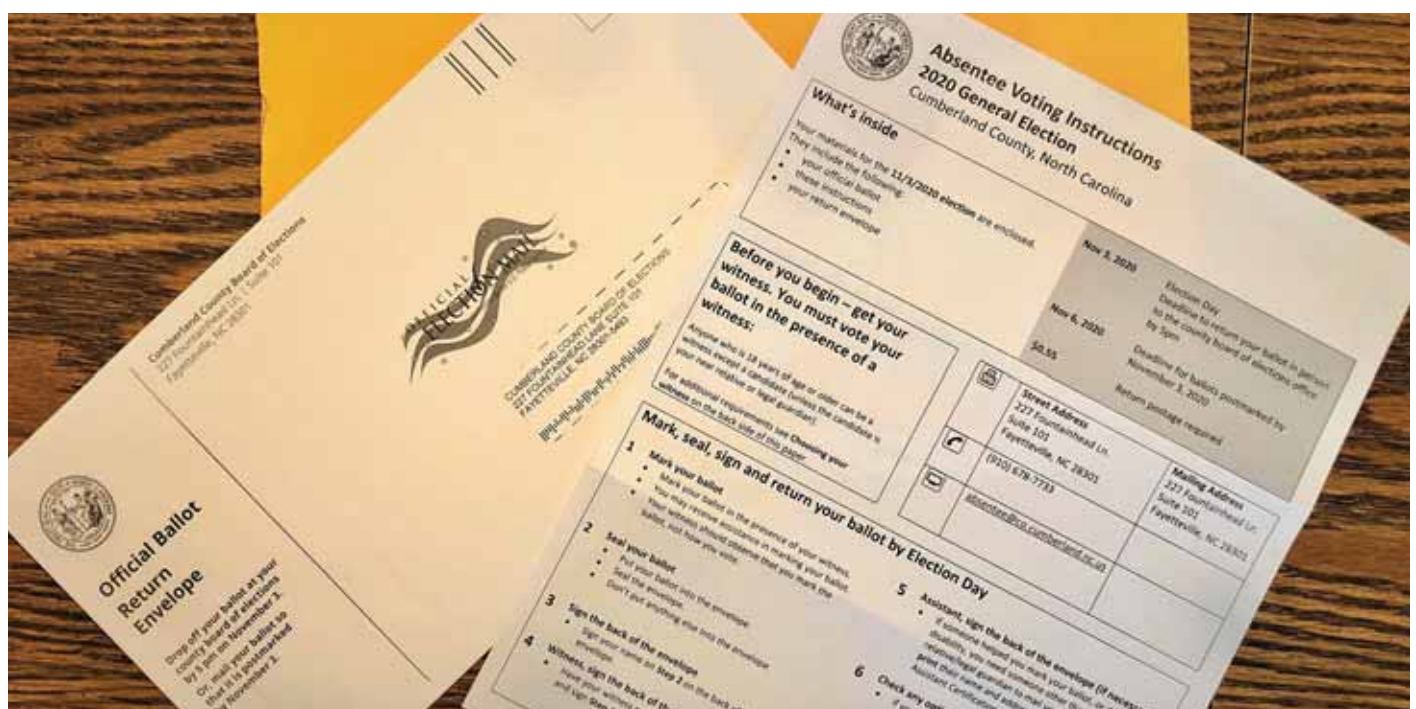
Caller had requested and received an absentee ballot but didn't want to mail it, so she asked if there was somewhere to drop it off.

*Catawba County,
October 16, 2020*



Caller wanted to know if it was too late for him to submit his absentee ballot in order for it to be counted. I explained that there were multiple options for returning his ballot including dropping it at an early voting site or the County Board of Elections, or by mailing it in.

*Johnston County,
October 29, 2020*



Monitoring a mail ballot

Throughout the mail voting period, the volume of calls about ballot status also indicated that voters were concerned about vote-by-mail ballot deadlines — both during the ballot requesting process and when returning the ballots. They also wanted to ensure that their ballots would be received in time to be counted. Over 850 callers (855) asked volunteers to check on the status of a submitted mail-in ballot, and 655 calls were from voters who had requested a ballot and had not yet received it. Once BallotTrax — a free service that tracks the status of every mail-in ballot — was put into place in September 2020, many of these calls were answered by volunteers who referred callers directly to the online monitoring system.



Caller lives in assisted living. She says she sent in an absentee ballot but got a letter back about not having a witness, and was asked to cure her ballot with a new ballot. She wants to know if her ballot counted.

*Craven County,
October 12, 2020*

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



Voter sent in an absentee request form weeks ago without response, so wanted to know the status of their ballot.

*Durham County,
October 15, 2020*



Caller and her mother never received their absentee ballots in the mail, so she was seeking information on their polling place. I gave her that information and she said she planned to vote today in person, but her mother will not be able to do so because she is very elderly and cannot walk.

*Rockingham County,
November 3, 2020*

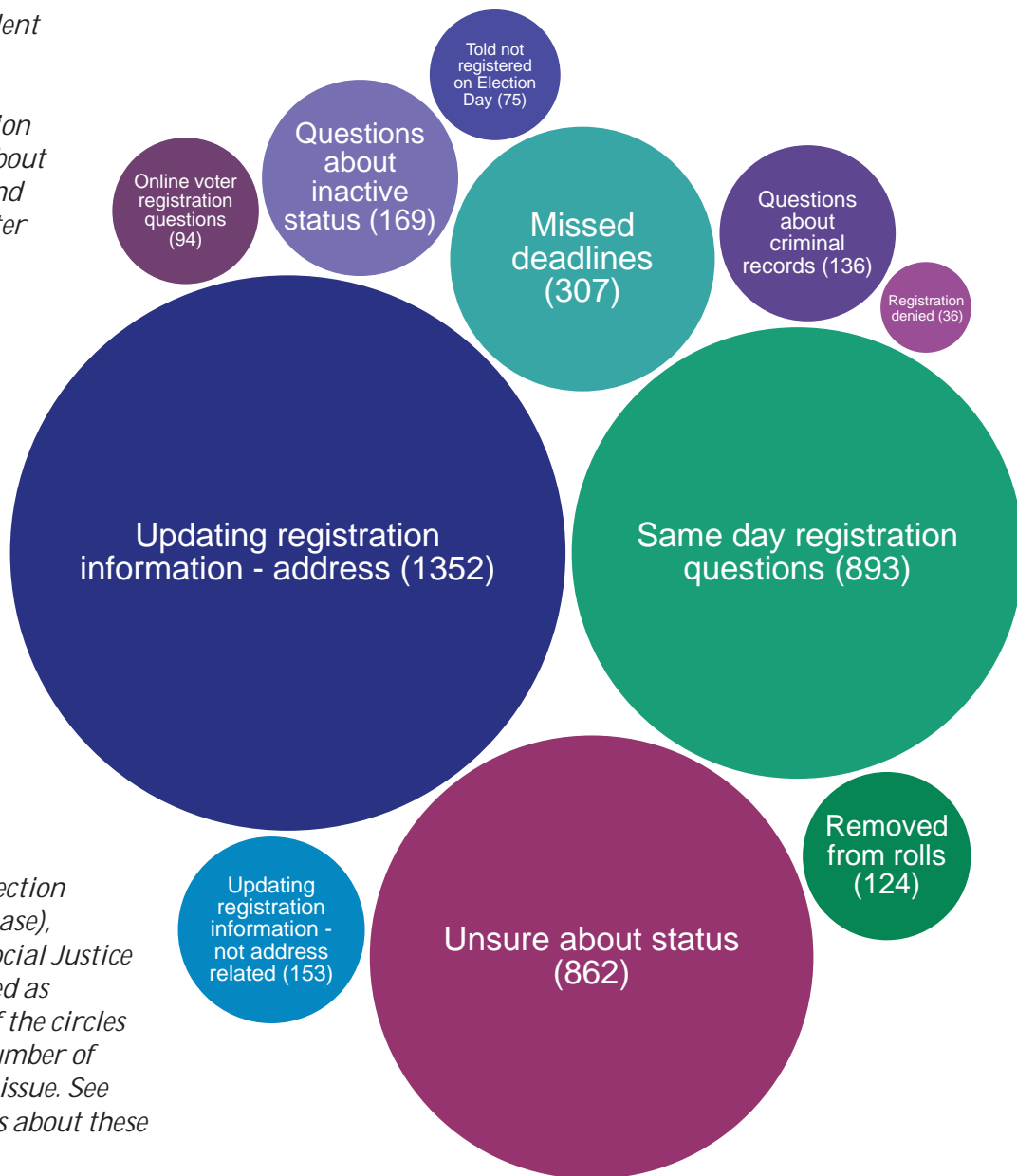
2. Voters are experiencing registration requirements as burdensome and confusing.

The multi-step and often difficult process of registering to vote keeps more people from casting a ballot than almost any other electoral barrier. It also disproportionately blocks Black and Latiné voters from exercising their fundamental right to vote.²¹

As figure 6 shows, the largest number of calls to the hotline in 2020 about voter registration were from callers who had questions about the process of updating registration information. Of the 4,684 calls about registration, nearly one-third (1,352) were questions about how to update (primarily) their home address. The majority of these calls (over 1,000) were from North Carolina residents who had moved within the state and either expressed confusion about the process or simply needed additional information.

²¹ See Williamson, Laura and Amshula K. Jayarm, “Universal Voter Registration: Eliminating One of the Biggest Barriers to Voting,” Demos, 2020. <https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/IDA%20-%20Universal%20Voter%20Registration.pdf>

Figure 6: The most prevalent questions in the context of voter registration were about updating registration information, questions about same-day registration, and callers unsure of their voter registration status.



Source: Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database), Southern Coalition for Social Justice analysis. OVL tickets coded as “registration.” The size of the circles is proportionate to the number of calls received about each issue. See appendix for more details about these categories.

The hotline also received a large number of questions (862) about registration status. Most of these calls were from voters who wanted to verify they were registered to vote, but many voters were also confused and wanted clarification on the voter registration categories. Of those calls, 169 voters asked about inactive status and 124 were removed from the rolls or had questions about being removed. Another 136 callers asked specifically about the ability to register to vote after being removed due to a criminal record. Many of these voters were confused about the meaning of these terms or the requirements around them and wanted assistance in remedying their status to active registration.

Same-day registration — the process of allowing voters to register and cast their ballot on the same day — is in place during Early Voting in North Carolina, but not on Election Day. Almost 900 callers asked about the possibility of same-day registration. Most of these callers wanted to know general information about the possibility of registering or updating their registration at the time of voting and what that process entailed. The most heartbreaking of these calls were received on Election Day, when volunteers had to inform the callers that same-day registration was not available to them.

Over 300 callers asked about registration deadlines, and many of these calls — most on Election Day about the topic of registration — were calls from voters who learned about registration deadlines too late and missed the opportunity to register to vote in the 2020 election.

See our recommendations for voter registration in Section 6.

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



Caller is a new NC resident living in employee housing without any lease, utility bills, etc. and wanted to know if and how he could register to vote without that documentation.

*Madison County,
September 25, 2020*



Caller was recently evicted from his apartment due to Covid and was not previously registered in NC. He asked what he needed to do [to] be registered.

*Mecklenburg County,
October 19, 2020*



Caller asked if she can register to vote today [election day]. I told her sadly no. Caller's registration was removed due to felony conviction and she has not re-registered.

*Wake County,
November 3, 2020*

3. Too many voters reported feeling intimidated, often beyond the limited legal definition of voter intimidation.

Federal and North Carolina laws prohibit voter intimidation, coercion, or interference with an individual's ability to vote. But while some forms of voter intimidation are blatant, contemporary voter intimidation can be nuanced, subjective, and difficult to prove.²²

During the 2020 election, the hotline received an alarming number of calls — 546 — from voters, callers assisting voters, or volunteers about potential voter intimidation incidents or questions about what constitutes voter intimidation.

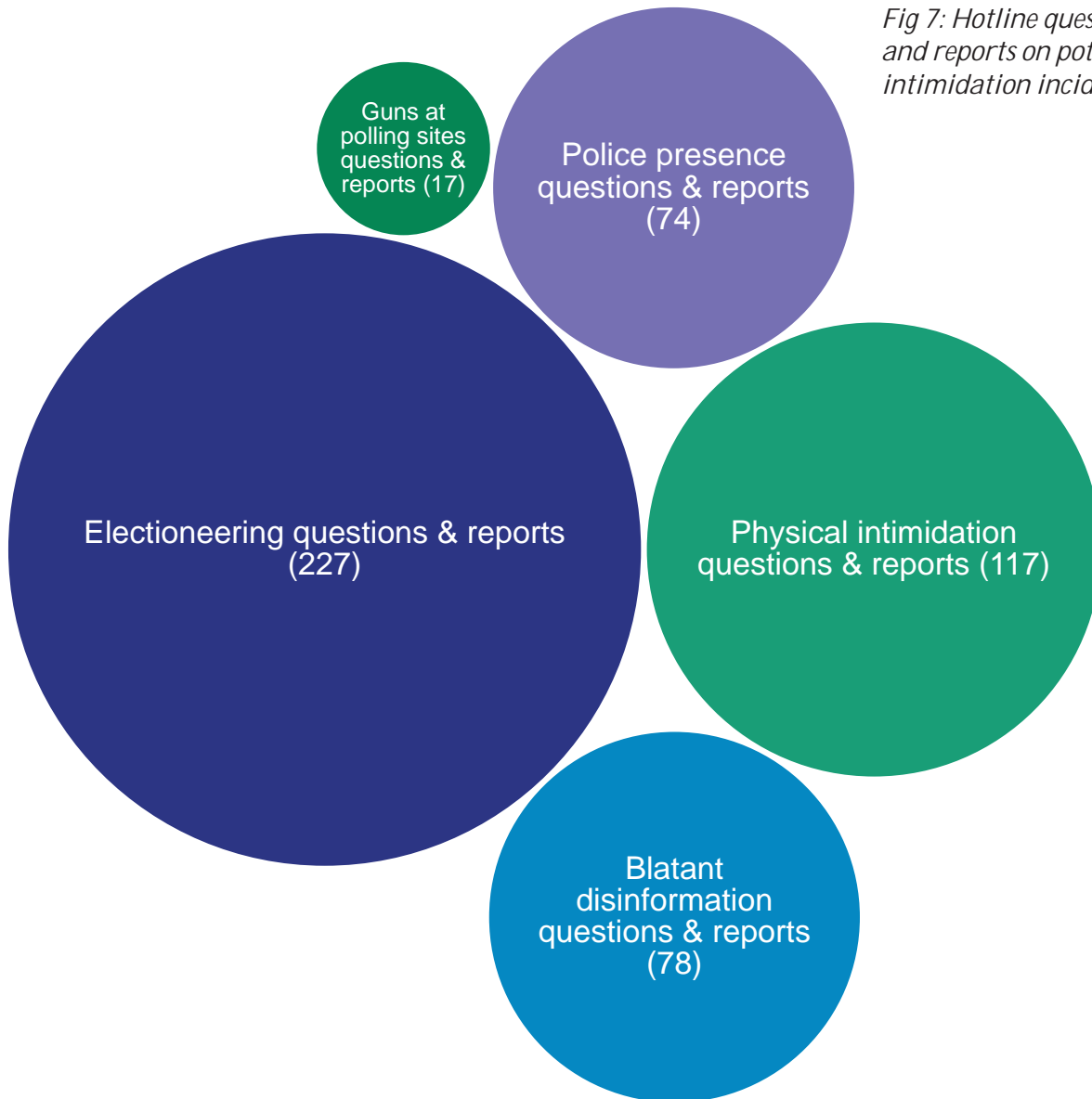
Callers reported or had questions about guns at the voting sites, police presence at the voting sites, and electioneering within the 50-foot buffer zone, aggressive campaigners, and campaigners that were not following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. Most of the callers cited an incident or situation they believed to be voter intimidation. Whether or not the incident met the legal definition of voter intimidation, the volume of calls suggests a large number of voters felt intimidated.

Outside of the context of polling places, over 100 callers also reported and had questions about blatant election disinformation and misinformation received via phone, text, email, social media, or canvassing.



²² Institute for Southern Studies in partnership with North Carolina Voters for Clean Elections (NCVCE), "Blueprint for a Stronger Democracy," June 2021. <https://www.southernstudies.org/sites/default/files/Blueprint%20NC%20Democracy.pdf>

Fig 7: Hotline questions about and reports on potential voter intimidation incidences



Source: *Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database)*, Southern Coalition for Social Justice analysis. OVL tickets coded as “voter intimidation.” The size of the circles is proportionate to the number of calls received about each issue. Note that not all are reports of incidents; many are questions about what constitutes voter intimidation. In addition, some callers mentioned more than one type of voter intimidation. These numbers do not add up to the total number of calls (546) because some issues and questions were not sub-categorized into these particular categories.



Police presence at polls

Police intimidation was a key tactic in voter suppression efforts under the Jim Crow South, and police presence continues to serve as a mode of voter intimidation. In addition, volumes of research and the lived experiences of people of color in this country show how law enforcement presence creates situations in which criminal penalties and outcomes are experienced disproportionately by Black and Latiné voters.

At least 74 callers called the voter hotline to report the presence of police at the polls or to ask questions about the presence of police.

Fig 8: A word cloud created from calls about police involvement at the polls shows references to voter concern about police presence at voting sites in the form of police cars at voting site locations.



Source: *Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database)*, Southern Coalition for Social Justice word frequency analysis.

Note that on Election Day, the highest number of calls came from Alamance County. In October 2020, on the final day of Early Voting in North Carolina, Alamance County police pepper-sprayed voters marching to the polls.²³

A large number of calls about potential voter intimidation points to the need for additional and more accessible information about current protections in place (and those that are not). These incidents also require lawmakers to re-examine how voters are experiencing intimidation throughout the voting process, beyond what limited legal definitions currently address.

See recommendations about voter intimidation in Section 6.

²³ Yeoman, Barry and Isaac Stanley-Becker, "Peaceful march to the polls in North Carolina is met with police pepper spray and arrests, causing outcry on eve of election," Washington Post, Nov 1, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/election-graham-north-carolina-protest/2020/11/01/beee5d8c-1c64-11eb-90dd-abd0f7086a91_story.html

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



Vote Protector reports police intimidation at the recreation center - police were there all day in 2-3 cars and people felt scared to go inside to vote.

*Alamance County,
November 3, 2020*

4. The digital divide impacts North Carolinians' access to the ballot box.

Access to computers and broadband internet remains out of reach for many North Carolinians. A recent analysis shows that a larger percentage of rural North Carolinians lack access; however, in-home broadband also tracks with income level, meaning that many North Carolinians with low incomes, regardless of where they live, lack internet access.²⁴

The hotline received over 100 calls (122) from voters who needed assistance and spoke directly about barriers to a lack of internet or home computer access. While the numbers are relatively small, these calls intersected with every part of the voting process: from requesting absentee ballots, to monitoring voting status, to registration updates and status questions. Some callers without internet access called to learn the location of their polling place. While mail and telephone options exist for these processes, each can be complicated — or made more difficult — by the lack of broadband internet access.

In addition to the calls in which voters expressly discussed the lack of internet or computer access, the sheer number of phone calls to the hotline may also point to either access issues or at least a continued preference for receiving information via telephone, whether mobile or landline.

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



Caller mailed in an absentee ballot request over a month ago and has not gotten it: her household member sent it at the same time, and he got his. **She does not have access to the internet.**

Guilford County, September 17, 2020



Caller wanted to know where to vote. He doesn't have transportation, and there are no early voting sites near to him. I gave him his precinct site and the early voting location he might be able to access by public transit, but he says there is a long wait between buses. He's concerned about walking to his voting location and standing in line due to mobility issues. I gave him the Onslow Board of Elections phone number. **He doesn't have internet access to look things up himself.**

Onslow County, October 10, 2020

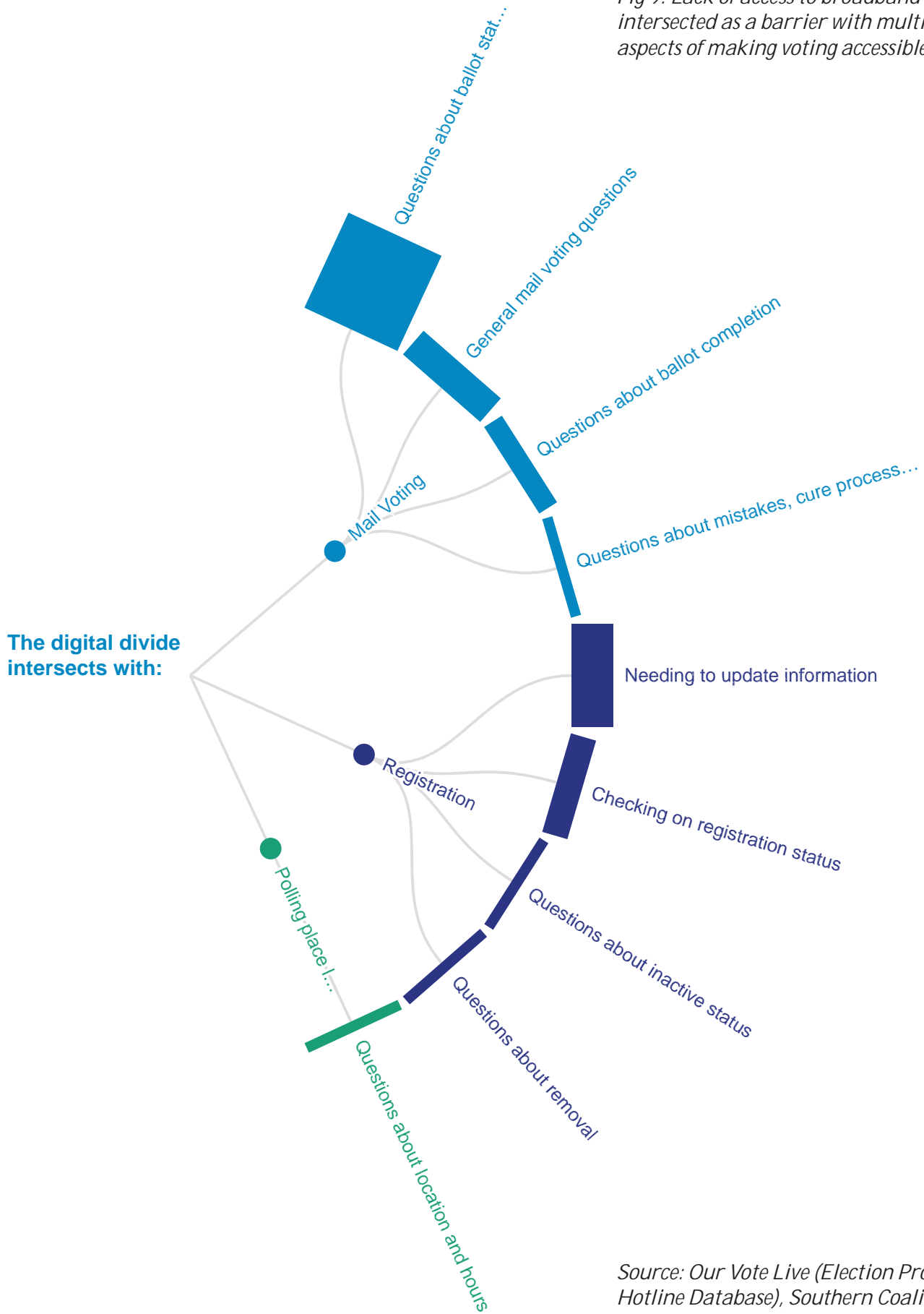


Caller has a disability and has called the Wayne County BOE 3 times to request an absentee ballot request form. The first 2 calls, the BOE said that they would mail her a request form. After not receiving the form, she called again, today (10/26) and the BOE said they had no record of her request. The BOE said that the only way she could vote absentee, at this point, was to send the "right" person to the BOE to pick up a request form, and if it was not the "right" person, then they could not pick up the request form. The BOE did not explain who the "right" person could be. **The voter does not have internet access,** has no near relatives available to help her with this request, and does not have a vehicle.

Wayne County, October 28, 2020

²⁴ NC Budget and Tax Center, "State of Working NC 2021: Protecting and Connecting Workers," September 4, 2021. <https://www.ncjustice.org/publications/state-of-working-nc-2021-protecting-connecting-workers/>

Fig 9: Lack of access to broadband internet intersected as a barrier with multiple aspects of making voting accessible



Source: Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database), Southern Coalition for Social Justice word crosstab coding analysis.

5. Voters with disabilities continued to face multiple barriers throughout the voting process.

In North Carolina, approximately one in three adults has a disability.²⁵ Although federal and state law speak to protecting the vote for peoples with disabilities,²⁶ polling places and the voting process remained inaccessible or difficult to access for many voters with limited abilities.²⁷

The hotline received over 400 calls from voters who had limited abilities or were calling on behalf of a voter with limited abilities. The calls were questions and concerns that spanned mail voting, registration, and voting site operations.

Specifically, over 100 callers had questions or concerns about mail voting. Many callers asked about ways to get assistance in requesting or completing a ballot and reported challenges in these areas. About 25 callers had questions or concerns about the registration process, including ways to update registration without physically going to the polls. Many of the calls from voters with limited disabilities pertained to questions or concerns about voting site operations. Of these, most concerned curbside voting (discussed in the following section).



VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



Caller called to ask for early voting sites in his zip code, they are vision impaired and had trouble with internet search to find polling site.

*Cumberland County,
October 15, 2020*



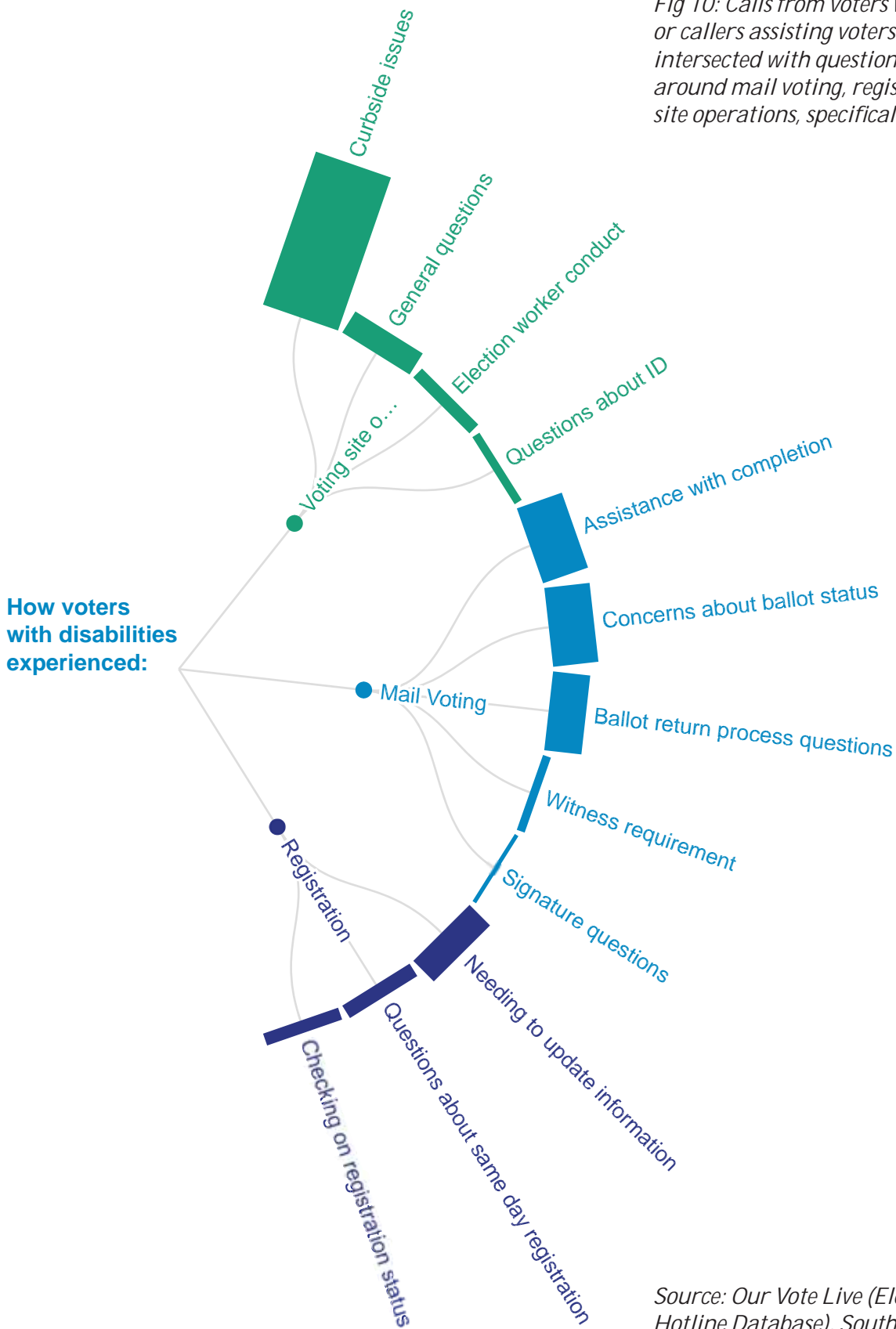
Voter drove with her mother to the county BOE office to deliver her mother's absentee ballot. They pulled up to curbside and a poll worker told the mother that she had to go inside to deliver the ballot. The poll worker did not tell her that a near relative (the daughter who was with her) could deliver it for her. While they were parking the car and getting the mother out of the car, a You Can Vote volunteer saw them & asked if they needed help. The volunteer told them that the daughter could deliver the ballot as an immediate relative. By the time the daughter got back up to the BOE office it was 5:05 pm and they were closed and refused to open the door. The daughter was able to go to a different location at the same site and deliver the ballot. Everything is OK now, but the caller was upset at the poll worker's lack of knowledge or help.

²⁵Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disability & Health US State Profile Data: North Carolina" <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/north-carolina.html>

²⁶The federal ADA mandates that all polling places must be accessible to people with disabilities, HAVA states that all Americans have the right to a private and independent vote, and North Carolina statutes allow any voter to receive assistance going in or out of a voting booth. N.C. Gen § 163-166.8

²⁷We are defining limited ability broadly as including disabilities, limited mobility, or any condition that inhibits participation without assistance

Fig 10: Calls from voters with disabilities or callers assisting voters with disabilities intersected with questions and concerns around mail voting, registration, and voting site operations, specifically curbside voting.



Source: Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database), Southern Coalition for Social Justice word crosstab coding analysis. Read about our recommendations for improving access to voting for disabled North Carolinians in Section 6.

6. Persisting challenges for voters at polling places

Curbside Voting

Curbside voting is required by North Carolina law as an option for voters with physical disabilities.²⁸ Even though it has been in place for decades in North Carolina, curbside voting is often not well known nor understood.

Many of the calls (almost 290) received by the hotline in this context came from disabled voters or people calling on behalf of voters with limited abilities asking for voting options and curbside information. Volunteers responded to these calls with an explanation of the curbside voting process. Many of these call logs stated, for example:



Caller wanted to know how curbside voting works because her husband is unable to stand in line to vote.

*Davidson County,
October 1, 2020*



Caller had questions about how his disabled mother could vote. I explained curbside voting.

*Wake County,
November 3, 2020*

VOLUNTEER REPORTS

There was no curbside voting signage at all, just a sign that said “Handicapped Voter Parking”. If someone parked in the handicapped area AND managed to flag down a poll worker, they could vote curbside, but it was hard because the parking was off to the side and not visible from the building. The poll workers were mostly inside the site.

*Wilson County,
October 31, 2020*

Curbside bell wasn’t working. It was fixed after about 90 minutes. Poll workers requested assistance from me in notifying them when curbside voting was needed.

*Orange County,
November 3, 2020*

Poll worker told voter that only people with a disability that prevented them from entering the building could use curbside voting. They did not explain all the categories included as a disability. Signage with all categories was present but not easy to read or see.

*Johnston County,
October 31, 2020*

VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE

Our data also show that too many of those who knew about the option arrived at their precinct or Early Voting site and could not locate the curbside voting location, or may have spent more than an hour waiting to vote via curbside due to ineffective planning or implementation.

Callers also reported an inability to indicate their presence (such as dysfunctional alert bells) and some reports of poll workers providing incorrect information, failing to follow COVID-19 protocols, and, in two separate counties, requiring voters to swear on a bible that they were eligible for curbside voting.



²⁸N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.9

Volunteers used the voting site checklist²⁹ to report:

Curbside voting was either **not set up, not clearly marked** with a sign, and/or **not easy to locate** at:

115

Early Voting sites in

49

counties and

135

Election Day sites in

43

counties

Curbside voters **could not alert poll workers** that they needed assistance without leaving their car at:

87

Early Voting sites in

43

counties and

143

Election Day sites in

44

counties

Curbside voters were **waiting for more than 10 minutes** for someone to speak to them at:

92

Early Voting sites in

37

counties and

48

Election Day sites in

44

counties

Voting site accessibility

Voting site accessibility means ensuring voting sites are easy to find, enter, and navigate. In 2020, as was similar to past elections, some voters reported having difficulties finding the voting site or voting site entrance and/or being unable or having difficulty finding parking.

Specifically, volunteer incident reports – in addition to hotline calls – show **a lack of or inadequate signage** at some sites, both signs designating the site as a polling place or directing voters to the specific entrance where voting was taking place. Some volunteers also reported inadequate exterior lighting, making the entrance difficult.

VOLUNTEER REPORT

I drove into the main entrance of the McDougle School, noting that there were no signs anywhere, and as soon as I pulled up, a young Black male voter walked up to me, asking where to vote. He informed me that the main door was locked. I immediately got on the phone to try to confirm where the entrance was, but the voter got frustrated and drove off. Although there were several cars parked, there were NO signs of where to vote anywhere. It took quite a while to determine that the location had moved from the library at the front of the school/main entrance (where it had traditionally been) to the gym/back of the school. I was upset to lose this voter, and so spent the duration of my shift standing in front of the library, redirecting other lost voters. – Orange County, November 3, 2020

Voters and volunteers also reported **inadequate parking options** at some polling sites. Some volunteers noted that the lack of adequate parking caused potential voters to leave without voting. In a few instances, full parking lots translated to cars parking in designated curbside voting areas. Some callers also noted the inability to find parking designated for those with mobility issues.

VOLUNTEER REPORTS



There is a long line of cars waiting for parking and a long line of voters waiting to enter the building. Drivers waited about 1 hour to try to park, but some left before they could. Voters in line were probably there two to three hours.

*Wake County
October 15, 2020*

There is no public transit in Youngsville so cars are the only way for most people to access the location. There is insufficient parking and it is very difficult to get in and out of the parking lot. People are leaving before voting because they can't park.

*Franklin County
October 15, 2020*

Volunteers used the voting site checklist²⁹ to report:

There were **no signs prominently displayed** identifying the building as a voting site at:

95 Early Voting sites in **52** counties
143 Election Day sites in **47** counties

There was **no directional signage** that led voters to the voting area at:

88 Early Voting sites in **45** counties
134 Election Day sites in **49** counties

There was **no adequate parking** available for voters at:

61 Early Voting sites in **35** counties
42 Election Day sites in **24** counties

There was a **wait time of over 30 minutes** to the entrance for voters at:

152 Early Voting sites in **46** counties
28 Election Day sites in **17** counties

²⁹The voting site checklist was a survey that volunteers at Democracy North Carolina used to measure the quality of polling sites across the state. Volunteers were instructed to observe the site for 15 minutes and, if multiple volunteers observed the same site, they were sent at different times of the day on different days.

Poll worker issues

In 2020, North Carolina election officials were faced with the formidable task of running an election amidst a pandemic. Thanks to a statewide effort by the North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) and voting rights advocates, the state overcame a poll worker shortage with the successful recruitment of tens of thousands of new poll workers.

Poll worker training confronted additional challenges amid shifting election rules and COVID-19 protocols. As such, reports of poll worker mistakes and misinformation were more predictable than in past years. However, some poll worker errors — for example, around provisional ballot eligibility — were part of a trend exhibited in past elections.

The hotline received over 200 calls concerning poll worker conduct. Most of these calls were reports or questions regarding poll workers providing **incorrect or inadequate information**. In addition, a handful of callers noted poll workers making partisan comments. Some callers reported that poll workers on Election Day were discouraging voters by telling them that their provisional ballots would not count.

Poll worker was angry that a man wanted to vote curbside. He was driving the car with a pregnant woman and a disabled person. The poll worker said the man was too lazy and that he was breaking the law by demanding to vote curbside when he wasn't eligible. He said that he would report him and he would face consequences. I believe he was still allowed to vote, but the poll worker was discussing this "lazy ass" with another voter and me.

Burke County, October 31, 2020

VOTER STORY FROM THE HOTLINE



Caller is a [person with a criminal record] who has finished their sentence, probation, & fees, and was told by the BOE he couldn't register because he's a convicted felon. He went to the BOE today to try to register but was turned away again, and so was his wife, citing that it was past the deadline.

Cumberland County, November 3, 2020

VOLUNTEER REPORT



Volunteers used the voting site checklist²⁹ to report:

Voters **complained about poll workers** at:

27 Early Voting sites in **18** counties

31 Election Day sites in **17** counties

Provisional ballots and out-of-precinct voting

Over 100 callers ask about eligibility, process, and whether or not their vote would ultimately count if voting by provisional ballot. In addition, the hotline received almost 40 calls from voters or those assisting voters reporting problems with the provisional ballot process. As in past elections, these reports were primarily cases of poll workers refusing or neglecting to consistently offer provisional ballots.

Many of these calls involved voters who presented to vote at a polling place within their county, but not at their assigned precinct on Election Day (out-of-precinct voters). Several voters and those assisting voters reported that poll workers either told voters about the option of going to their precinct where they can vote a regular ballot OR voting a provisional ballot, but did not inform them about both options — and in some cases, neglected to provide any options.

Notably, several hotline volunteers explicitly noted the level of **voter frustration**, at times leading to voters to give up on the process around precinct voting on Election Day.



VOTER STORIES FROM THE HOTLINE



Voter arrived at the polling place but was told he was not on the rolls and was denied a regular and provisional ballot.

Onslow County, November 3, 2020



Voter's polling place had been changed and he was turned away from his normal polling place. He was not told where he could vote nor offered a provisional ballot.

Mecklenburg County, November 3, 2020



Caller was told she couldn't vote because she wasn't registered. When I looked her up, the NCSBE site showed she last voted in 2014. I told her to go back and demand a provisional ballot. At first, the poll workers didn't want to give it to her. I told her to insist that it was her right under the Help America Vote Act. They finally gave her a provisional ballot. I told her she needed to follow up with the BOE tomorrow to find out why she was knocked off the rolls since she has lived at the same address for many years.

Rutherford County, November 3, 2020

VOLUNTEER REPORTS

Vote Protector spoke directly with the election judge who said she was not offering provisional ballots unless requested specifically by the voter. If a voter arrives and is at the wrong polling location, they are just being told to go to the correct polling location but are not offered a provisional ballot, or informed that this is an option.

Chatham County, November 3, 2020

A student voter had been sent to three separate polling locations, all of which weren't the correct one for them. **The voter was frustrated and left without giving me their contact information.**

Mecklenburg County, November 3, 2020

VOLUNTEER REPORT

Voter went to their correct precinct but was asked for ID at the site. She is a registered and active voter so she should not have been asked for ID. When she showed it, her ID address was different from her registered address and the poll workers sent her to a second site (where Election Protection volunteers are based). At site 2, the voter was not on the rolls and sent to site 3. The voter was frustrated and called the hotline; we believe that the **voter might be giving up after receiving this kind of runaround.**

Mecklenburg County, November 3, 2020



Calls about polling place locations and hours are also about access

The hotline received close to 4,000 (3,894) requests for polling place location and hour lookups, translating to almost 30 percent of all hotline calls. Many of these calls were paired with a request to look up registration status. This overwhelming volume points to a gap in accessible information — either a more easily accessible web presence or even a North Carolina state voter hotline that could provide this needed information to voters.

VOTER STORY FROM THE HOTLINE



They keep moving the polling place.

Perquimans County, October 14, 2020

THE HOTLINE RECEIVED 3,894 REQUESTS FOR POLLING PLACE LOCATION AND HOUR LOOKUPS

where to vote • know where to go to vote tomorrow • help looking up his voter registration and precinct • where to vote on election day • polling locations • where she needs to vote • voter needed to know their polling location • where she can vote • where she should vote on Election Day • help identifying polling place • wanted to know if he had to vote in his precinct polling place or anywhere in the county • where his polling place was • where to vote • find polling location • couldn't find her polling place address • polling place • needed address of polling place • wanted to know polling place • where her polling place was • looked up her polling place and she said she had never heard of it, but is going to the high school she has always voted at to see if she can vote there • when time polls are open, and run precinct info • wanted to know location • needed the name of polling place • election day polling place • find polling place • where she goes to vote • looking for polling place is • wanted to know open • find voting precinct • polling place is no longer one, so he wanted to know where to vote • identifying polling place • needed to know the name and address for his polling location • at her polling place hunting for it, couldn't find it • where to vote • he is homeless but has a P.O. Box address on his photo ID • look up her polling place • wanted to know his polling location • wants to know his polling place for election day • looking for voting site • wanted to know his polling location and when polls closed • confirm her polling place address • find out polling site • confirm polling place location had not been changed • unsure of her election day polling place • where her polling place is located • where her father could vote • where to go vote • where he could vote • wanted to know polling

Background text is comprised of text from some of the 3,894 calls requesting polling place location and hour look-ups. Our Vote Live (Election Protection Hotline Database), Southern Coalition for Social Justice word coding for "location and hours." The thousands of voters who reached out to us in 2020 help inform our recommendations. See recommendations for voter accessibility in Section 6.

5. CELEBRATING 2020 WINS

Despite serious challenges in 2020, North Carolinians won major improvements to casting ballots meaningfully and safely.

Responses to COVID-19 prompted more accessible and voter-friendly policies, contributing to North Carolina's highest turnout in modern history.

Election officials also took on the monumental task of successfully running an unprecedented election. Thanks to the due diligence and care of election officials, no COVID-19 clusters were tied to North Carolina voting sites.³⁰

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

In March 2020, North Carolina joined 39 other states in offering online voter registration to North Carolinians who possess a DMV-issued ID, greatly expanding access to and ease of voter registration.

Over half a million North Carolinians registered to vote via the online portal in 2020.⁶⁹ **The online portal was the most popular way to register to vote for the 2020 General Election.**

Online voter registration was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many places where voters would register to vote, such as in-person events, did not occur in 2020. Democracy NC rose to this challenge by organizing and hosting online voter registration parties where folks could register, ask questions, and have fun.



VOTING ACCESS

Disability voting rights advocates achieved a huge victory for visually impaired voters in 2020. The United States District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina in *Helen Jo Taliaferro, et al. v. North Carolina State Board of Elections, et al.* ruled that blind and visually impaired voters can now vote through an online, accessible absentee ballot – an option that had already existed for overseas citizens and military members.³¹

Forward Justice filed a lawsuit in 2019 challenging North Carolina's felony disenfranchisement law. In September 2020, a three-judge panel in *Community Success Initiative v. Moore* ruled that justice-involved North Carolinians whose inability to pay fines and fees extended their probation or parole period are eligible to register to vote.³²

³⁰@ncsbe. "Your state and county board of elections made your safety their priority during the 2020 general election, with PPE available at every voting site. No reported clusters of COVID-19 were tied to voting sites. More: [#2020WrapUp #YourVoteCountsNC](http://go.usa.gov/xATU9)." Twitter, 27 Dec. 2020, 10:00 a.m., <https://twitter.com/NCSBE/status/1343210195133095936>

⁶⁹"NVRA Registration Statistics." NCSBE.gov, North Carolina State Board of Elections, www.ncsbe.gov/registering/national-voter-registration-act-nvra/nvra-registration-statistics.

³¹After the State Board of Elections did not respond to a letter sent in June regarding the fact that blind and visually impaired voters could not use paper absentee ballots without assistance, four plaintiffs—Helen Jo Taliaferro, Kenneth Durden, Kendall Gibbs, and Ricky Scott—with the North Carolina Council of the Blind, the Governor Morehead School Alumni Association, and Disability Rights North Carolina, filed, and won a lawsuit against the SBOE that accessible absentee voting be made available to visually impaired voters. United States District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina. *Helen Jo Taliaferro, et al. v. North Carolina State Board of Elections, et al.* 5:20-CV-411-BO, 24 Sept. 2020.

³²*Community Success Initiative v. Moore* (No. 19-cvs-15941, Wake County Superior Court). See "Unlock Our Vote Campaign." Forward Justice, 2020, <https://forwardjustice.org/campaign/unlock-our-vote-campaign/>.

VOTING BY MAIL

North Carolina lawmakers and election administrators knew voting by mail would be crucial to keeping voters safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working across party lines, they moved quickly to improve the mail voting process.

The changes implemented below led to the most accessible, secure, and transparent mail voting process in North Carolina's history. In 2016, just 4% of the ballots cast were mail ballots. In 2020, this number jumped to 18%.³³ Between the 2020 primary and general elections, the number of mail ballots accepted and counted jumped from 90% to 98%.³⁴



Witness requirement:

The passage of House Bill 1169 reduced the number of required witnesses from two to one.³⁵ Previously, absentee voters were required to collect the information and signatures from two witnesses.



Online request form:

The North Carolina State Board of Election (NCSBE) launched an online absentee ballot request portal for the first time. North Carolina voters requested more than 326,000 ballots through the portal in 2020.³⁶



Mail ballot tracking:

The NCSBE released BallotTrax in September 2020. BallotTrax allowed voters to track their absentee ballot through the mail system, alerting them when election officials had received it.



Mail ballot deadline extension:

The COVID-19 pandemic put a strain on mail delivery in 2020, causing significant mail delays across the country. In response, the NCSBE extended the deadline to receive voted absentee ballots up until November 12, 2020, the day before election results were certified.



Allowing voters to fix mistakes on their absentee ballots:

In 2020, the The NCSBE issued a new statewide process to give voters an opportunity to correct mistakes made on their mail ballot envelope.

³³ 2020 Year-End Wrap Up. North Carolina State Board of Elections, Dec. 2020, p. Digital, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/year-end-wrap-2020>.

³⁴ @ncsbe. "In the 2020 general election, about 98% of absentee ballots were accepted, compared to 90% in the primary. This increase is partly due to improvements in the absentee by-mail process, and online request and tracking portals. #ncpol #YourVoteCountsNC" Twitter. 20 Feb. 2021, 10:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/NCSBE/status/1363141663191891976>

³⁵ <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2019/H1169>

³⁶ @ncsbe. "In the 2020 general election, the State Board introduced an online Absentee Ballot Request Portal to streamline the request process for voters. North Carolina voters requested more than 362,000 absentee ballots through the portal! #ncpol #YourVoteCountsNC." Twitter, 1 Feb. 2021, 2:30 p.m., <https://twitter.com/NCSBE/status/1356323969809395712>



EARLY VOTING

Early Voting has been North Carolinians' preferred way to cast a ballot for years, and the percentage share of voters taking advantage of Early Voting continues to increase steadily. In 2020, 65% of votes cast were at Early Voting sites, while the 2008 election marked 55.5%.³⁷

In 2020, North Carolina offered more Early Voting sites and Early Voting hours than ever.³⁸ Early Voting hours increased by 80% from 2016 (approximately 42,400 hours)³⁹ to 2020 (approximately 78,000 hours).⁴⁰

LINES AND WAIT TIMES

The last day of Early Voting and Election Day are typically the most popular voting days. As a result, these days saw the longest lines. Thanks in part to the expanded Early Voting hours and sites, volunteers reported quiet polling places with very little wait time on Election Day. While lines were reported for both curbside and indoor voting on the first day of the Early Voting period, many voters were excited to cast their ballots in such an important election and waited as long as it took.⁴¹

SECURE ELECTIONS

In North Carolina's 2020 election, 100% of county boards of elections used paper ballots for the first time. This produced a paper trail that could be accurately recounted and audited. The NCSBE also carries out a post-election audit, and in 2020 found a non-significant level of discrepancies or issues in counting, most of which were due to human error or were satisfactorily explained by county boards of election.⁴²

TURNOUT AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In North Carolina, 71.5% of the eligible voting population turned out at the polls, placing the state at 17th in the country and third among Southern states. The 2020 Election reflected nearly a 7 percentage point increase over 2016 turnout.⁴³ The turnout of registered NC voters was also at an impressive high, reaching 75.4%.⁴⁴

³⁷ "Voter Turnout." NCSBE Results & Data, Mar. 2021, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/results-data/voter-turnout>.

³⁸ "2020 in Review: 20 Ways Election Officials Served Voters in 2020." NCSBE Press Releases, 22 Dec. 2020, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2020/12/22/2020-review-20-ways-election-officials-served-voters-2020>.

³⁹ "Early Voting Hours, Sites Increase from 2012." NCSBE Press Releases, 10 Oct. 2016, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2016/10/10/early-voting-hours-sites-increase-2012>.

⁴⁰ "NC Votes Top 1 Million." NCSBE Press Releases, 16 Oct. 2020, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2020/10/16/nc-votes-top-1-million>.

⁴¹ Anderson, Bryan and Sarah Blake Morgan. "Long lines form as North Carolina begins early voting." Associated Press, 15 October 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-election-2020-donald-trump-north-carolina-greenville-4f38bfa1ea7b1f1b953c63cf5d00a1bf>

⁴² Audit Results for the November 3, 2020 Election. North Carolina State Board of Elections, Nov. 2020, p. 3, https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/Outreach/Election%20Security/Post-Election%20Audits/Nov_2020_Audit_Report.pdf.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ "Voter Turnout." NCSBE Results & Data, Mar. 2021, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/results-data/voter-turnout>.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

IMPROVING OUR ELECTIONS

We charge our state lawmakers at the NC General Assembly and election officials at the North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) with a mission: to make North Carolina a national model for comprehensive voting access.

Becoming a national model means ensuring access and fair representation for every North Carolinian – especially Black and Latiné North Carolinians who have been the targets of voter suppression.

The following recommendations stem directly from comments by thousands of voters who reached out to us in 2020. *To read about what we heard from voters in 2020, see section 4.*

Some of our recommendations are minor fixes. Others are comprehensive reforms. All are based on the belief that true democracy is possible and worth the work, and that increasing access to the ballot is a crucial step in creating and improving a true democracy.

VOTING BY MAIL

Voting by mail is rapidly gaining in popularity. Nearly one in five North Carolina voters cast a mail ballot during the 2020 presidential election. More people voted by mail in 2020 than voted in person on Election Day. However, our mail voting laws are outdated and must be improved.

The following should be implemented to bring North Carolina's absentee voting laws into the 21st century:

Who has the power to make this change?



North Carolina General Assembly



North Carolina State Board of Elections



1. Eliminate the witness requirement for absentee ballots. North Carolina law currently requires a voter to have two witnesses (or one notary) sign their absentee ballot. This law disenfranchises voters who live alone, are disabled, or do not otherwise have access to two witnesses. The witness requirement is unnecessary; North Carolina already has safeguards in place to ensure secure mail ballots, without the need to burden voters, including:

- ✓ requiring voters to submit a driver's license or state ID number or the last four digits of their Social Security Number to request an absentee ballot⁴⁵,
- ✓ requiring a certification under penalty of perjury by the voter on the absentee ballot itself, and
- ✓ making the identities of absentee ballot requestors confidential until Election Day⁴⁶, to ensure mail voting is accessible and safe and to prevent those trying to harvest ballots from targeting voters who have requested mail ballots.

⁴⁵ See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-230.2(a)(4), (f)

⁴⁶ See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-228(c)



2. Allow voters to fix mistakes on their mail ballots. In 2020, voters in North Carolina had the opportunity to fix problems with their mail ballots after submitting them. This process – known as ballot curing – should be passed into state law.⁴⁷



3. Offer voters paid postage for mail ballots and absentee ballot request forms. Voters should not face a poll tax in order to vote by mail. The state should provide paid postage for every step of mail voting.



4. Offer secure drop boxes for returning mail ballots. North Carolina is one of only 10 states that explicitly forbids counties from offering secure, standalone drop boxes where voters can deposit their absentee ballots.⁴⁸ Drop boxes are a convenient and secure option which should be available to voters across the state.



5. Allow voters to pick up their mail ballot from their county boards of elections. NC law prohibits voters from picking up their mail ballot from their county board of elections office. This makes it impossible for voters who do not have a permanent residence to receive their ballot as well as voters who do not have time to wait for a new ballot to be mailed. This is a minor yet extremely significant change.



6. Allow voters to request their mail ballot online. 2020 was the first year that voters were able to request their mail ballot using an online form. Approximately 362,000 registered voters requested their absentee ballot using this method.⁴⁹ The NCGA should codify this online request system into law for all future elections.



7. Allow voters to “opt-in” to mail voting for all future elections. North Carolinians must submit a new request form for every election they want to vote by mail.⁵⁰ Voters should have the option to indicate that they would like to vote by mail for all future elections and automatically receive a mail ballot for each election instead of requesting them every cycle.

⁴⁷ Currently, the NCSBE has issued a numbered memo mandating a cure process. However, this could be revoked at any point by the current or future NCSBE Director, and must be codified into law.

⁴⁸ Hufford, Axel, et al. Where Can You Drop Off Your Ballot? A 50 State Analysis. HealthyElections.org, 22 Oct. 2020, p. 5, https://healthyelections.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Ballot_Drop_Off_0.pdf.

⁴⁹ Gannon, Patrick, and Democracy North Carolina. E-Mail Re: Online Voter Engagement Numbers. 29 Sept. 2021.

⁵⁰ Currently, voters can request that a mail ballot be sent to them for all future elections in the same year if they are facing “continued or expected illness or disability.”



8. Incorporate a mail ballot tracking process into law. Nearly half a million North Carolinians used BallotTrax to track the status of their mail ballot in 2020.⁵¹ The NCGA should include this or a similar ballot tracking system in state law, ensuring that voters can use it in future years.



9. Expand the window of time when mail ballots may be accepted. Currently, mail ballots cast by military and overseas voters will be counted up until the day before the statewide canvass, which takes place 10 days after Election Day.⁵² All absentee ballots should follow the same guidelines to allow for mail delays (as we saw during the 2020 Election).

EARLY VOTING

Early Voting is the most popular voting option in North Carolina. Early Voting sites allow voters to register to vote, update their registration, and cast their ballot all in one place. It is a particularly popular option for students, rural voters, Black voters, and Latiné voters.

North Carolina has lengthened the Early Voting period since it was first introduced in the late 1990s. However, several changes are needed to improve Early Voting in future years:



1. Require weekend voting hours. North Carolina only requires one day of Early Voting on the weekend — the Saturday before Election Day.⁵⁵ This should be expanded to include multiple weekend days, including at least one Sunday.



3. Allow voters without a permanent residence to register at Early Voting sites. Current law requires voters registering to vote or updating their registration at an Early Voting site to provide identification that contains both the voter's name and residential address. This prohibits voters without permanent homes from voting, as they will not have this identification.



2. Allowing counties to set flexible voting hours. Current law requires all Early Voting sites within the same county to be open during the same hours.⁵⁶ This law should be changed to allow sites to have different hours within the same county.



4. Require a minimum number of Early Voting sites to be offered based on population. In 2020, the NCSBE required each county to operate one Early Voting site for every 20,000 registered voters in the county.⁵⁷ A similar formula should be required for future elections.

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² N.C.G.S. § 163-258.12

⁵³ NC State Board of Elections, Voting Method in Presidential Election Years: 2008-Present, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/results-data/voter-turnout>

⁵⁴ Democracy NC, Greater Costs, Fewer Options: The Impact of the Early Voting Uniform Hours Requirement in the 2018 Election, <https://democracync.org/research/greater-costs-fewer-options-the-impact-of-the-early-voting-uniform-hours-requirement-in-the-2018-election/> ⁵⁵ N.C.G.S. §163-227.6

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ NC State Board of Elections, Numbered Memo 2020-14, 23 July 2020. https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/sboe/numbermemo/2020/Numbered%20Memo%202020-14_Emergency%20Order%20of%20July%2017%2C%202020.pdf

VOTER REGISTRATION

North Carolinians have three options for registering to vote: online, in person at an Early Voting site, or by submitting a paper voter registration form. While North Carolina took a big step by offering online voter registration in 2020, several improvements should be made in the coming years:



1. Allow voters to register or update their registration on Election Day.

North Carolina already allows voters to register and cast a ballot — a process known as same-day registration — at any Early Voting site in their county. However, North Carolina does not currently allow voters to make changes to their registration on Election Day. At the time of this report, 18 states and the District of Columbia offer voters same-day registration on Election Day.



2. Allow all North Carolinians to register to vote online.

Currently, only voters who have a DMV-issued driver's license or ID can register to vote online. The online voter registration system should match the paper form, allowing anyone to register using their Social Security Number.



3. Implement automatic voter registration.

North Carolina should allow state agencies collecting information — such as the DMV — to automatically register voters. Voters should be given the option to opt out if they do not wish to register. As of this writing, 20 states use automatic voter registration in some form.⁵⁸



4. Extend the voter registration deadline.

Current law requires unregistered voters to submit a voter registration form 25 days before Election Day.⁵⁹ The deadline should be changed to 10 days before Election Day, which gives counties enough time to process new registrations.



5. Provide more information to the public about voter status.

The “inactive,” “denied,” and “removed” voter status continue to confuse voters. There is little information available online to help voters who have been flagged. The NCSBE should create a standalone web page on these statuses, along with what a voter can do to fix the issue.



6. Improve North Carolina's list maintenance process.

Federal law requires states to keep their voter registration lists accurate and up to date. Unfortunately, North Carolina's current list maintenance process sometimes removes eligible voters. North Carolina should improve its system by not placing the burden on the voter to confirm their address and do more outreach to voters who have been removed from the voter rolls.

⁵⁸ National Conference of State Legislatures, Automatic Voter Registration, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration.aspx>

⁵⁹ N.C.G.S. § 163-82.6

POLL WORKERS

Poll workers are the backbone of election administration. Nearly 60,000 North Carolinians served as poll workers during the 2020 Presidential Election.⁶⁰ As a result, the election ran smoothly, without a single county reporting poll worker shortages.

However, North Carolina still faces long-standing issues with recruiting and training poll workers – which could be addressed by the following:



1. Require a uniform statewide poll worker training. There is currently no standard training that poll workers must receive before assisting voters. A statewide required training would ease the burden on the counties to provide their own training while standardizing the information that poll workers receive.



4. Permit poll workers to work outside their county of residence. North Carolina should allow any registered voter within the state to serve as a poll worker in any county, no matter where they are registered. This small change would ensure that poll workers can move from one county to another if there are future shortages.



2. Establish a standard Poll Worker Code of Conduct. A poll worker code of conduct would create a welcoming environment for all voters. This would include a system for dismissing poll workers who failed to abide by the code of conduct.



5. Set a minimum hourly wage for poll workers. There is no set minimum hourly wage for poll workers serving in North Carolina. This has led to marked disparities from county to county in poll worker pay. This creates barriers for low-wealth North Carolinians, who may otherwise wish to serve as poll workers. However, poll workers should be given the option to opt out of this funding.



3. Lower the poll worker minimum age from 18 to 16. The majority of states allow residents 16 years of age and older to serve as poll workers.⁶¹ High school students can receive first-hand experience learning about elections by running the polls and receive a crucial lesson in civic engagement.



⁶⁰ <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2021/03/04/state-board-receives-national-award-2020-poll-worker-recruitment-efforts>

⁶¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-poll-workers637018267.aspx>

VOTER INTIMIDATION

To learn about what voter intimidation looked like in North Carolina in 2020, see section 4.

While North Carolina law specifically prohibits voter intimidation, specific actions are not clearly defined in state law.⁶² As a result, voters, police officers, and poll workers can be unsure about what does and does not classify as voter intimidation.

We recommend the following changes to ensure that voters are not intimidated when trying to cast a ballot:



1. Update state law to clearly define voter intimidation. The NCSBE sets guidelines for voter intimidation through memos – however, these change over time. State law should be updated to clearly define prohibited activities. This should be based on the perspective of the voter experience and should also include protections for mail voting.



4. Form an advisory group on voter intimidation. This group would be tasked with ensuring poll workers, police officers, community groups, and voters have information about voter intimidation. The group could also work to track and address incidents of intimidation.



2. Provide voter intimidation training to all poll workers and election officials. All county boards of elections staff and poll workers should be trained on how to handle instances of voter intimidation at the polls. Currently, county boards develop their own poll worker training materials.



5. Outlaw weapons at voting sites. The 2020 Election saw a significant uptick in instances of voter intimidation and harassment. North Carolina should completely ban guns at voting sites to ensure that voters feel safe when voting.



3. Require police officers to complete voter intimidation-specific training. This should include how to respond to instances of voter intimidation at polling places and the rules and regulations that prevent police from patrolling voting sites.



6. Create a statewide, unified system for reporting voter intimidation incidents. The NCSBE should provide a “voter intimidation complaint form” to centralize complaints received by voters and the county boards of elections. This anonymized data should be released to voters after each election.

⁶²N.C. Gen. §163-48, 163-274(3) & (6).

VOTER ACCESS & TRANSPARENCY

Voters should have access to the information they need to vote — and be able to look “behind the curtain” to see how elections are run. While the NCSBE website is a good place for voters to start, we can do more:



1. Develop and publicize a statewide, toll-free voter hotline. This hotline could be used by any North Carolina voter who has a question or needs to report a problem. Trained volunteers should be on hand to assist voters in languages commonly spoken in North Carolina (including English, Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and Urdu.)



2. Develop a voter advocate program. At present, many voters do not know who to turn to if they have a problem voting or registering to vote. The NCSBE should recruit and train a group of voter advocates who could assist voters in real-time. These advocates would be aware of North Carolina voting rules and serve as a mediator between the voter’s county board of elections staff.



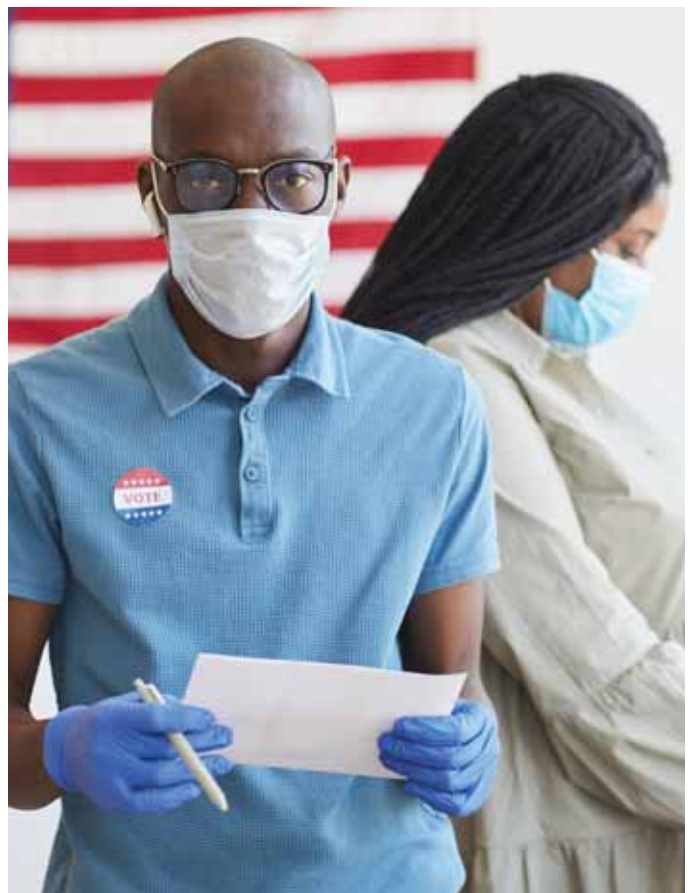
3. Design a centralized online portal for North Carolina voters. The NCSBE’s current website (ncsbe.gov) contains good information, but many improvements could be made to ensure voters can easily look up their voter record, find their closest voting site, and get answers to frequently asked questions.



4. Release a document of reported voter incidents to the public following each election. The public deserves to know the problems that voters faced at the polls — and how they will be addressed in future elections.



5. Solicit voter feedback. Feedback could come from a comment card that can be completed before leaving the polling place, or a website voters can visit after voting to leave their feedback.



PROVISIONAL VOTING

Provisional ballots act as a safety net for voters who are unable to vote a normal ballot. This could be because the voter shows up to the wrong precinct on Election Day or a problem with their voter registration. Any voter who is denied a regular ballot must be allowed to vote a provisional ballot.

Provisional ballots are reviewed and researched by the local county board of elections staff after the election. Any provisional ballots that are counted are included in the final election results, which are certified 10 days after Election Day.⁶³

North Carolina should make the following changes to provisional voting in the coming years:



1. Provide voters who cast a provisional ballot with a contact who can answer questions. Several hotline callers reported that they did not know who to turn to with their questions about why they were asked to vote a provisional ballot and how they could ensure that it counted. A hotline could be staffed by advocates who could assist voters with ensuring their provisional ballot will count (if possible) and how to prevent them from voting a provisional ballot in future elections.



3. Require mandatory statewide training on provisional ballots for every poll worker and additional training for county boards of elections. Provisional voting should be well understood by every poll worker who works with voters. Having a standard training system for poll workers on this complicated issue will ensure that every voter is offered a provisional ballot, and no voters are turned away. In addition, improper rejection of provisional ballots points to a need for additional training for county boards of elections staff.



2. Allow voters who cast a provisional ballot to see if the ballot was counted via their online voter record. Currently, voters who cast a provisional ballot cannot see if their ballot was counted by looking at their online voter history. If the ballot was not counted, the reason should be listed, with a person to contact with questions or concerns.



4. Investigate the number of voters who are denied provisional ballots each election. Each election, we hear from voters who are denied a regular ballot but are not offered a provisional ballot. The NCSBE should invest time and energy into investigating the reasons why poll workers do not offer provisional ballots, and what can be done to prevent this from happening in the future.

⁶³ "Provisional Voting" NCSBE.gov, North Carolina State Board of Elections, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/provisional-voting>

ACCESSIBLE VOTING

In 2020, North Carolina took strides in improving voter accessibility for disabled voters. This included a new online voting portal for blind and disabled voters which half a million voters used in 2020.⁶⁴

Despite these wins, North Carolina still has work to do. The following are our recommendations for improving voter accessibility:



1. Develop new systems to ensure that curbside voting is properly marked, attended, and offers a comparable voting experience. Curbside voting is supposed to be available at every poll site throughout the state; however, curbside voting is not consistently offered and properly marked. The NCSBE should develop a statewide system to ensure all voters can vote using curbside voting.



3. Require statewide training for election officials to ensure disabled voters can cast a ballot privately and independently. North Carolina requires all polling places to be accessible to all voters. However, voters with disabilities have reported that poll workers lack knowledge about operating accessible voting machines or providing appropriate assistance.



2. Expand and improve the Multipartisan Assistance Team (MAT) program. MATs assist voters who are in residential facilities with completing their ballots. They are formed and coordinated by the county boards of election staff. MATs should be available to any voter in future years, and more work should be done to recruit and pay MAT workers.



4. Make permanent a portal for blind and visually impaired voters into law. Starting in 2020, blind and visually impaired voters in North Carolina could request, receive, and return an accessible absentee ballot online.⁶⁵ This portal should be written into our state law for future voters.

⁶⁴ “NVRA Registration Statistics.” NCSBE.gov, North Carolina State Board of Elections, www.ncsbe.gov/registering/national-voter-registration-act-nvra/nvra-registration-statistics.

⁶⁵ <https://www.ncsbe.gov/news/press-releases/2020/10/20/state-board-launches-voting-portal-blind-visually-impaired-voters>

⁶⁶ “Newkirk II, Vann R. “Voter Suppression Is Warping Democracy.” The Atlantic, July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/poll-prri-voter-suppression/565355/>.



OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are final recommendations for improving our elections:



1. End felony disenfranchisement and extend voting rights to all individuals who are incarcerated. North Carolina currently strips people who are serving a felony sentence of the right to vote. Incarcerated individuals should have a voice in choosing the elected officials that create policies that affect them and their families.



2. Creating new statewide funding sources for elections. In North Carolina, local governments largely shoulder the burden of administering and funding elections within their counties. Counties should not have the burden for funding elections or have to rely on sporadic public and private funding. Instead, the state should develop permanent, recurring revenue sources that could be funneled to counties for election administration.



3. Standardize transparency across all county boards of elections (BOE). All county BOE meetings should be available for the public to participate remotely. While some counties currently offer remote access, others do not. Information on how to join and participate in all meetings should be posted on the county elections board website. Meeting recordings should be stored on each county's BOE website. The NCSBE should provide oversight to ensure that public meetings are properly noticed, implemented, and recorded.



4. Make Election Day a state holiday. North Carolina should join the handful of states that have officially declared Election Day as a paid state holiday. Tuesdays are a day when many North Carolinians are working or attending school. Not being able to take time off work to cast a ballot disproportionately affects Black and Latiné voters.⁶⁶



7. TAKE ACTION

- ✔ **Protect the vote.** For the past decade, Democracy NC’s non-partisan Vote Protectors have helped thousands of voters across the state. They sound the alarm when polling locations aren’t properly equipped, when voters are denied a ballot, and much more. Their work allows us to fight for and win on-the-spot fixes so fewer voters get turned away. In addition, volunteers for our Election Protection hotline have assisted voters by answering questions about registering to vote, casting ballots, and reporting voting problems. Learn more at demnc.co/voteprotector.
- ✔ **Stay local.** Work with Democracy NC’s Regional Managing Organizers and local partners across the state to make sure your communities know how they’ll be affected by election campaigns and policies right where they live. Learn more at demnc.co/volunteer.
- ✔ **Get educated.** Become a local Elections Advocate and build relationships with your county board of elections. Monitor your local meetings and help work toward funding, accessible voting sites, and greater transparency. Learn more at demnc.co/electionsadvocate.
- ✔ **Stay connected.** Sign up to hear the latest from North Carolina and across the South at scsj.org/newsletter.



8. CONCLUSION

Elections are designed to ensure self-determination for our communities – to decide how we equitably decide representation and resources. However, generations of North Carolinians have been blocked from participating in our government on the basis of race, gender, income, wealth, and ability.

Not all barriers to voting are intentional. Often, voters are unable to cast a ballot due to systemic issues, despite the best efforts of election boards and their administrators. Running an election during a pandemic highlighted both the importance of poll workers and the need to support and fund them more adequately.

While many of our findings detailed how voters were prevented from casting a ballot, almost an equal number showcased positive interactions with poll workers fostering trust and enthusiasm among voters. By centering the experience of 2020 voters, we hope our report laid a clear roadmap for improving North Carolina’s policies and processes.

Democracy NC and SCSJ believe that by working together, we can create a democracy that is truly “of, by and for the people.”

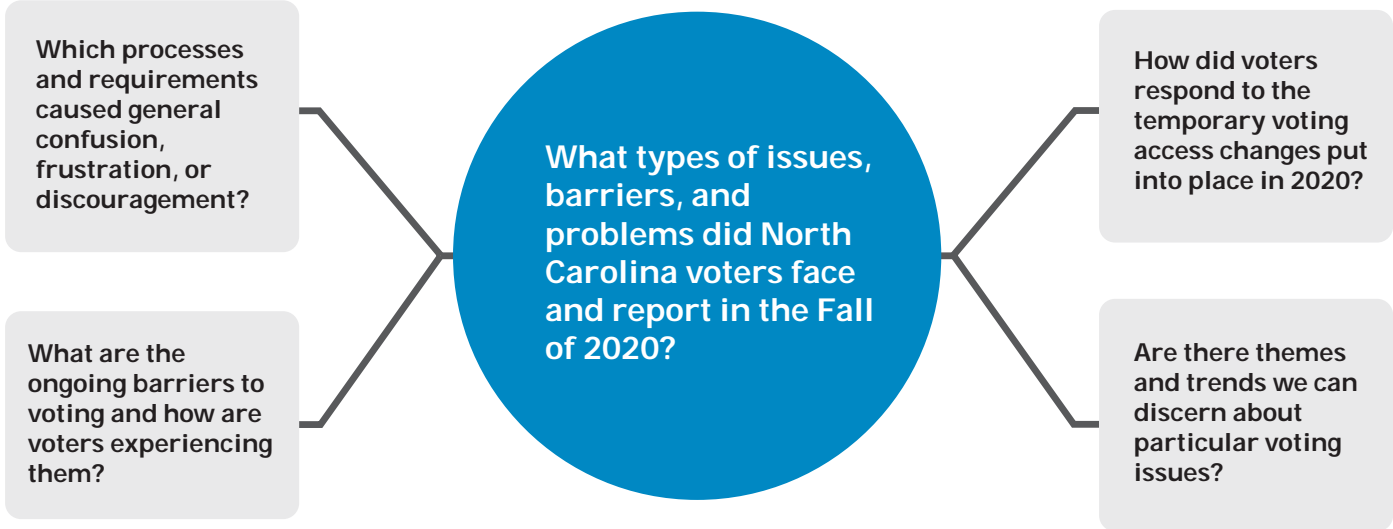
9. APPENDIX

SECTION 4 METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND CODE BOOK

Volunteers who staffed the North Carolina Election Protection hotline during the Fall 2020 election recorded information about each call – from both voters and volunteers assisting voters – in the Our Vote Live (OVL) database. Volunteers responded to a series of prompts in OVL to record call content and caller information, including geography and issue descriptions.⁶⁷ Volunteers entered the information from North Carolina-based calls into 12,977 “tickets” from August 10 to November 13, 2020.⁶⁸

In the winter and spring of 2021, SCSJ examined and categorized the almost 13,000 tickets, and together with Democracy NC, created an initial coding framework based on frequently observed voting issues and barriers, priorities, and concerns, and potential for regressive legislative action. A subset of the tickets were precoded in March 2021 to get a sense of the scope, identify emergent themes, and gather feedback on the utility of the types of analyses available. From April to June, a team of three staff – all with past volunteer experience on the hotline – categorized the tickets into 19,233 issues and questions, or “codes,” in NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. Staff checked in frequently with each other and with advocates throughout the process to ensure both intercoder reliability and an iterative and informed evolution of the codebook.

Guiding research questions included:



⁶⁷Tickets included both required and optional fields. Only 46.6 percent of North Carolina tickets, for instance, were categorized by voters’ race, which does not allow us to make generalizations based on this factor.

⁶⁸12,259 tickets were tagged by volunteers as North Carolina-based calls. In addition to these tickets, SCSJ matched all tickets to NC OVL volunteer emails to locate mis- or uncategorized North Carolina tickets and merged the “NC Counties Categorized Data” file with the matched “NC Counties Potentially Miscategorized” and “Blank States” files for a total of 12,977 records in the final merged file.

ELECTION PROTECTION OVL DATA CODES

- I. Absentee Ballots (includes mail in, drop off but not one-stop in person)
 - a. Acceptance
 - i. AB and voting in person - [Mostly questions about whether one can request an AB and then vote in person and what to do with the physical ballot if voting in person.]
 - ii. Dropbox - [Is there a dropbox, where is the dropbox etc]
 - iii. Rejected – [caller reports AB rejected without legitimate reason]
 - iv. Return process - [Includes questions about ID, who can drop off, drop off deadline (combined with drop off location - where to drop off, how to drop off)]
 - v. USPS - [Includes questions about delivery, where to mail the completed ballot, postage]
 - b. Completing
 - i. Assistance with completion – [Who can assist, MAT issues - both ABRF and AB]
 - ii. Damaged ballot - [includes sealed, ripped, other damage upon receipt]
 - iii. General form questions – [includes questions about leaving blanks, providing a date]
 - iv. Mistakes, deficiencies, and cure process
 - Concern about making a mistake - [concerned a mistake would invalidate etc, from voter’s perspective, pre-submission]
 - Deficiencies – [after submission; Types: Witness information incomplete, Missing voter signature (no voter signature), Did not print name, Did not print address, Signed on wrong line, Missing witness signature (no witness signature), Witness address incomplete, Voter spoiled ballot (or replacement ballot), Unsealed]
 - Election workers refused to spoil
 - Cure process questions - [deadlines, who to mail it to, what it means, how to spoil a ballot (if not for voting in person)]
 - v. Signature - [Mostly question about signature matching, middle name questions]
 - vi. Witness requirement
 - Eligibility and requirements
 - a. Number of witnesses
 - b. Who can be a witness [(spouse, child, US citizen, NC resident etc)]
 - No witness - [includes concern about no witness]
 - c. General questions - [including what is AB, AB/early voting?]
 - d. Monitoring - [also goes to trust]
 - i. Ballottrax issues [issues with ballottrax system]
 - ii. Concerns about status – [what is the status, how to check status (see digital divide)]
 - Concern about ballot status
 - Requested, not received - [Check dates, high volume in mid to late-Sept]
 - a. [Not received after 2 weeks]
 - b. [Not received in time to vote (ex 9/11 mailing)]
 - e. Requesting – [note, intersects with monitoring]
 - i. ABRF process questions – [includes eligibility, who can request, how to request (ABRF v. ballot)]
 - ii. County refused to issue [new AB - despite request]
 - iii. In-person pick-up preference
 - iv. Missed deadline [includes concerns about missing deadline]
 - v. Multiple ballots received (or multiple ABRFs)

- vi. Reason for voting absentee - [covid, disability etc]
- II. Ballot Questions - [sample ballots, what different offices are]
- III. County BOE [direct call to CBOE, includes interactions with SBOE]
 - a. Closed during business hours
 - b. Incorrect or inaccessible information - [Received incorrect information from CBOE (employee or website); includes instances of inability to access info because of non-intuitive site format etc.
 - c. Unresponsive - [COE unresponsive to requests for help/information]
- IV. Hotline Confusion - [thought the hotline number they were calling was something else (CBOE, democratic party, Conservation Voters org that sent all those postcards etc)]
- V. Intersecting Issues
 - a. 3rd party mailings – [about AB or registration status that caused confusion and/or frustration, but maybe not disinformation/misinformation. Also see code: Multiple ABRF received electioneering texts or mailings; check double coding w/ Concern about status.]
 - b. Deadline concerns - [“I’m afraid I missed the deadline, or will miss the deadline” Also includes tickets close to the deadline, then will go vote in person because worried about the deadline]
 - c. Digital divide – [no access to a computer or internet to request ballots, includes AB, ballot status etc.]
 - d. Disenfranchisement - [voter was not able to vote]
 - e. Displacement
 - f. Houselessness
 - g. Language accessibility
 - h. Limited ability - [includes limited mobility, disability, COVID diagnoses, and anything that inhibits participation without assistance]
 - i. Military member - [requesting absentee ballots, not knowing where to vote (military base vs. voter registration), special military deadlines, etc.]
 - j. New voter [(first-time voter includes students, voters from other states, parents calling on behalf of their kids, naturalized citizens etc).]
 - k. Privacy concerns (includes domestic violence survivors)
 - l. Transportation [transportation to, includes ride to the polls]
- VI. Juicy Quotes
- VII. Location and Hours [both one-stop and ED, Nov 1 and 2 confusion about EV vs ED]
- VIII. Registration
 - a. Criminal records [confusion about eligibility, felonies/misdemeanors]
 - b. General information
 - c. Inactive status - [confused about what it means, how they got there]
 - d. Missed deadline
 - e. Need to update information - [possible during EV but not ED. Address, name, birthdate, party]
 - i. Address questions - [includes questions about college students’ addresses]
 - Out of state
 - f. OVR (Online Voter Registration)
 - g. Registration denied - [and didn’t know why]
 - h. Removed from roll
 - i. SDR (Same Day Registration) - [includes people asking about registration options when SDR is the option, how to register in person]
 - i. No SDR on ED
 - j. Told not registered on ED - [showed up to vote on ED and told not registered]
 - k. Unsure about status - [includes checking on status, unsure about eligibility]

- IX. Voter Intimidation
 - a. Blatant disinformation - [via phone, text, email, social media, door knock]
 - b. Electioneering - [w/in 50 foot buffer zone, aggressive campaigner, or campaigners not following CDC guidelines]
 - c. Gun - [Report of gun at the voting site]
 - d. Physical intimidation - [not wearing masks, yelling at voters, waving non-partisan but violent masks, racist chants]
 - e. Police presence - [Reports of police or security officers presence at voting site]
- X. Voter Perspective (if explicitly stated)
 - a. Confusion
 - b. Frustration
 - c. Happy or relieved
 - d. Trust or confidence in process – [worried ballot won't count, calling to make sure it counts]
- XI. Voting Site Operation
 - a. Accessibility, [for example Site not accessible to those with physical disabilities, Voting site hard to find or improperly signed, Lack of transit accessibility (parking and public transit), Ride to the polls]
 - b. Closed - [Voting site closed, when it should be open]
 - c. Concern about status - concern about voting status after one-stop or ED voting
 - d. COVID issues - [includes guidelines not being enforced by poll workers, using not following CDC guidelines as voter intimidation is in the voter intimidation section]
 - e. Curbside
 - i. Curbside not operational
 - ii. General information
 - iii. Long line
 - iv. Not properly signed
 - f. Election workers [includes Caller received incorrect information (from poll worker or EJ), Pollworker was rude, aggressive, biased, Issues like understaffing]
 - g. Essential supplies - [Site ran out of essential supplies (including ballots)]
 - h. ID - [refers to in-person voting, if you need an ID to vote - both one-stop and ED]
 - i. General questions - [both one-stop and ED]
 - j. Language accessibility - [includes questions about interpreters, voting materials, double code in intersecting issues]
 - k. Long lines
 - l. Provisional ballot – [should have been offered, but wasn't]
 - m. Showed up, already voted - [Showed up to vote, but told already voted]
 - n. Voting machine issues - [be specific: tabulators, scanners, ballot marking devices]

ACRONYMS

BOE: Board of Elections or Boards of Election

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

EV: Early Voting

MAT: Multipartisan Assistance Team

NCGA: North Carolina General Assembly

NCSBE: North Carolina State Board of Elections

OVL: Our Vote Live

PPE: Personal Protective Equipment

VP: Vote Protector

DEFINITIONS

We have included definitions of the below terms to ensure that readers can gain a full understanding of the racial and political context contained within this report:

Absentee Ballots/Mail Ballots. Voting by mail. Since 2001, North Carolina has had “no excuse” voting by mail. This allows any registered voter to request and vote a mail-in ballot. When a voter completes their mail-in ballot, they can mail their ballot in the return envelope, return it to their County Board of Elections in person, or bring it to an early voting site.

Ballot curing. The notification and correction/remedy process following an election to correct errors such as missing signatures on absentee ballots so that it may be counted.

Communities or People/Person of Color. These terms broadly encompass Black, Latiné, Indigenous, Asian American, and Pacific Islander populations. We refer to Black, Latiné or Indigenous as often as possible in this report as a means of identifying the exact population and to avoid generalizing when we mean a specific group. However, in a few places we refer more generally to “people of color” or “communities of color” to encompass the broader community, including that of Asian American and Pacific Islanders.

Canvass. The process of ensuring votes have been counted correctly. The required audits have been completed and the results of each candidate race has been certified during meetings of every county board of elections. The post-election “canvass” process occurs after every election.

Disenfranchisement. The act of depriving a person of the rights or privileges promised to citizens of a nation.

Felony Disenfranchisement. The act of barring individuals from the polls or casting their ballot due to a felony conviction, both while they are imprisoned as well as after their release. How long these people lose the right to vote and how they regain the right to vote, if at all, is determined state by state.

Indigenous. The people native to an area prior to contact with new settler populations. In this report, Indigenous refers to the relatives of those who lived within what is now the United States prior to European contact. Indigenous peoples live on every continent. They have pre-existing sovereignty and are fighting to remain culturally intact on their land.

Latiné. The gender-neutral form of the word Latino or Latina, referring to those native to/an inhabitant of/descendant of those from Latin America.

Low-resource. Circumstances typically characterized by a lack of funds to cover things like health care, housing, and other societal needs.

Misinformation and Disinformation. While misinformation refers more generally to falsehoods or inaccurate information (sometimes unknowingly shared), disinformation is a subset of misinformation that is deliberately misleading or deceptive, aimed at achieving a political goal often through the intentional spread of viral falsehoods.

Provisional Ballots. A provisional ballot is a “failsafe” or safety net option for voters when there is a question about their eligibility to vote. These questions can come up for a variety of reasons, including going to the wrong precinct, moving, or some other problem with the voter record. Federal law requires that anyone who presents to vote be given the opportunity to vote, and provisional ballots guarantee that every voter is given that chance. The voter is then able to contact their County Board of Elections after the canvass to learn if their ballot counted.

Racist. The ways in which we perpetuate and/or assume the idea that white people are inherently better and/or people or communities of color are inherently inferior on an individual basis. Systemic or structural racism is how the racist and discriminatory practices of institutions intersect to create a network of opportunity for people in the white group, while blocking opportunity and access for communities and people of color.

Voter suppression. The means or strategy, legal or extralegal, of reducing voting, or registering to vote, by members of a targeted racial group, political party, or religious community. Such barriers in front of the ballot box could include imposing strict voter ID laws, cutting voting times, restricting registration, and purging voter rolls.

White Supremacy. The ways in which the ruling class elite have used the pseudo-scientific concept of “race” to create whiteness and a hierarchy of racialized value in order to disconnect and divide white people from themselves and Black, Indigenous, and people of color; and disconnect and divide Black, Indigenous, and people of color from each other.

Sources: Brennan Center for Justice; Dismantling Racism; North Carolina State Board of Elections; UCLA Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; White Supremacy Culture.

Voting Site Checklist

Use this checklist to evaluate each of the voting sites you are assigned during your shift.

<u>First and Last Name</u>	<u>Phone Number</u>	<u>Email</u>	<u>Date</u>
<u>Voting site 1</u> Site name: City: County: Time Arrived: Time Departed:	<u>Voting site 2</u> Site name: City: County: Time Arrived: Time Departed:	<u>Voting site 3</u> Site name: City: County: Time Arrived: Time Departed:	<u>Voting site 4</u> Site name: City: County: Time Arrived: Time Departed:

>> **Arriving:** Fill out this section when you arrive at the voting site. Mark each column with **Y** for Yes, **N** for No, or **U** for Unsure.

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
1. Is the voting site easy to locate and access ?				
2. Is there public transportation within 2 blocks (or seeing distance) of the voting site?				
3. Is a sign identifying the building as a voting site prominently displayed?				
4. If needed, is there directional signage that leads voters to the voting area?				
5. Is there adequate parking available for voters?				
6. Is curbside voting set up, clearly marked with a sign, and easy to locate?				
7. Does the voting site appear to be accessible to those with disabilities?				

>> **During Your Shift:** Observe the following during your shift and complete this section before leaving the site. Mark **Y** for Yes, **N** for No, or **U** for Unsure.

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
8. Can curbside voters alert poll workers that they need assistance without leaving their car?				
9. Are curbside voters waiting more than 10 minutes for someone to speak to them?				
10. If there is a line of voters , are voters waiting 30 minutes or more until they reach the entrance?				
11. If there is a line of voters , are 6 foot markers clearly visible so voters know where to stand?				
12. Do you hear complaints from voters about poll workers ?				
13. Do you see or hear about voters being challenged by another voter?				
14. Have you observed any instance of voter intimidation ?				
15. Did voters report that the voting site is following CDC guidelines (e.g. poll workers are wearing masks)?				
16. Are there any partisan signs, materials, or campaigners within the 50-foot buffer zone?				

TURN OVER >>>>>

Incidents: If during your shift you experience any of the following, call 888-687-8683 and fill out an Incident Report Form immediately.

<p>If you see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voters in line for 30+ min. • Voters unable to locate / use curbside voting • Voters struggling to locate or access the voting site 	<p>If you hear from a voter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voting site ran out of ballots or other supplies • Voting machines not working • Poll workers not wearing face masks • Poll workers providing incorrect information • Voter denied provisional ballot 	<p>If you witness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals patrolling the voting site • Police presence at voting site • Campaigning within the 50-foot buffer zone • Any instance of voter intimidation
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Site Assessment: complete this section at the end of your shift. Mark each column with **Y** for Yes, **N** for No, or **U** for Unsure.

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4
<p>In your opinion, was this a good location for a voting site? Think about if the site was easy to find, if parking was available, and was easily accessible to all voters.</p>				
<p>Did this polling place provide a good voting experience? Think about if voters reported having a good voting experience, did not have to wait in long lines, and didn't encounter problems with poll workers.</p>				

Notes: if you have notes about your voting site(s) that you would like to share, please write them below. Use blank pages in clipboard if necessary.

Site 1	
Site 2	
Site 3	
Site 4	

