

# COVID-19 Underscores the Need for Voting Reform in North Carolina

North Carolina has continuously been at the center of the struggle for political equality since the Civil Rights Movement. North Carolina's state legislature is one of the most gerrymandered in the country, preventing voters from being accurately represented, and a federal court struck down a voter ID requirement that "target[ed] African Americans with almost surgical precision" (Ingraham 2016). The ID requirement has been blocked for the 2020 election.

With only 3.5 percent of voters casting votes by mail in 2016, the state needs a massive infusion of resources into vote-by-mail (VBM) training and technology. Recent bipartisan reforms to establish an online absentee request portal and reduce the number of witnesses who must sign absentee ballots from two to one were necessary first steps (Harte 2020), but the state remains far behind other states in equipping voters to exercise the franchise in November.

## Community Health

The first COVID-19 related death in North Carolina occurred on March 24, 2020. Underlying health conditions make North Carolinians especially vulnerable.

North Carolina ranked 37th of the 50 states in life expectancy in 2018. It is one of 14 states that have not expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Although the state has engaged in some innovative health delivery programs, health care quality remains below average, and key negative quality of life indicators, including suicide, have risen over the last decade.

Years of inequitable policy have taken a toll on North Carolinians. Infant mortality is higher in North Carolina than the national average, and the Black infant mortality rate is more than double the White non-Hispanic rate. The state legislature has a poor record of environmental protection, and the state still relies

*Environmental injustice remains widespread in part because voters are not adequately represented in the state legislature.*

## Health and Democracy in North Carolina by the Numbers

- 18** rank among states in COVID-19 deaths as of July 22
- 37** rank among states in overall life expectancy
- 46** rank among states for electoral integrity
- 4** percent of mail/absentee votes cast in the 2016 US presidential election

SOURCES: JHU CCI N.D.; NORRIS AND GRÖMPING 2019; EAC 2017; BROWNSTEIN 2019.

disproportionately on nonrenewable energy sources. According to Environmental Protection Agency data, North Carolina ranks higher than average (32nd) in industrial toxin levels and is 20th in environmental health risks (EPA 2020).

Inequality and environmental injustice remain widespread in part because voters are not adequately or accurately represented in the state legislature. Participation and representation could be even more skewed unless protections are implemented now. Urban voters and voters of color, who are at higher risk for COVID-19, have historically experienced longer wait times and crowded conditions at polling places, putting them at greater risk in November.

By the end of June, when Governor Roy Cooper signed an executive order requiring masks to be worn in public places, the number of COVID-19 cases in North Carolina had already topped 60,000, with deaths exceeding 1,300 (Shaffer 2020). North Carolina is one of many states experiencing a steady caseload surge going into the summer.

## How to Build a Healthier Democracy

Given that it is not known exactly how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect voting this November, North Carolina needs several

democratic upgrades before the 2020 election. With one of the lowest percentages of VBM voters in the country, the state must take steps to protect voters' health while increasing access to voting.

Voters need to be able to vote safely from home via absentee ballot or vote early in-person to relieve pressure on polling places on Election Day. North Carolina has a history of strong early in-person voting, and that capacity must be strengthened to ensure that those who are less likely to vote absentee (urban voters, voters of color, new voters) will not have to risk their health in long lines. The allocation of polling places needs to account for these disparities, and the state must maximize points of service with an adequate number of voting machines and trained poll workers to process votes efficiently. The state legislature should act now to implement provisions identified in a recent lawsuit, including a longer registration period and drop boxes for mailed ballots, in anticipation of high voter turnout (Fein 2020).

Given the expected surge in VBM ballots, election officials must be able to process ballots as they arrive and be transparent about when results will be available.

The state should also make Election Day and the day before a school holiday in order to be able to use schools and other public facilities as polling places. Businesses should be encouraged to provide larger, safer, and sanitary polling places.

Finally, it is crucial that voters be educated about these changes. Public outreach must be targeted to communities that traditionally vote on Election Day, and all voters need to have—and be effectively notified of—an opportunity to correct vote problems and ballot status problems as these problems arise.

If a ballot cannot be verified or if its validity is challenged, the voter must be able to resubmit a verifiable ballot in time for it to be counted or must be allowed to validate their identity by more than just one method. Ensuring these protections will require changes in procedures as well as attentive voters willing to work with local officials.

## For More Information

Fortunately, there are many organizations working to improve electoral integrity. You can help these organizations ensure a safe and secure November election:

- **Democracy North Carolina** is engaging voters throughout the state and helping North Carolinians to prepare a coronavirus election response: <https://democracync.org>
- **North Carolina Voters for Clean Elections** is working on a sweeping set of anticorruption and voting rights reforms: <https://ncvce.org>
- Learn about voter registration and election laws with the **WeCanVote** app: <https://wecanvote.us>

## Electoral Preparedness in North Carolina

Voting Protocol	Available?
Automatic voter registration	No
Online voter registration	Yes
Same-day registration	Yes (early in-person)
No-excuse mail voting	Yes
Early in-person voting	Yes
Statutory ballot tracking	Yes
Provisions for voters to correct rejected ballots	Needs revision
Ballot rejection procedures	Needs revision
Audits with verifiable ballots	Yes
Voting Protocol Utilized in 2016 US Presidential Election	Percent of Votes Cast in NC
Voting by mail	4%
Early in-person voting	58%

Note: Ballot correction and rejection procedure quality are determined relative to recommended national standards and current practices in states such as Colorado and Utah. See UCLA VRP 2020.

SOURCES: BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE 2020; EAC 2016; VAH 2020; VRL 2020.

At the Union of Concerned Scientists, we know that voting is at the heart of people power in a functioning democracy. It is how we choose between competing policy agendas and priorities, how we govern the institutions that govern us. And, crucially, it is how we hold our leaders accountable when they fail to serve the public interest. This election, we are working toward a healthier democracy—one that represents the people and allows science to better serve the public. We, together with our partner organizations, are committed to ensuring that marginalized communities, such as communities of color and low-income communities, are at the forefront of the conversation so political decisions will be made on behalf of the public good rather than narrow special interests.

To learn more about our work at the intersection of voting rights and environmental justice and how to get involved, please visit us: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/help-build-healthier-democracy>

*Professor Michael Latner, California Polytechnic San Luis Obispo, is also a senior fellow in the Center for Science and Democracy at UCS. Taofik Oladipo is a campaign coordinator in the Center.*

## REFERENCES

Brennan Center for Justice. 2020. *Preparing Your State for an Election Under Pandemic Conditions*. New York and Washington, DC. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/preparing-your-state-election-under-pandemic-conditions>

- Brownstein, Ronald. 2019. "Brace for a Voter-Turnout Tsunami." *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/2020-election-voter-turnout-could-be-record-breaking/591607>
- EAC (US Election Assistance Commission). 2017. *The Election Administration and Voting Survey: 2016 Comprehensive Report*. Silver Spring, MD. <https://www.eac.gov/research-and-data/2016-election-administration-voting-survey>
- EPA (US Environmental Protection Agency). 2020. *TRI National Analysis: Supporting Data Files for the TRI National Analysis. Washington, DC*. <https://www.epa.gov/trinationalanalysis/supporting-data-files-tri-national-analysis>
- Fein, Travis. 2020. "Lawsuit Argues NC's Voting Laws Aren't Built for a Pandemic." *WRAL.com*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.wral.com/lawsuit-argues-nc-s-voting-laws-aren-t-built-for-a-pandemic/19111009/>
- Harte, Julia. 2020. "North Carolina to Expand Absentee Voting Access in 2020 Elections." *Reuters*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-north-carolina-law/north-carolina-to-expand-absentee-voting-access-in-2020-elections-idUSKBN23I3AP>
- Ingraham, Christopher. 2016. "The 'Smoking Gun' Proving North Carolina Republicans Tried to Disenfranchise Black Voters." *Washington Post*, July 29, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/07/29/the-smoking-gun-proving-north-carolina-republicans-tried-to-disenfranchise-black-voters/>
- JHU CCI (Johns Hopkins University Centers for Civic Impact). n.d. COVID-19 World Map Dashboard. Baltimore, MD. Accessed June 26, 2020. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
- Norris, Pippa, and Max Grömping. 2019. *Electoral Integrity Worldwide*. Sydney: University of Sydney, The Electoral Integrity Project. <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/the-year-in-elections-2017>
- Shaffer, Josh. 2020. "Coronavirus Total Tops 60,000 Cases in North Carolina." *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 27, 2020. <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article243843297.html>
- UCLA VRP (UCLA Voting Rights Project). 2020. *Analysis of H.R.1 and the Immediate Need for Expanded Access to Vote-by-Mail*. Los Angeles: UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Initiative. <https://latino.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UCLA-VRP-Memo-on-HR1.pdf>
- VAH (Vote at Home). 2020. *State Voting Policy Changes to Deal with COVID-19*. Washington, DC. <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Voting-policy-changes-from-COVID.pdf>
- VRL (Voting Rights Lab). 2020. "The State Voting Rights Tracker: Voting Rights by Issue." Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://tracker.votingrightslab.org/issues>. Account required.

*The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science to work to solve our planet's most pressing problems. Joining with people across the country, we combine technical analysis and effective advocacy to create innovative, practical solutions for a healthy, safe, and sustainable future.*

**NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS**

Two Brattle Square  
Cambridge, MA 02138-3780  
Phone: (617) 547-5552  
Fax: (617) 864-9405

**WASHINGTON, DC, OFFICE**

1825 K St. NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20006-1232  
Phone: (202) 223-6133  
Fax: (202) 223-6162

**WEST COAST OFFICE**

500 12th St., Suite 340  
Oakland, CA 94607-4087  
Phone: (510) 843-1872  
Fax: (510) 843-3785

**MIDWEST OFFICE**

One N. LaSalle St., Suite 1904  
Chicago, IL 60602-4064  
Phone: (312) 578-1750  
Fax: (312) 578-1751