Duke
NORTH CAROLINA LEADERSHIP FORUM

2024 Report

Conversations on Elections

Contents

Introduction

The North Carolina Leadership Forum (NCLF) seeks to create constructive engagement between North Carolina government, business, and non-profit policy leaders across party lines, ideologies, professional experiences, and regional perspectives. A program of Duke University, NCLF has been bringing together cohorts of NC leaders since 2015.

The Challenge

Although North Carolinians have always had significant political differences, they have historically exhibited a practical, problem-solving mindset to politics. Today, however, the tenor of the times is highly partisan, and North Carolina, like many other states, finds itself sharply divided. Progressive and conservative leaders often depend on different media and social media outlets, operate with different facts and beliefs, do not often enough engage substantively with people with whom they disagree, and all too often assume the worst about the motives of others. For these reasons, our leaders are less willing and able to work together to create widely-embraced solutions and opportunities for our state and its people. Our aim is to help bridge this divide.

Our Approach

> *The overarching goal of NCLF is to develop a critical mass of civic and political leaders who have the will, the skills, and the relationships to address challenging issues and to model constructive engagement across ideological divides.*

NCLF focuses on those who engage in state-level policymaking as leaders in government, business, nonprofits, and local communities. For each cohort, we provide an opportunity for these diverse leaders to:

- Build authentic relationships based on trust and understanding through frank, civil, and constructive discourse; and
- Significantly deepen understanding of a specific issue and the underlying values and concerns of others without diminishing one's own or another person's point of view.

Our Method

Over the course of several months, in a series of face-to-face multi-day meetings, we work to:
1. Increase participant understanding of their own and others' concerns and values that underlie their varying views about the issue;
2. Establish a shared understanding of the nature of important problems and the relevant facts;
3. More clearly articulate the benefits and inherent downsides of proposed ways to address concerns;
4. Identify points of agreement about proposed actions to address concerns;
5. Examine and seek to understand the values, perceptions and experiences that underlie the most polarized disagreements about the proposals;
6. Build authentic relationships among leaders of different political parties and ideological views, as well as across sectors, geography, and other demographics; and
7. Create a foundation for future constructive engagement among their fellow participants.

The Question Addressed

Every year, NCLF selects an important public policy topic for discussion based on several criteria. The chosen topic must be important to a wide variety of people in North Carolina, currently controversial, and under discussion. Additionally, people with different perspectives or ideologies should have varying views about the nature of the problem and its best solutions. The topic is intentionally broad to allow the group to narrow the issue and set priorities for discussion. However, it should not be so broad that it is impossible to consider the context of the issue or arrive at practical actions to address facets of the issue. An ideal topic presents tension between closely held values, involves many actors, and related solutions involve tradeoffs. Looking ahead to the year 2024, with the elections for president and major offices in state government, as well as recurring tensions around the voting process over the last several political and legislative cycles, NCLF thought it would be important to convene NC policy leaders to talk about the election process in the state.

The 2023-24 North Carolina Leadership Forum asked:

What is the best way for North Carolina to conduct elections?

The Leadership

NCLF is primarily led by a diverse Steering Committee made up of experienced leaders from around the state. This group spent significant time designing the format, focus, and pacing of the 2023-24 program. With the exception of Tamara Barringer, who recused herself to avoid conflicts that might come before her as an Associate Justice on NC's Supreme Court, members of the Steering Committee also facilitated program sessions during each participant gathering.

In addition, NCLF contracted Frank Williams as a facilitator. Williams, President of Pioneer Strategies and an alum of NCLF's forum on healthcare, had been a reliable and capable facilitator for NCLF's recent regional forum on housing. Duke students from NCLF's Bass Connections Class, "Strengthening Cross-Partisan Collaboration in NC Policymaking," provided support during program sessions, took notes and assisted with logistics, researched and wrote memos to inform discussions, and drafted sections for this report. Duke University also provides operational support, helps to evaluate the impact of NCLF, and communicates the impact of the program more broadly to the public.

The 2023–24 NCLF Steering Committee members were:

- **John Hood**, Co-chair: President, John William Pope Foundation
- **Leslie Winner**, Co-chair: Former Executive Director, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation; Former Member, NC Senate
- **Abdullah Antepli**, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Interfaith Relations, Duke University
- **Tamara Barringer**, Associate Justice, NC Supreme Court; Clinical Professor of Law and Ethics, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School; Former Member, NC Senate
- **Anita Brown-Graham**, Gladys Hall Coates Distinguished Professor of Public Law and Government & Director, ncIMPACT Initiative, UNC School of Government
- **Ricky Hurtado**, Co-Founder and Senior Advisor, LatinxEd
- **Charles B. Neely**, Retired Partner, Williams Mullen; Former Member, NC House of Representatives
- **Debbie Goldstein**, Executive Director, NC Leadership Forum

The Participants

The 2023–24 NCLF Cohort consisted of 31 participants, in addition to the NCLF steering committee. Participants included members of the General Assembly, state and local officials, leaders of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, and business leaders from across the political spectrum and from across North Carolina. Some of the participants are deeply engaged in state and local political campaigns, elections, and election policy, and some are more generally engaged in the development of public policy in North Carolina. All of them play a significant leadership role in their local community and most at the state level. The group was evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, with a handful of participants identifying as unaffiliated.

For a complete list of the 2023-24 NCLF participants on Elections, see Appendix A.

The Process

Overview

The Elections cohort gathered for four day-and-a-half meetings between November 2023 and February 2024. The first two sessions were held in Winston-Salem and New Bern, respectively, and the final two meetings were held in Durham. All meetings operated under the Chatham House Rule:

> *When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received. However, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s) nor that of any other participant may be revealed.*

The program progressed as follows:

- Establish ground rules for constructive engagement.
- Learn who is in the room and begin to build relationships and trust among members of the cohort.
- Identify the broad array of concerns related to North Carolina state elections and the participants' core values regarding voting and our elections system.
- Examine the tradeoffs or tensions among a set of core values around the elections system.
- Develop a shared knowledge base by establishing basic facts and a greater understanding of where complexities lie.
- Establish the overarching concerns related to the topic. Identify and discuss potential options to address each of these concerns, including the benefits and downsides of each option.
- Determine the extent of agreement and disagreement about the proposed options and participants' tolerance for their downsides.
- Identify the actions about which there is a consensus. For those actions that have substantial but not complete support, determine how they could be modified to broaden support.
- Dig deeper into the options that generated the greatest amount of disagreement to allow participants to articulate deeply held views, further understand others' viewpoints, and practice skills in constructive engagement.

In addition, in three of the four sessions, local leaders from the location where the meeting was being held shared information about their communities and offered their perspectives on election issues. These engagements, and most especially the first one, proved incredibly important to the group's deliberative process.

Session 1: Identifying Areas of Concern, Things Held Valuable, and Basic Facts

The discussion of elections began in Winston-Salem, N.C. After sharing their personal stories, participants named a range of concerns about the topic before walking to the Forsyth County Board of Elections for a guided tour of the county's election facility.

During the tour, participants saw the machinery used to count ballots, received information on the voter identification requirements and legal voting options, and visited the room where Board of Elections officials meet and make decisions.

On the second day, each participant shared their values about the election process (for example, trust, security, and equity). An overview of basic facts about election access and security followed, including the current legislative landscape for voting, the history of who could vote, when restrictions changed in North Carolina and nationally, and examples of voter fraud in the state. The session finished with a panel discussion about Winston-Salem from three local leaders.

Session 2: Prioritizing Values, Defining Chief Concerns, and Beginning to Identify Solutions

At the second meeting, held in New Bern, N.C., the group revisited the core values identified in Session 1, using live-polling software to determine the relative priority of values for the group. The group also engaged in a line exercise that explored the tradeoffs and tensions between competing values. Participants were presented with a condensed list of concerns generated from the first session and then selected five to focus on for the remainder of the program.
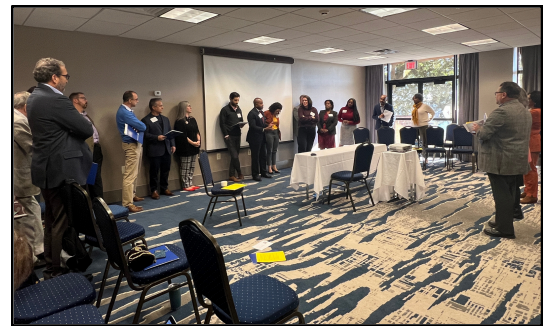
To end the day, the group took a bus tour of downtown New Bern and, after dinner, heard from town alderman Hazel B. Royal and Director of Economic Development, Jeff Wood. A piano at the venue provided an impromptu round of holiday songs by some of the participants, which became a highlight of the meeting. The session closed with participants working in small groups to brainstorm actions to address the selected concerns and vote on which actions would benefit from further discussion.

Session 3: Benefits and Tradeoffs

The third meeting at Duke focused on specific policy options to address the identified concerns. Participants discussed the benefits and inherent downsides of each policy option. They then voted on their degree of support for the benefits and tolerance for downsides of each option. The resulting "polarity charts" show the degree of agreement and disagreement among the group and are included in the discussion section of this report.

Over dinner, participants were joined by Duke political scientist Nick Carnes and Durham city member Mark Anthony Middleton, an NCLF alum, for a moderated discussion about local governance and working-class representation in public office, which covered the challenges of running for and serving in elected office, a theme raised by the cohort in early discussions.

Session 4: Understanding our Agreements and Disagreements

For the final meeting hosted at Duke, the goals were to determine the policy areas with the highest levels of agreement and to dig deeper into the issues and ideas that produced the most polarized responses. The cohort used the polarity chart results from the previous meeting to facilitate this process, which provided a visual representation of the group's attitudes toward each policy option. In addition, participants considered what they could do as community leaders to address a need for more trust in the integrity and transparency of the system. This fundamental concern ran throughout the program. At the end of this meeting, participants reflected on what they were taking away from the experience and provided feedback to NCLF on future programs.

Relationship and Trust-Building as a Primary and Ongoing Goal

Throughout the program, participants had opportunities to build relationships with people of different perspectives. During the first afternoon, they engaged in an intense exercise where they shared an event that had a transformative impact on the person they are today. As individuals shared significant experiences from their personal lives that led them to engage in public policy or that had a profound impact on their overall life paths, a deepened understanding and respect for each other's backgrounds emerged among the participants.
This newfound appreciation fostered a greater openness to engage with one another, laying the foundation for forming personal connections and strengthening group cohesion.

Other examples of opportunities for building trust among the participants included pairing "buddies" of differing ideologies to meet outside of sessions, creating diverse "homeroom" groups, which were returned to periodically in each meeting, and assigning intentionally diverse groupings for small-group discussions, jigsaw sessions (a mix-and-match method for sharing group discussions), and dyads. Each of these tools encouraged and enabled connections among individuals who may not otherwise have interacted in a meaningful way.

Background

At the outset of the program, NCLF provided cohort participants with historical context and available data about voting trends in the state. Data was provided to establish a shared background for all participants and aimed to offer detail and nuance without taking a position. In particular, background focused on who could vote, regulations around how people could vote (i.e. method, requirements for identification, maps for representatives), and trends among voter participation and perceptions of the election process. NCLF also drew on a comprehensive Heritage Foundation database to offer insight into the small number of known cases of voter fraud in the state and the types of fraud that have occurred.

History of Who Can Vote in NC

While today, all adult U.S. citizens in North Carolina can vote (with the exception of convicted felons who have not completed their sentences), that has not always been the case. The following timeline outlines the history of the right to vote in North Carolina and seminal laws and court decisions that impacted who could vote.

- **Pre-Civil War:** Only white landowners could routinely vote or hold state office. NC General Assembly members are required to own 100–300 acres of land.
- **1867:** The Federal Military Reconstruction Act allows black men the right to vote.
- **1868:** The new NC Constitution passes universal male suffrage.
- **1870:** The 15th Amendment to the US Constitution grants all African American men the right to vote.
- **1875:** NC amends its constitution, removing the right to vote for people with felony records.
- **1899:** NCGA requires a literacy test and poll tax with "Grandfather Clause"; Legislation implements criminal penalties for felons who vote.
- **1920:** The 19th Amendment to the US Constitution grants women the right to vote.
- **1965:** The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits racial discrimination in voting and includes the Section 5 preclearance requirement, which prohibits certain jurisdictions from implementing any change affecting voting without first receiving confirmation from the US attorney general or the US District Court for DC.
- **2009:** NC legislation allows pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds.
- **2013:** The US Supreme Court removes the preclearance requirement in Shelby v Holder. NCGA HB 589 also removes pre-registration of 16–17-year-olds and makes several other changes.
- **2016:** Fourth Circuit overturns some 2013 provisions as racially discriminatory. The US Supreme Court declines to hear the case.

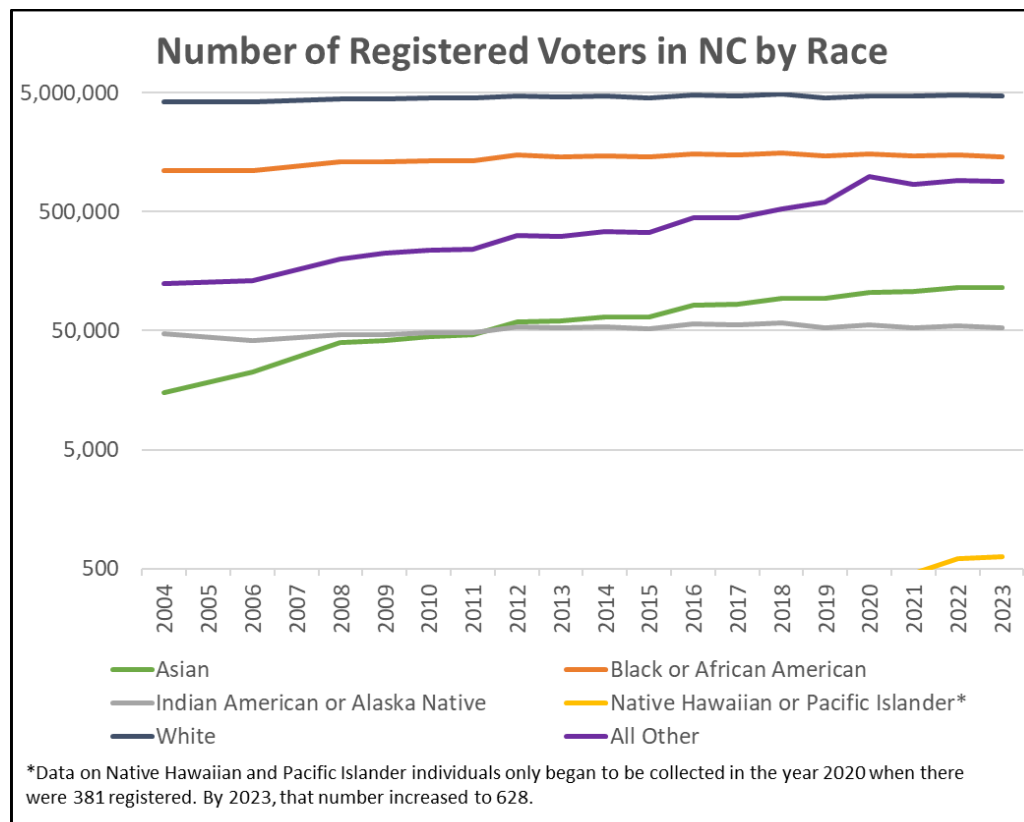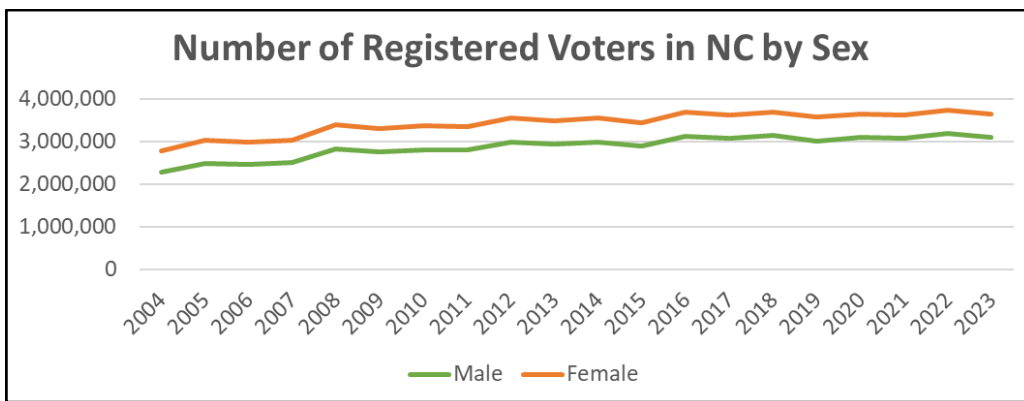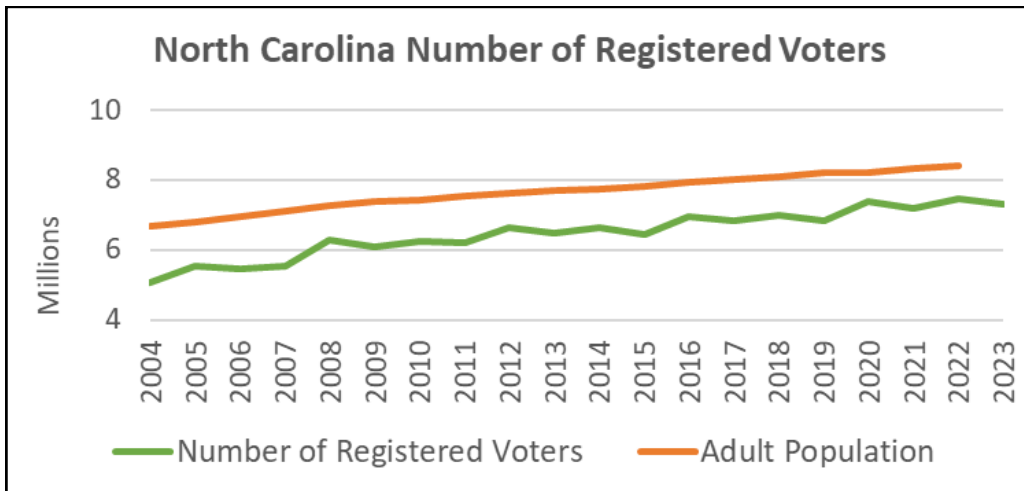## Current Composition of NC Voters and Registered Voter Trends

NC has seen considerable population growth in recent years and a shift in where the population resides, with urban centers growing as rural parts of the state experience a population decline. This population change has implications both for the composition of the NC voting population and the attitudes of North Carolina voters, but it may be too early to predict voting trends in the state. Population growth, of course, also has implications for the pressures and demands placed on the Board of Elections and the costs of administering elections across the state.
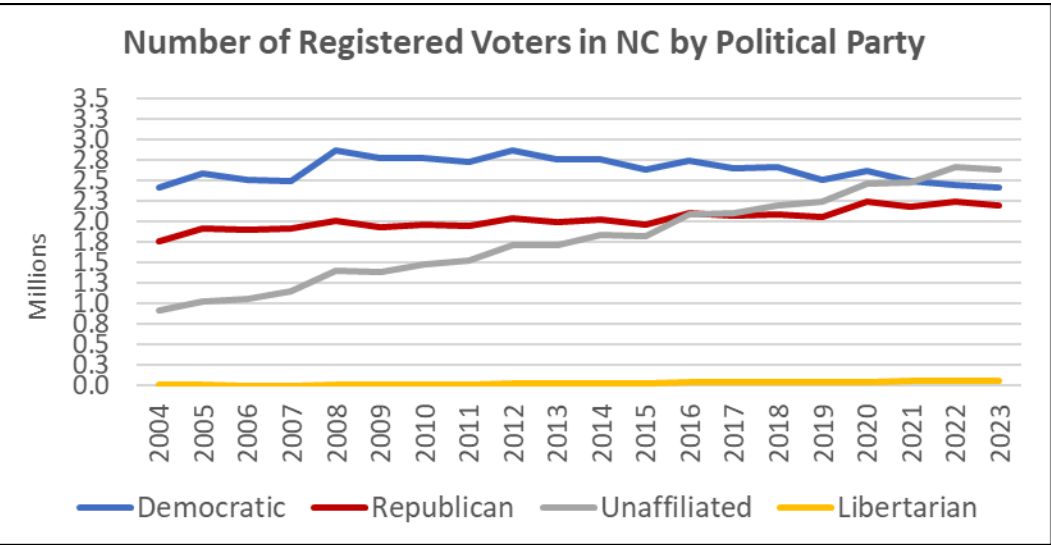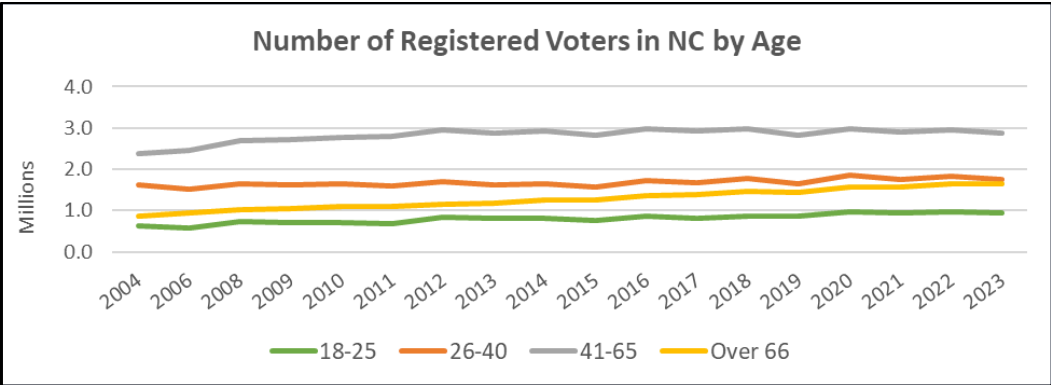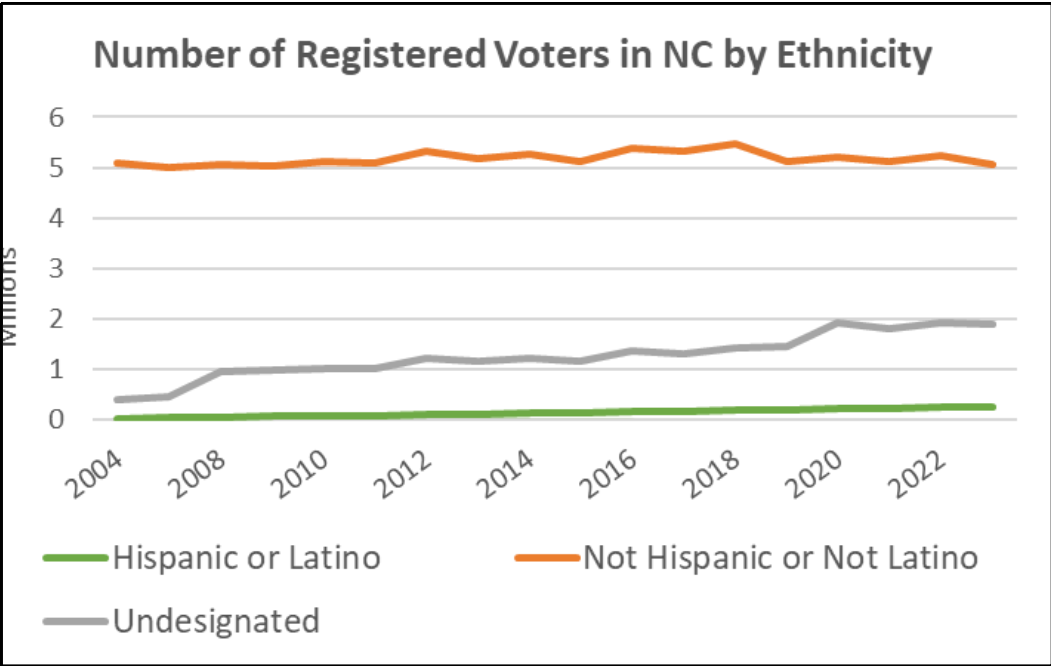
While North Carolina is experiencing a period of significant growth, population growth has not been consistent across the state. Between the 2010 and 2020 Census, the NC population grew by 9.5%, or more than 900,000 residents. 50% of the population gain was in Mecklenburg County and Wake County, home to Charlotte and Raleigh, respectively, the two largest cities in the state. Suburbs to these cities have also seen rapid growth. The coastal area has been another driver of growth, with Brunswick and Pender counties seeing the fastest growth among all counties in the state. The largest driver of North Carolina growth is migration from other US states (newcomers are attracted both by jobs in metro areas and appealing retirement options around the state). While the White and Black populations of North Carolina have largely tracked overall population growth, the Latino, Asian and multiracial populations have grown at a faster rate.[1]

The graphs on the next few pages provide insight into how the state's population growth and voter composition impact trends in registered voters. Each graph depicts a specific NC registered voter trend between 2004 and 2023. Notably, across the period, registered voters are more likely to be an individual who is white, female, and between the ages of 41-65. This trend holds for the entirety of the 2004 – 2023 period. The most significant change can be seen in the composition of registered voters by political party. The number of unaffiliated registered votes has more than doubled, showing a clear and consistent upward trend. During the same period, the Republican share of registered voters changed little and the Democratic share declined. As of late 2023, 36% of North Carolina voters were registered unaffiliated, with 33% as Democrat and 30% as Republican.[2]
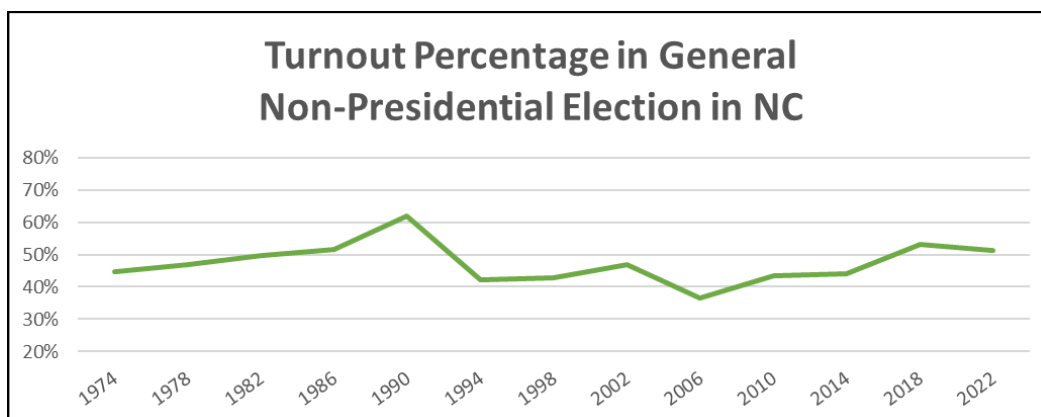
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[1] For the most recent information on population growth in NC, see https://carolinademography.cpc.unc.edu/2024/03/18/75-nc-counties-have-grown-in-population-since-2022/ and David Raynor, By the numbers: Which groups drive population growth in a more diverse North Carolina?, N&O at https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article289439172.html

[2] For more data on the demographic composition of North Carolina voters, see https://carolinademography.cpc.unc.edu/2023/09/28/who-are-north-carolinas-7-3-million-registered-voters-2023/

North Carolina Number of Registered Voters

Legend: Number of Registered Voters — Adult Population

Number of Registered Voters in NC by Sex

Legend: Male — Female

Number of Registered Voters in NC by Race

Legend: Asian — Black or African American — Indian American or Alaska Native — Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander* — White — All Other

*Data on Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander individuals only began to be collected in the year 2020 when there were 381 registered. By 2023, that number increased to 628.

Number of Registered Voters in NC by Ethnicity

Number of Registered Voters in NC by Age

Number of Registered Voters in NC by Political Party

Voter turnout in North Carolina has largely tracked population growth, with higher rates of participation in Presidential Election years. Of note, trends in voter turnout have been higher for older voters and white voters, with the exception of the 2008 and 2012 elections. Finally, while voter turnout for Democrats was higher in the early 2000s, that gap has narrowed considerably in the last two Presidential elections.

Total Voter Turnout in General Presidential Election in NC

Legend: Total Ballots Cast · Adult Population

Turnout Percentage in General Presidential Election in NC

Turnout Percentage in General Non-Presidential Election in NC

Voter Turnout in General Presidential Election in NC by Age

Turnout Percentage in General Presidential Election in NC by Race

Voter Turnout in General Presidential Election in NC by Political Party

History of How to Vote in NC

North Carolina has also changed the time, place, and manner in which citizens could vote over time. Early-voting is a relatively new innovation, borne of an expansion of the use of "no-excuse absentee voting." The timeline below highlights the context and history behind absentee voting and same-day registration.

Early 20th century: Absentee voting for the ill or disabled was allowed.

1977: One-stop absentee voting introduced at the Board of Elections.

1999: For even-year elections, "no-excuse absentee voting" was authorized at various locations, not just the Board of Elections.

2001: "No-excuse absentee voting" extended to all elections + 18-day early voting.

2007: NCGA adds same-day registration during early voting.

2013: Shelby v Holder; NCGA eliminates same-day registration, shortens early voting to 11 days, implements Voter ID.

2016: Fourth Circuit overturns some 2013 provisions as racially discriminatory. The US Supreme Court declines to hear the case.

One-stop early voting has become quite popular in the state, as seen in the graphs below.
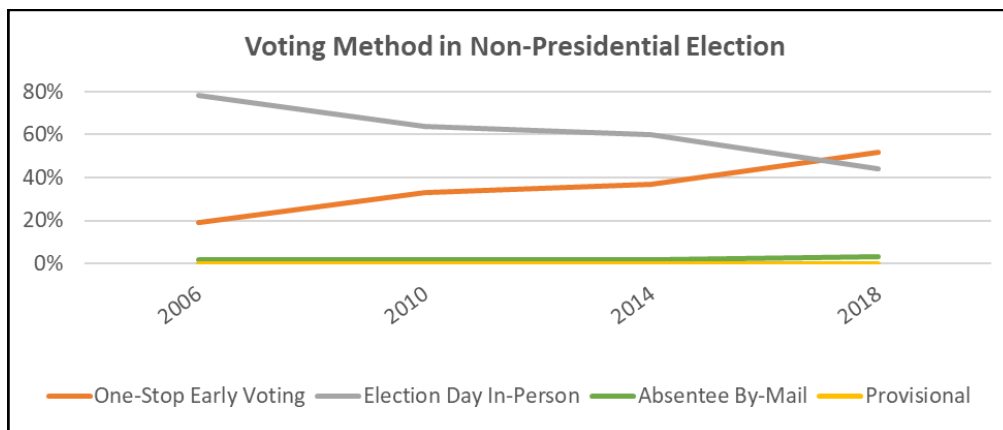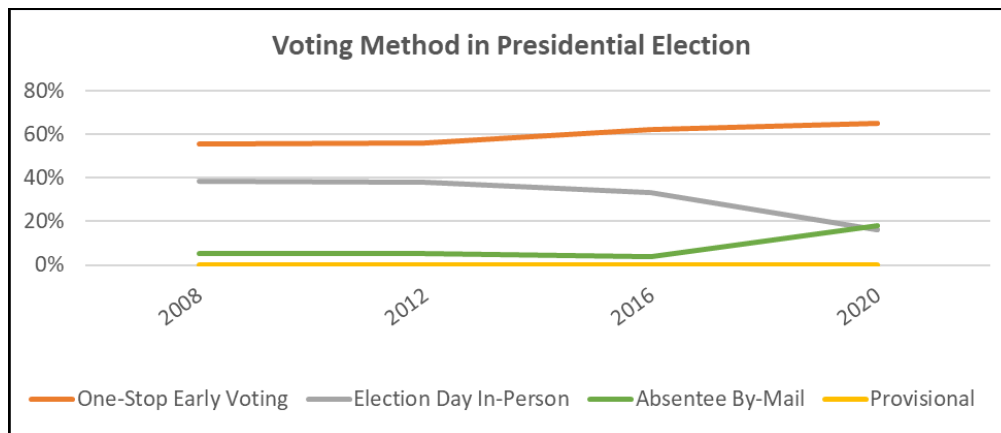
In addition to demographic data and voter behavior, the cohort also reviewed data on timely and controversial election topics that have arisen in the state and nation recently. Examples included:

- A brief overview of the history of debates over voting maps in the state and a projection of the likely outcomes of recently proposed maps for state legislative and congressional elections[3];
- A detailed outline from the Board of Election of state voter identification requirements and rules around provisional ballots, as well as history and context for North Carolina's current law[4]; and
- A limited overview of the cost of elections in the state and top individual and committee contributions and expenditures in the 2022 election.[5]

Finally, NCLF shared some information on trust and integrity of the North Carolina election system. A key resource was a Heritage Foundation scan of cases of voter fraud. [6] While fraud remains rare in the state, there are several instances of election fraud from North Carolina's history worth noting:

Specific Local Election Interference: 4 Major Cases • NC-09 Ballot harvesting case • Town of Pembroke 2013-2014, 2015-2016 • Caldwell County 2004 • Project Westvote 1986	Ineligible Voting: 29 Cases Total Since 2003 • 24 involving non-citizens • 8 involving felons
Duplicate Voting: 7 Cases (1 included a candidate running for office and voting twice)	Fraudulent Use of Absentee Ballot: 1 Case (2014) Woman tried to honor husband's dying wish and cast absentee ballot in his name. Caught during audit by election officials, widow confessed when confronted.

[3] See, e.g. https://www.johnlocke.org/what-are-the-partisan-leanings-of-north-carolinas-proposed-legislative-maps/.
[4] See, e.g. https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/Voter%20ID/2023-Voter-ID-Requirement-Infosheet.pdf and https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/voter-id.
[5] See https://www.transparencyusa.org/nc/.
[6] See, e.g. https://www.heritage.org/voterfraud/

NC-09 Ballot Harvesting Case: NC-09 Congressional election seat was decertified, and BOE ordered a new election after multiple people expressed suspicions of illegal collection of absentee ballots and completion of empty mail-in ballots. Seven people were charged and convicted for their role in the case, including the unlawful collection of ballots from voters, being a false witness to an absentee ballot, and mailing absentee ballots in a way that concealed the voter did not mail the ballot.

Town of Pembroke: The Town of Pembroke's 2013 election was overturned after thirty fraudulent votes were detected (specifically, voting by non-residents and the use of improper ID to verify residency). In the 2015 election for mayor, a new election was held when a candidate's residency was challenged. In 2016, a second election was held due to improperly cast ballots.

2004 Caldwell County: Five people paid residents $10 to register and $25 to vote for the incumbent county sheriff or a straight-party ticket.
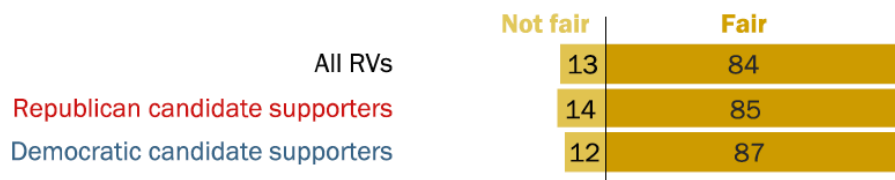
1986 Western NC Case: An FBI investigation into "endemic vote-buying operations netted 41 convictions. The Heritage Foundation found 4 major cases of local election interference between 1986 and 2022 and 29 cases of ineligible voters casting a ballot since 2003. It identified 7 cases where voters cast more than one ballot and one case involving a widow fraudulently casting a ballot on behalf of her husband.

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[7] See Pew Research Report October 31, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/10/31/two-years-after-election-turmoil-gop-voters-remain-skeptical-on-elections-vote-counts/.
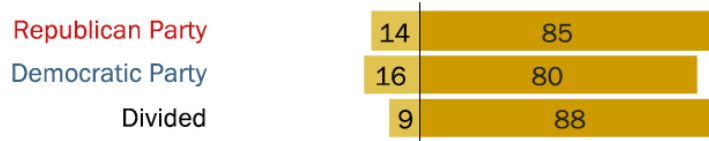
NCLF also shared national data from the Pew Research Center on how voters perceive election administration and rules in their own state compared to others.[7] As shown in the figures below, registered voters on the national level overwhelmingly find election rules to be fair, particularly in their own state. However, a partisan gap emerges when asked about election administration.

## Voters overwhelmingly say election rules in their own state are fair

*% of registered voters who say their state's election rules are ...*

	Not fair	Fair
All RVs	13	84
Republican candidate supporters	14	85
Democratic candidate supporters	12	87

Among all registered voters living in states where the state government is controlled by ...

	Not fair	Fair
Republican Party	14	85
Democratic Party	16	80
Divided	9	88

Among supporters of Republican congressional candidates living in states where the state government is controlled by ...

	Not fair	Fair
Republican Party	5	95
Democratic Party	35	63
Divided	12	87
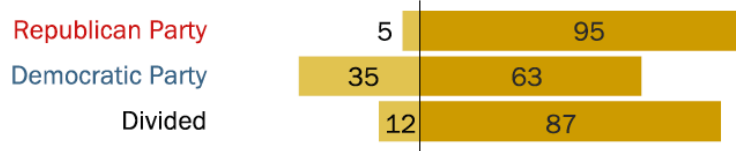
Among supporters of Democratic congressional candidates living in states where the state government is controlled by ...

	Not fair	Fair
Republican Party	26	73
Democratic Party	3	95
Divided	7	91
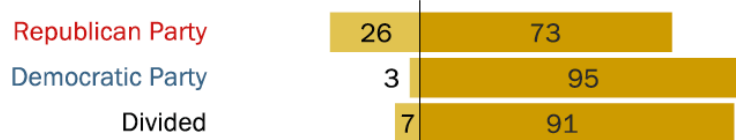
Notes: Based on registered voters. No answer responses not shown. Data on partisan control comes from the National Conference of State Legislatures and reflects the composition of state governments as of the most recent update on June 1, 2022. District of Columbia residents were asked about election rules in the District of Columbia and are included in this figure. Nebraska omitted because the legislature is nonpartisan.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 10-16, 2022.

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Partisan gap in views of election administration in the U.S. wider than in 2020, much wider than in 2018

% of registered voters who say they think the elections this November in the United States will be administered ...

ALL VOTERS

SUPPORT REP CANDIDATE

SUPPORT DEM CANDIDATE

NET

Somewhat well

Very well

All Voters: Oct '18 = 81 (59 Somewhat well, 22 Very well); Oct '20 = 62 (47 Somewhat well, 15 Very well); Oct '22 = 70 (48 Somewhat well, 22 Very well)

Support Rep Candidate: Oct '18 = 87 (58 Somewhat well, 29 Very well); Oct '20 = 50 (42 Somewhat well, 9 Very well); Oct '22 = 56 (45 Somewhat well, 11 Very well)

Support Dem Candidate: Oct '18 = 79 (61 Somewhat well, 18 Very well); Oct '20 = 72 (52 Somewhat well, 20 Very well); Oct '22 = 88 (53 Somewhat well, 35 Very well)

Note: Based on registered voters.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 10-16, 2022.

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What The Group Values

The forum explored the values participants held as foundational when considering elections in North Carolina. Although not all members held all of these values, the group put forth the following list of things held valuable when it comes to elections in North Carolina:

- Elections should be administered well
- Elections should both be impartial and trustworthy
- There should be respect and reverence for voting
- Elections should be convenient and easy
- People should feel physically safe and respected when participating in the election process
- Elected officials should be representative of their constituents
- Elections should be confidential

During the second meeting, participants rated each value's importance from one to five, with one being "Not Important At All" and five being "Very Important."
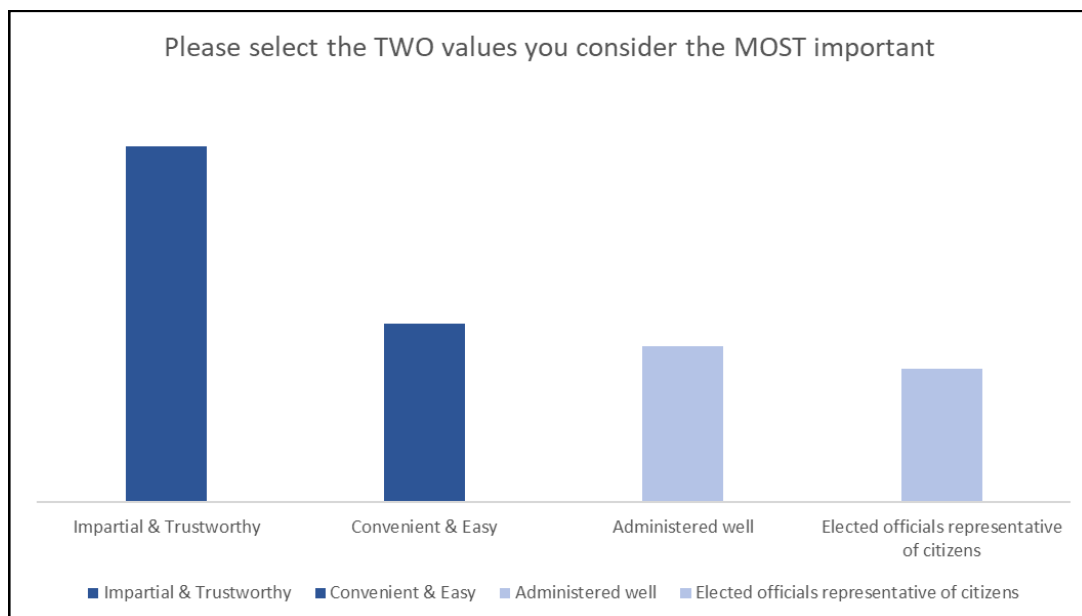
The initial responses demonstrated that most of these values enjoyed considerable support from all participants. "Impartial and Trustworthy" was unanimously rated a 5, or "Very important." Indeed, five of the seven values were rated as "Very Important" by more than half of the cohort. One of the exceptions, "Elected officials being representative of their constituents," received a plurality of votes as "Very Important," and a majority chose it to be either "Important" or "Very Important." The only value where there was a significant range of opinions on its importance was "Respect and reverence for elections," with participants being fairly evenly divided between "Less Important" and "Very Important."

Votes for each value cluster from Most Important to Not Important At All
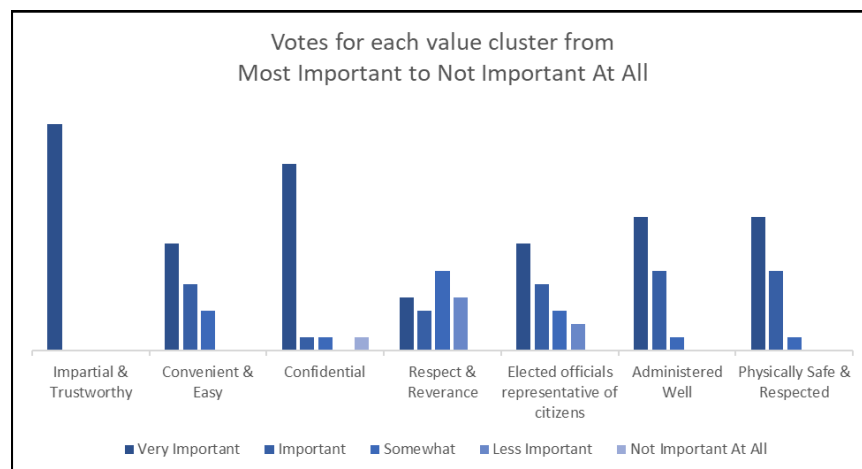
When asked to select their top four values, "Impartial and Trustworthy" garnered the highest number of votes, with "Administered well" and "Convenient and Easy" close behind. As for the fourth top value, "Physically safe & respected," "Confidential," and "Elected officials representative of citizens" were tied with an equal number of votes.

Please select the FOUR values you consider the MOST important
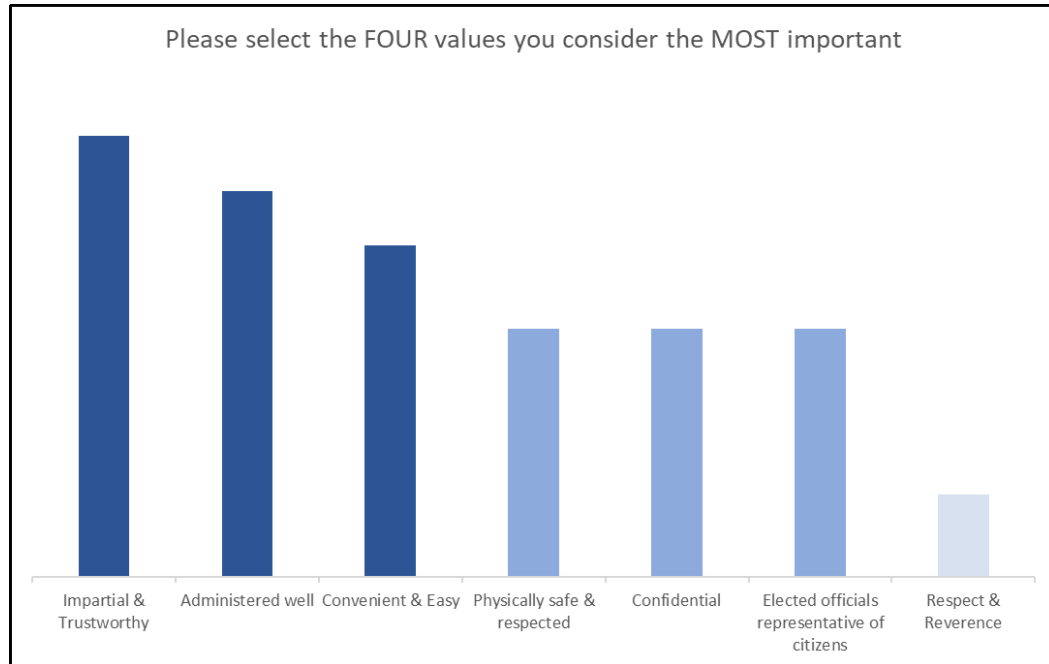
When participants narrowed down to their top two values, "Impartial and Trustworthy" remained the most important value with almost half of participants selecting it. When selecting their second most important value, participants slightly favored "Convenient and Easy" over "Administered well" and "Elected officials representative of citizens".

Please select the TWO values you consider the MOST important

■ Impartial & Trustworthy ■ Convenient & Easy ■ Administered well ■ Elected officials representative of citizens

Following this activity, participants took part in a line exercise where they placed themselves along a line depending on how they prioritized one chosen value against the other. This line exercise helps participants better understand where the other participants stand on these values and demonstrates a range of perspectives on the relative importance of these values. During this exercise, participants shared why they decided to place themselves on the line where they did, which deepened their understanding of the various perspectives in the room.

Impartial and Trustworthy vs Convenient and Easy

The group was divided on which value was more important and their discussion reflected the tensions between them. On the one hand, supporters of valuing "Convenient and Easy" as the priority pointed out the present and historical difficulties for people of color in accessing the ballot box. One participant commented that when there is only one election site for a large number of people or voters have to travel long distances to vote, it becomes difficult to view an election as impartial. On the other hand, people who prioritized "Impartial and Trustworthy" pointed out that America has been lucky to have peaceful transitions of power throughout its history. They were concerned that if people viewed the elections as partial or untrustworthy, this history of a stable democracy would end with disastrous consequences. These participants pointed to 2020 as a possible preview of such a scenario. From this side's point of view, the downside of making it easier to vote may be that people see the resulting elections as unfair and untrustworthy.

Respect and Reverence in Voting

Participants also discussed how they valued "Respect and Reverence" for voting. Here, participants illuminated different perspectives on participation in the electoral process. Those who placed themselves closest towards the value of "Respect and Reverence" argued that participating in the democratic process is not something to take for granted. Some argued from a historical perspective, saying that their forefathers had to fight for people today to have the right to vote. Others shared personal anecdotes that illustrated their frustration with perceived apathy towards voting. Those who did not place as much value on "Respect and Reverence" pointed out that some people do not like their electoral options and are disenchanted with the political process. Similarly, others on this end of the line noted that not voting is a legitimate statement; not voting may mean the person lacks enthusiasm for the candidates or believes that their vote would not make a difference in the outcome.

Concerns Overview

The members of the cohort generated an extensive list of concerns related to conducting elections. (See Appendix B for a complete list of concerns.) Participants ultimately chose to focus on five concerns. The remainder of this report describes the deliberation of the forum with respect to the possible ways to address these five areas of concern:

1. *There is a lack of trust in the integrity and transparency of the system*
2. *It's too hard to vote*
3. *The two-party "duopoly" system is failing*
4. *Gerrymandering prevents the results from being representative, pushing winners towards extremes*
5. *Running for and serving in public office is hard for the average person to do*

It is important to note that not all Forum members agreed that each of these concerns should be addressed with policy actions. Rather, among all of the concerns shared, these concerns merited substantial enough attention from a majority of the group to be prioritized for further discussion. In addition, even those who raised particular concerns did not necessarily support pursuing specific actions to address them when faced with the tradeoffs in doing so.

Discussion of Actions to Address Concerns

Participants developed actions to address the five main concerns and then selected which proposed actions they would most like to discuss further and explored the benefits and drawbacks of three options per concern.

After their discussion, participants were asked to vote on polarity charts to determine the level of agreement in the cohort for particular proposals (see discussion below for polarity chart results). Participants placed two "votes" on a polarity chart for that option. For the first vote, a participant indicated their level of support for the benefits of the option by placing a sticker above the x-axis, on the spectrum of "agree" to "don't agree," while also taking into account the intensity of that viewpoint. The second vote shows the extent to which someone can tolerate the downsides of an option and also the intensity of that opinion. Taken in aggregate, these votes provided a visual representation for the level of agreement on particular options.

Concern: There is a lack of trust in the integrity and transparency of the system

Participants extensively discussed the general lack of trust in the current election system. Many believed that some individuals chose not to vote because they did not trust that the election results would be accurate. Issues such as absentee votes not being counted, lack of trust in electronic voting machines, and concerns about fraud within the election system were brought up. Different viewpoints were expressed regarding fraud related to absentee vote collection, cases of impersonation, and measures to prevent double voting by visiting multiple locations. In addition, some participants raised concerns about the lack of transparency in the election system, particularly with restrictions placed on election observers.

In response to this concern, the group considered three actions to address the lack of trust in the integrity and transparency of the system:

1. *Shift to 6-person Board of Elections: 2D, 2R, 2U (at state and local level; NC currently has a 5-person Board of Election)*
2. *Appoint poll workers like we appoint jurors*
3. *Provide funding to the state Board of Elections for communications and civic education, including tours, and share successes in integrity / Mandate a day on election administration as part of high school civics, including a tour of the Board of Elections*

The chart below summarizes the group's agreement on the actions' benefits and downsides.

AREAS OF BROAD AGREEMENT	AREAS OF VARYING DEGREES OF AGREEMENT	AREAS OF STRONG DISAGREEMENT
Provide funding to the state Board of Elections for communications and civic education, including tours and share successes in integrity / Mandate a day on election administration as part of high school civics, including a tour of the Board of Elections	*Replace 5-Person Board of Elections with 6-Person Board, with seats for unaffiliated representatives (2D-2R-2U)*	*Appoint poll workers like we appoint jurors*

Action: Mandate and Funding for Election Education and Communication

Some participants proposed providing additional funding to the state Board of Elections for improving communications and civic education, including organizing tours and sharing insights into the electoral process. It also includes the implementation of a mandatory day focused on election administration in high school civics, along with student tours of the Board of Elections.
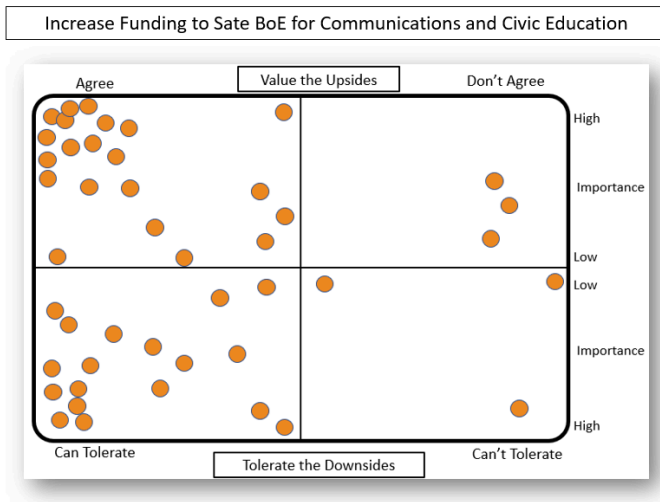
Participants mostly supported the proposal, emphasizing potential benefits such as enhancing the high school civics curriculum, increasing engagement among youth, and simplifying the voting process for first-time voters. Concerns were raised about the additional burden on educators and election officials, curriculum integration, funding, and logistics of student tours, as well as potential bias and partisanship in the curriculum creation and administration.

Despite these concerns, the majority of participants were very supportive of the benefits and highly tolerant of any perceived downsides.

Action: Replace 5-Person Board of Elections with 6-Person Board, with Seats for Unaffiliated Representatives

Currently, in North Carolina, members of the board of elections are appointed by the Governor based on a list of nominees provided by the State party chairs of the two respective political parties with the highest number of registered voters. The Board is composed of five total members, and the Governor's appointments are subject to the rule that no more than three members of the board of elections can belong to the same political party. As an example, under Democrat Governor Roy Cooper's current administration, the board of elections is composed of three Democrats and two Republicans.

The proposed action seeks to establish a board comprising two Democrats, two Republicans, and two individuals registered as Unaffiliated. Opinions on this proposal varied, although those who did not support the benefits of the action were moderate in their opposition. Rather, the group as a whole indicated a wide range of ability to tolerate the downsides.

Proponents argued that an equal balance of affiliations would necessitate consensus from both parties to address violations of the law, thus preventing targeted actions by any political party. They also emphasized that this change would provide representation for unaffiliated individuals and foster increased trust in the electoral system.

Conversely, skeptics raised concerns about the impartial selection of members, questioning the possibility of truly having unaffiliated individuals given the partisan nature of the selection process. They also expressed apprehension that in the event of a tie, resorting to the courts would undermine the intended purpose of a balanced board.

6 Person BoE (Even Party Representation)
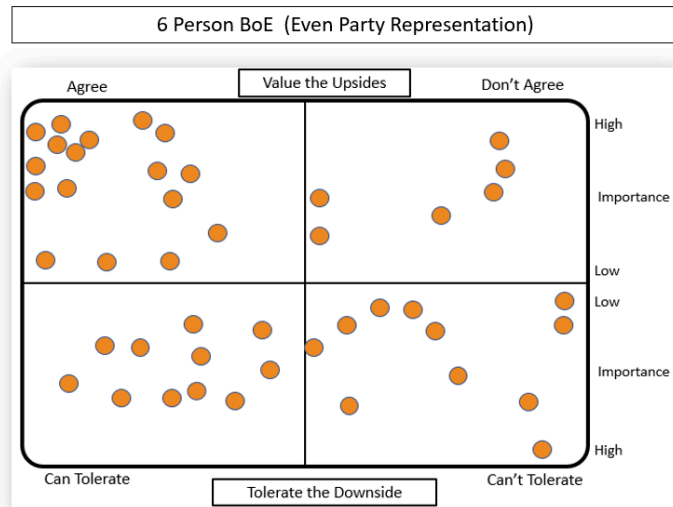
Additionally, there were overarching concerns about the difficulty of identifying genuinely unaffiliated individuals. Furthermore, logistical uncertainties were highlighted, particularly regarding the nomination or selection of unaffiliated individuals who might fall along a range of political ideologies or reasons for non-affiliation and are not in a group with unified leadership.

Action: Appoint Poll Workers like Jurors

Participants explored the idea of whether citizens could be required to serve as poll workers, using a process in a manner akin to the current jury selection process. Randomly chosen citizens would be required to serve as poll workers on election day. Feedback on this proposal was mixed, with a majority expressing lack of support and tolerance for its potential drawbacks.

While there are limited examples of this approach, Douglas County in Nebraska uses a combination of volunteers and drafting local voters for election duty. The county serves 350,000 registered voters at 230 precincts and uses 2000 election workers to administer each election. Over 50% of election workers are volunteers, but the county supplements with a "draft." The county election commission chooses workers randomly from the roll of registered voters in the county, notifying draftees at least 60 days prior to the election. Drafted election workers serve four elections to complete their required service. Both volunteers and drafted election workers are paid for training and hours worked and the county statute requires employers to give election workers time off for working an election and to pay the employee their regular wages for time served as an election worker. For more information, see the Douglas County website.

Proponents of this initiative highlighted that it could enhance public engagement in the electoral process. They also argued that it would streamline logistical arrangements by reducing vacancies and shortening shifts. Moreover, it was suggested that the policy could foster greater investment and trust among individuals in the electoral system.
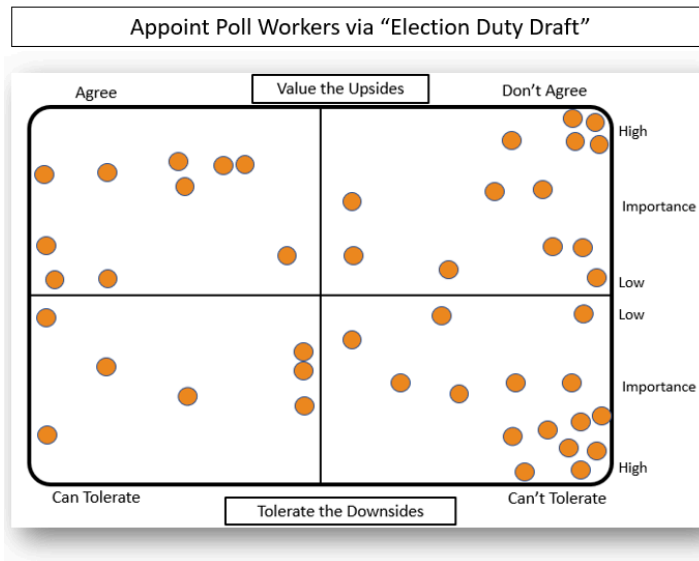
Conversely, many participants raised concerns about the potential decline in the quality of poll workers, apprehensive about the possibility of unmotivated and inexperienced individuals fulfilling these roles. There were also fears that the initiative could contribute to voter disenfranchisement. It was noted that substantial training and preparation time would be necessary should this policy be implemented. Additionally, there were financial implications to consider, as poll workers, like jurors, would require compensation. Thus, the program could potentially result in increased costs.

Furthermore, there was a significant worry that individuals might abstain from voter registration out of fear of being chosen as poll workers, exacerbating existing issues. The potential enforcement of this policy and the consequences for non-attendance were also subjects of concern. Lastly, participants expressed apprehension about managing last-minute no-shows on election day. Overall, there was a considerable consensus regarding a low tolerance for the outlined drawbacks.
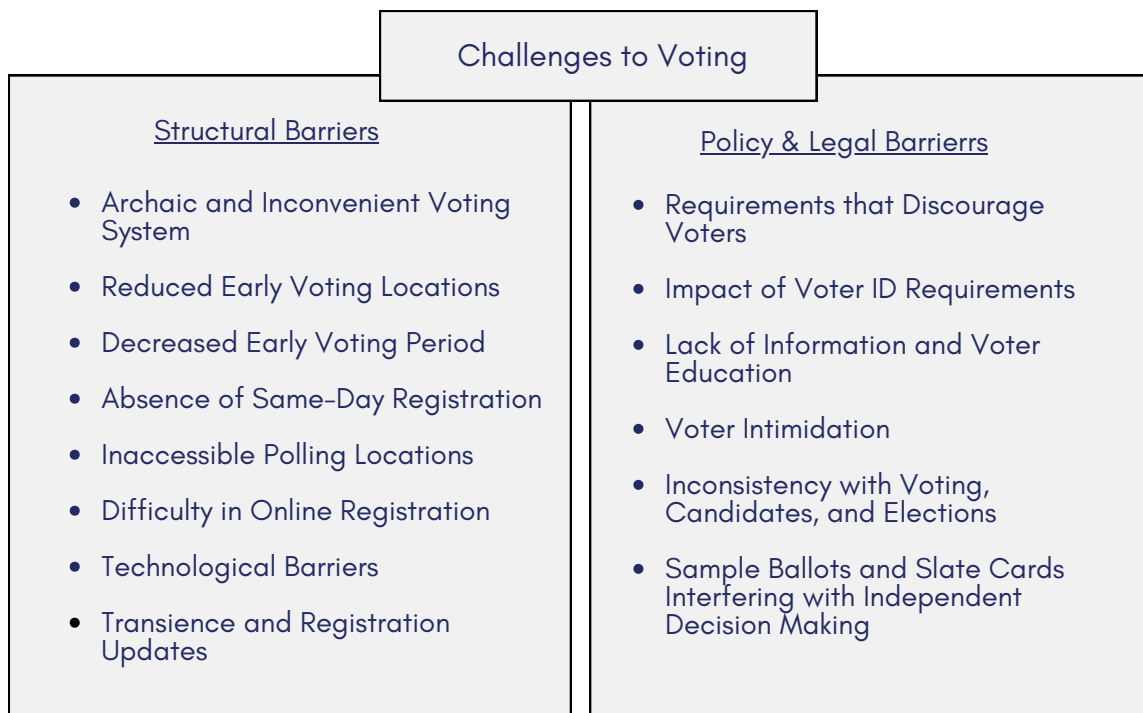
Concern: It's too hard to vote

Members of the Elections cohort representing diverse political affiliations in North Carolina shared their concerns regarding structural and policy challenges that make it difficult for voters to cast their votes. (See chart below for the list of challenges named.) To address this concern, participants selected three potential actions for deliberation:

1. *Universal voter automatic registration (no individual registration)*
2. *NC State Board of Elections creates more return options for absentee ballots and postage–paid absentee ballots*
3. *County Board of Elections offers mobile early voting sites in rural areas*

This table summarizes the group's agreement on the actions' benefits and downsides.

AREAS OF BROAD AGREEMENT	AREAS OF VARYING DEGREES OF AGREEMENT	AREAS OF STRONG DISAGREEMENT
None	• *NC State Board of Elections creates more return options and postage–paid absentee ballots* • *County BOE offers mobile early voting sites in rural areas*	*Universal voter automatic registration*

Challenges to Voting

Structural Barriers

- Archaic and Inconvenient Voting System
- Reduced Early Voting Locations
- Decreased Early Voting Period
- Absence of Same-Day Registration
- Inaccessible Polling Locations
- Difficulty in Online Registration
- Technological Barriers
- Transience and Registration Updates

Policy & Legal Barrierrs

- Requirements that Discourage Voters
- Impact of Voter ID Requirements
- Lack of Information and Voter Education
- Voter Intimidation
- Inconsistency with Voting, Candidates, and Elections
- Sample Ballots and Slate Cards Interfering with Independent Decision Making

The majority of the group valued the benefits of establishing mobile early voting sites in rural regions, although at varying levels of importance. Supporters noted that this proposal would address transportation barriers, making voting more accessible and efficient for rural residents (including those with disabilities and elderly voters). They thought bringing voting facilities closer to communities fosters inclusivity and participation among traditionally underserved populations. Moreover, establishing mobile sites could cultivate a sense of enthusiasm and energy around voting, potentially increasing voter registration and turnout. Finally, people believed this measure would alleviate pressure on existing early voting locations, such as churches and schools, and may free up resources for nonprofits engaged in voter outreach efforts.

Participants acknowledged logistical and security challenges. Finding suitable sites and coordinating schedules may prove tricky and require additional resources, potentially exacerbating staffing challenges. Some participants raised concerns about perceptions of partisanship and the difficulty of equitably distributing mobile voting resources given disparities in rural population density.
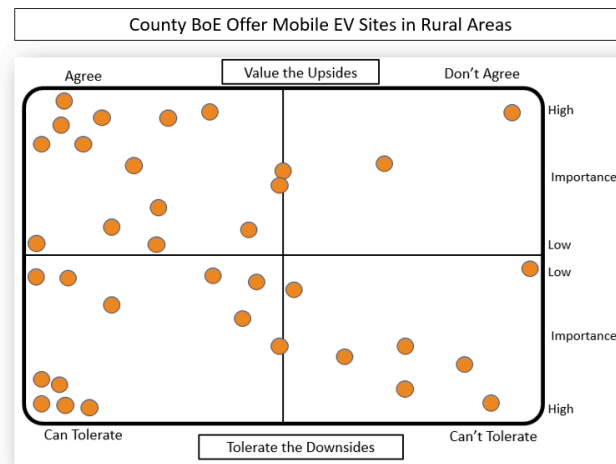
Others questioned the security of mobile voting facilities. Legislative changes may be necessary to enable the establishment of mobile voting sites, and careful consideration is needed to provide adequate coverage in both rural and urban areas. Finally, some legislators who do not serve primarily rural regions were ambivalent as to the impact this action would have given their constituents' concerns about access to the ballot.

In the end, while most participants supported the benefits, several participants indicated they could not tolerate the downsides.

There are some existing examples of using Mobile Vote Centers in rural areas. Yolo County in California sets up a Mobile Vote Center—a 29-foot trailer—that provides the same services as a typical Vote Center and goes to a different location each day. In November 2022, it visited seven sites in Yolo County between November 1st and November 7th.[8] In Idaho, Ada County set up a mobile unit that printed ballots on-site and collected votes during the early voting period in 2016.[9]

[8] https://www.yoloelections.org/voting/mobile-vote-center
[9] https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/10/29/499856446/how-food-truck-voting-is-catching-on-in-one-idaho-county

Action: Expand Return Options for Absentee Ballots by the NC State Board of Elections, Including Postage-Paid Options

Participants voted similarly on expanding the options for returning absentee ballots. Many supported the benefits, but several could not tolerate the downsides. which primarily centered around the intricacies of maintaining security in implementation. The proposed option encompassed a range of possible strategies to make it easier to submit absentee ballots, including adding more drop box locations for ballot submission and providing prepaid postage for returning ballots.

Supporters of the action said it would eliminate barriers related to cost and logistics, particularly for individuals who have trouble obtaining postage. They believed making absentee ballots readily available at common locations like grocery stores or pharmacies makes the process more convenient and accessible for a broader range of voters, including marginalized populations and those unable to attend traditional voting sites. Additionally, participants thought allowing drop boxes to function as ballot return sites may bolster voter confidence in the delivery process and increase overall voter participation, particularly among college students, nursing home residents, and individuals with limited mobility.

More Postage Paid and Return Options for Absentee Ballots.
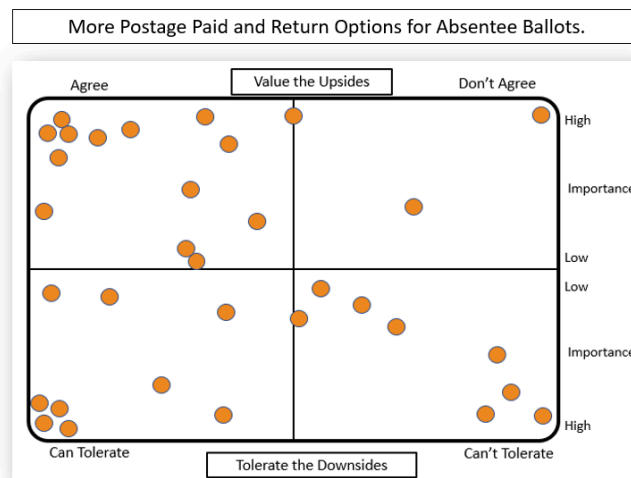
Those opposed to expanding return options to increase voter participation raised serious concerns about security risks. They noted that easy access to absentee ballots could potentially increase the risk of fraud, as there would be fewer consistent mechanisms for verifying voter identity and preventing ballot tampering. Additionally, the costs associated with printing and distributing postage-paid ballots could strain electoral budgets. Other logistical concerns include the availability of extended return dates, which may delay the counting process and potentially impact election timelines. Furthermore, participants raised security considerations regarding both the physical security of ballots and the chain of command in handling them.

In the forum, universal automatic voter registration sparked intense debate, with one group firmly in support and another arguing strongly against it. This issue emerged as one of the most divisive within the broader concern of making voting more accessible. The contention arises from conflicting priorities: on the one hand, the desire to ensure widespread access to voting rights, and on the other, the imperative to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process against fraud. Advocates argue that universal automatic registration would significantly increase voter participation by instantly enrolling a large segment of the population. However, opponents question whether the potential expansion of the electorate justifies the potential security vulnerabilities associated with the initiative.[10]

Supporters of universal automatic voter registration mainly argue that it reduces barriers to voter registration for all individuals, boosting overall participation rates and lowering biases in the voting population. It streamlines administrative processes, increasing efficiency and potential cost savings for voter registration organizations. By leveraging existing infrastructure and information-sharing systems, it can enhance the accuracy and acceptance of ballots, simplifying the voting process and improving accessibility for infrequent voters.

Universal Voter Automatic Registration

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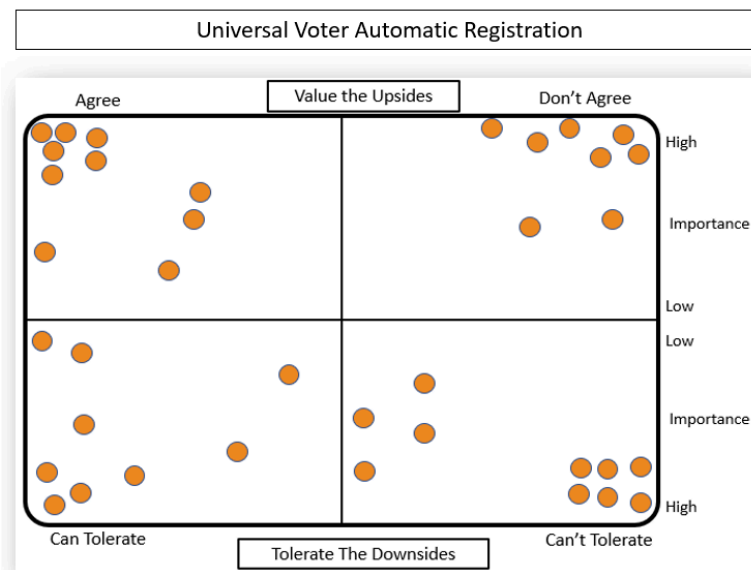
[10] For more information on which states use automatic voter registration and how it works, see the National Conference of State Legislatures at https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-voter-registration; the MIT Election Lab at https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-registration and Pew Charitable Trusts, Measuring Motor Voter https://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/assets/2014/05/06/measuringmotorvoter.pdf.

Additionally, automatic registration reinforces the fundamental value of universal voter eligibility. Allowing everyone a more accessible avenue to political participation may dilute the effects of the most partisan people being most likely to vote, potentially mitigating the influence of political parties. Finally, it promotes fairness by ensuring incarcerated individuals and young people of all groups are registered to vote, enhancing the integrity of the electoral system.

Opponents of this proposal argue that the influx of new registrants may strain the current system's capacity and increase the risk of administrative errors. Errors in implementation may even facilitate fraudulent activities such as double voting. Additionally, the automatic nature of this type of registration may include individuals who have no interest in voting, increasing the cost of maintaining accurate voter rolls and keeping the electorate informed without a parallel benefit. Furthermore, logistical challenges such as determining voting locations and eligibility verification could arise, potentially leading to disparities in access and decreased trust in the electoral process.

Concern: Two-party "duopoly" system is failing

The Republican and Democratic parties dominate American politics and public policy. Some critics of the two-party system blame it for increasing polarization, partisan gridlock, and the lack of diversity in the policy proposals of state and federal representatives.[11] In North Carolina, the 2022 Senate election resulted in the Democratic and Republican candidates receiving 97.8% of the votes.[12] The 2020 presidential election was no different, with Donald Trump and Joe Biden earning 98% of the votes.[13] With Republicans and Democrats almost guaranteed to win, it can seem as though a vote for another party is a "wasted" vote.

The Elections cohort discussed different policies to address the dominance of the two political parties and the ways the two-party system has fostered polarization. This group narrowed their proposals to 3 potential actions:

1. *Implement a version of Louisiana's majority-vote primary system[14]*
2. *Reduce the signatures required for unaffiliated candidates to be placed on the ballot (or increase ballot access for third-party candidates)*
3. *Remove listing of party affiliation on the ballot*

Overall, the cohort felt differently about each of the three proposals, reflecting the diversity of opinions in the group. They broadly agreed on the merits of Louisiana's majority-vote primary system and expressed varying degrees of support for reducing the signatures required for unaffiliated candidates to be added to the ballot. However, most participants strongly disagreed with removing party affiliation from the ballot.

This table summarizes the group's agreement on the actions' benefits and downsides.

AREAS OF BROAD AGREEMENT	AREAS OF VARYING DEGREES OF AGREEMENT	AREAS OF STRONG DISAGREEMENT
• *Majority-vote primary* • *No Party affiliation on the ballot (the group largely opposed)*	*Remove/reduce the signatures required for Unaffiliated candidates on the ballot / 3rd party access*	*None*

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[11] https://goodparty.org/blog/article/disadvantages-of-the-two-party-system
[12] https://www.politico.com/2022-election/results/north-carolina/senate/
[13] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/
[14] https://ballotpedia.org/Jungle_primary

The cohort favored a majority-vote primary system change more than the other two proposals, but the potential drawbacks were carefully considered. In the current North Carolina primary system, candidates run in either a Republican or Democrat primary. Voters affiliated with a party receive that party's primary ballot, while Unaffiliated voters may choose which party ballot to vote for (but must vote in only one-party primary).

Proponents believed that the majority-vote primary system would lead to less polarized candidates, lower election costs, reduce gerrymandering, and increase transparency. However, critics argued that this change to primaries could decrease voter turnout and necessitate extensive voter education, potentially increasing the cost of elections.
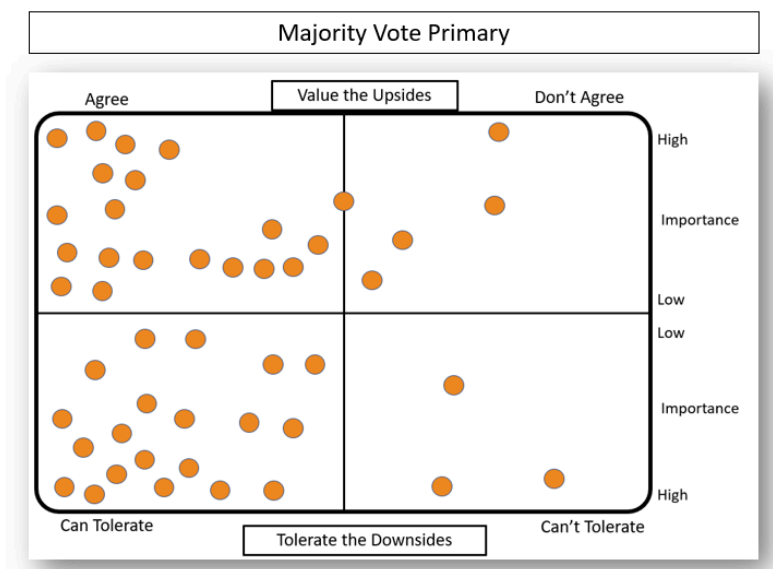
> **What is a Majority-Vote Primary?**
>
> Majority-vote primary systems, colloquially referred to as "jungle primaries," are a system in which candidates running for local, state, and federal office appear on the same ballot, regardless of party. Candidates win the election with 50% of the vote or more. If not, the top two candidates advance to a second election to decide who is the winner. California and Oregon use a variation of this approach, where a common ballot lists all candidates and party affiliations or preferences. In those two states, the top two candidates advance to a general election, regardless of whether any candidate in the first round secures over 50% of the vote.
>
> While the term "jungle primary" is more commonly used by the general public, that term lacks descriptive force and the word "jungle" suggests disorderliness and chaos, which has negative connotations. Other terms like "blanket primaries," "open primaries," and "top-two primaries" are also used interchangeably with "majority-vote primary," however, these types of primary elections have distinctive characteristics that make them different from a "majority-vote primary."

Many supporters in the cohort believed a majority-vote primary would result in more emphasis on issues and less on personality. They felt this would occur partly because moderates would have a better chance of being elected. This, in turn, would increase voter choice and competition. Some supporters even speculated that this would lead to more crossover voting.

Crossover voting occurs when voters vote for different parties for different offices. Significantly, increased crossover voting correlates with an increased voter turnout, most likely in moderates. If more moderates vote, it could incentivize politicians to capture those votes through issues rather than a polarizing personality that does not appeal to moderates. In the long run, this could help reduce polarization.

Besides drawing attention to issues, supporters also believed majority-vote primaries are cost-effective, reduce gerrymandering, and increase access to information. Such primaries are cost-effective because they eliminate the cost of a second primary. Additionally, since there is one ballot for everyone, majority-vote primaries also cut down on administrative costs. Majority-vote primaries diminish the likelihood of gerrymandering by bolstering diversity in "safe" districts. Finally, by increasing transparency and access to information on policy, participants speculated more voters under 30 would be motivated to vote.


Yet, a small number of participants felt the majority-vote primaries would decrease voter turnout and increase costs. Such a significant change from the status quo could confuse voters, resulting in more voters staying home. To overcome this, an investment in voter education would be essential, thus increasing costs and offsetting the proposed benefit of lowering costs. If education proved ineffective, the new system could turn voters off. This would decrease voter turnout, again effectively eliminating one of its purported benefits. Detractors also felt that too many choices could also lower voter turnout. All in all, some participants believed that this dramatic change to primaries would hurt voter turnout and increase costs, the exact opposite of what proponents argued would occur.

Of all the proposals considered to address this concern, reducing the signatures required to add unaffiliated candidates to the ballot prompted the most varied degrees of agreement. Many participants were in the middle, while the rest were relatively balanced between "agree" and "disagree."

Supporters argued that reducing the signatures required for unaffiliated candidates to secure a spot on the ballot would free candidates from party platforms and result in more moderate candidates running. Further, extreme candidates would be less likely to make it through the primaries. Unaffiliated candidates would be more confident about running, increasing the diversity of viewpoints in elections and the choices available to voters. Since there would be more options, voter participation would increase because voters now have more candidates with whom they can identify. In response, the Republican and Democrat parties might develop less polarized stances to compete for unaffiliated voters. This would create a feedback loop in which candidates would continue to become more moderate and less polarized.

On the other hand, critics of reducing signatures felt that the initiative could decrease the quality of candidates. If anyone can easily run, candidates might not have a serious platform. A surge of these uninformed, unqualified candidates could lead to "ballot bloat" and less informed voters. Additionally, some participants believed that reducing signatures would give rise to more single-issue candidates.

Remove/Reduce the Number of Signatures Required for Unanimous Candidate / 3rd Party Ballot Access
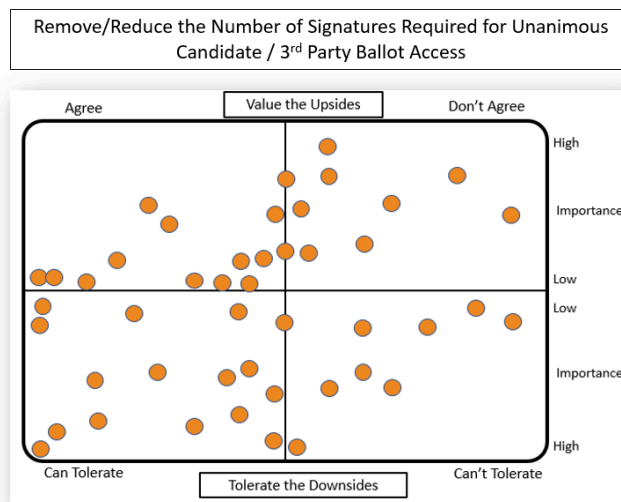
 These candidates would also be more extreme, which would have troubling implications for political polarization. In contrast to supporters' claims, opponents were concerned that reducing signatures could lead to greater polarization.

Interestingly, some members of the group pointed out that reducing signatures might not affect the two-party duopoly. Unaffiliated candidates may take votes from the two major parties, but Republicans and Democrats would still win. As a result, the policy would not achieve its goal.

Action: No Party Affiliation on the Ballot

Most of the cohort opposed eliminating the listing of party affiliation on the ballot. Several members were in the middle, while only a few supported the idea.

The few who supported this proposal felt it would help break up the two-party "duopoly." No longer beholden to a party or towing the party line, more candidates would run on issues. They may also feel freer to develop more creative approaches to policy issues. Voters would have to conduct more research because they could no longer vote along the party line. This would lead to more educated and engaged constituents, which could help alleviate disenchantment around voting and parties.

Many participants' main concern was that dropping party affiliation for all candidates was simply not feasible, and it would make voting harder. They believed that the action would require too much effort from voters to become educated on all the candidates on the ballot. Voters would thus become dissuaded from voting, and voter turnout could decrease.

The other concern was the increased power of PACs and other groups that endorse candidates. Voters might identify who they should vote for based on these endorsements. Additionally, campaigns would be more expensive as candidates try to identify and separate themselves from the crowd. This would lead to an increased reliance on money from PACs, further boosting their influence in the political process. Some members of the cohort found this very concerning.
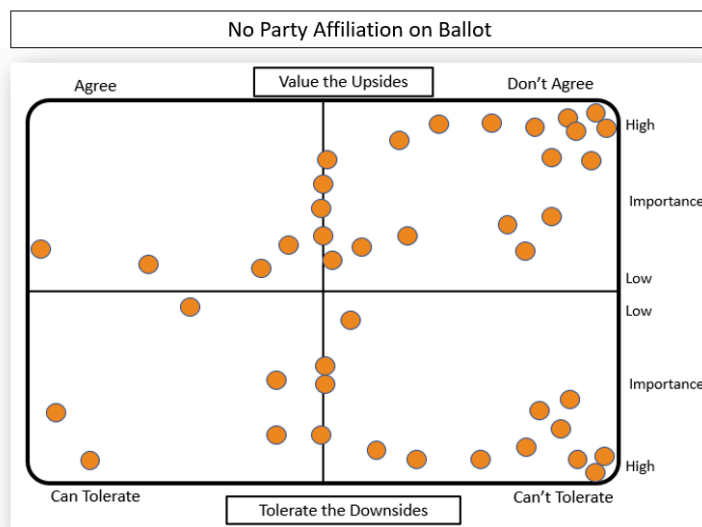
There was also strong concern that as candidates sought to stand out, they might become more extreme in an effort to attract attention. Finally, there was a concern that reducing party information about candidates would also favor incumbents and increase barriers to entry for new candidates with low name recognition.

Concern: Gerrymandering prevents the results from being representative, pushing winners towards extremes

After each census, the North Carolina General Assembly draws state legislative and congressional districts by ordinary statute. The resulting plans are not subject to the Governor's veto. This process, known as redistricting, aims to ensure that each district is equally represented, accounting for any population shifts that occurred in the previous decade.
Principles governing redistricting come from the US and state constitutions, federal and state statutes, and criteria adopted by the legislature for a specific redistricting effort. Federal principles governing redistricting include:

- "One person, one vote" requires state legislative districts to have roughly equal populations
- The Equal Protection provisions of the Constitution and Voting Rights Act prohibits districts that discriminate based on race

In North Carolina, the state constitution requires that districts avoid county splits and be contiguous (all parts of the district are physically adjacent, or you can travel from one point to another without crossing its boundary). In addition, legislative redistricting committees can also adopt additional criteria. For example, they can require districts to be compact or avoid pairing incumbents. In 2002, the NC State Supreme Court sought to reconcile some federal requirements with the state constitution by establishing the "Stephenson Rule" for state legislative districts (the Stephenson rule does not apply to Congressional plans). This rule creates a "county groupings" process and requires consideration of "communities of interest." It also prohibits multi-member districts.

When redistricting occurs, there is concern about illegal or unfair gerrymandering practices that disadvantage certain voters. Gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral districts to create an advantage for a particular group. Gerrymandering can have a variety of effects on the electoral process. One of the main consequences is the possible manipulation of district boundaries to favor a political party, racial group, or incumbent, making elections less competitive and disregarding voter preferences. Additionally, gerrymandering can affect voters based on their race, political party, and geographic location, such as rural or urban areas. By drawing district lines to benefit a particular group, gerrymandering can reduce the overall fairness and representation in the electoral system. Critics also often point to gerrymandering as contributing to political polarization.

Participants considered ways to address their concerns regarding the negative impacts of gerrymandered districts while maintaining adherence to the governing principles described above, deciding on three potential actions for further deliberation:

1. *Establish an independent redistricting commission*
2. *Radically increase the number of seats in the legislature*
3. *Prioritize competitiveness as a redistricting principle*

Participants were divided on instituting an independent redistricting commission, with some strongly supporting it and others strongly opposing it. They also split on the other two proposals, with half opposing them and the other half showing ambivalence.

This chart summarizes the group's agreement on the actions' benefits and downsides.

AREAS OF BROAD AGREEMENT	AREAS OF VARYING DEGREES OF AGREEMENT	AREAS OF STRONG DISAGREEMENT
None	• *Radically increase the number of seats in the legislature* • *NC General Assembly prioritizes competitiveness as a redistricting principle*	*Establish an independent redistricting commission*

Action: Establish an Independent Redistricting Commission

A majority of the participants supported establishing an independent redistricting commission to draw electoral district boundaries, while a strong minority opposed it and were concerned about its downsides.

Supporters of the proposal argued that an independent redistricting commission would increase civic engagement and participation within the public, as citizens joining the commission would have a chance to participate in government at a high level. More participation in the process would increase transparency, thereby increasing trust and decreasing litigation, saving the legislature time and money. Additionally, supporters asserted that an independent redistricting commission would decrease the negative image of the legislature. Reassigning the responsibility of drawing maps to those who would not directly benefit from them would reduce bias. This would help to improve relations within the legislature, increasing efficiency. An independent redistricting commission would also free up time for the legislature to work on other issues, including other issues related to election reform.

Participants who opposed the proposal noted the difficulties in establishing the commission. There were numerous concerns regarding the ambiguity of rules surrounding such a commission, including the fact that the General Assembly has some discretion when creating Congressional districts. Additionally, the creation of the commission would require a constitutional amendment, which would take a lot of work to pass. In addition to concerns about the structure, those opposed also noted complications in choosing who would serve on the commission.
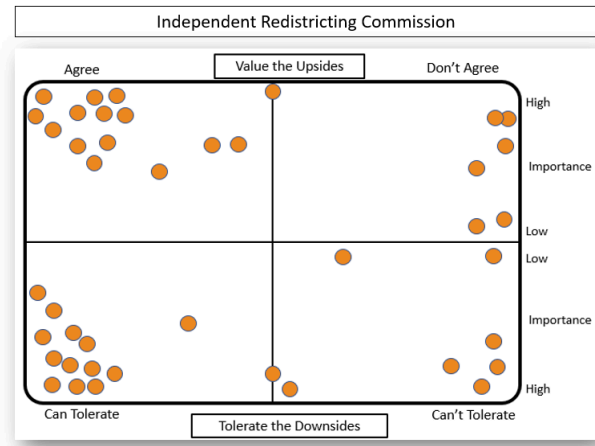

Many participants questioned how the independence of members could be guaranteed and highlighted how other loyalties could be hard to identify. Participants were also concerned about fairness in an inherently political process, suggesting that the process could be undemocratic.

Action: Radically Increase the Number of Seats in the Legislature

Participants largely opposed increasing the number of seats in the NC General Assembly or were, at best, ambivalent. Benefits included increasing representation and civic engagement. For example, by increasing the number of seats, districts would be smaller, and the ratio of representative to constituent would return to what it was before the state's population growth. Representatives would have fewer people to serve, allowing them to be closer to their constituents getting to know them better. A more representative legislative body would also allow for more diverse thought and campaign styles. One participant argued that smaller districts would be harder to gerrymander.

However, these benefits did not outweigh the downsides for the group. Foremost was the administrative expense that would be incurred, including the cost of a new building to house the larger legislative body. Another chief concern was that it would be more difficult for such a big group of people to govern efficiently. More seats could make it more challenging to establish a coalition, making it harder to pass laws.
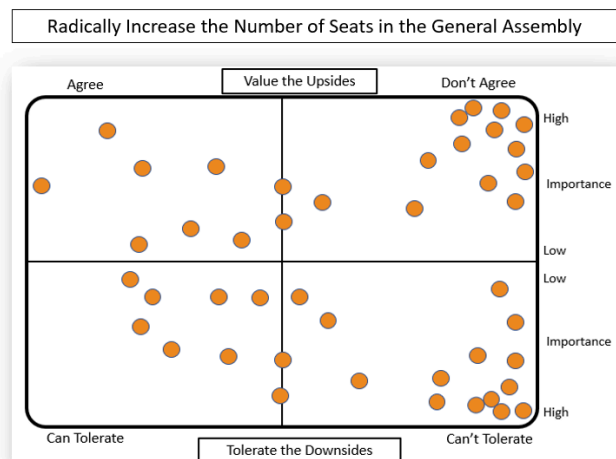
More seats could also diminish each legislator's influence, making it even more difficult for them to pursue their agenda. An increase in legislators could also disrupt deliberation and allow for more distractions, as there could be a legislator whose sole priority is to cause distractions and obstruct the legislative process. Finally, there were concerns about an increase in the number of lobbyists and a decrease in the quality of elected legislators.

> *While there is no live proposal to expand the NC Legislature, the idea is not without precedent. In 2020, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences issued a bipartisan report (available at https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report), arguing that the US should add 150 members to the US House. This proposal would reduce the number of people per district from about 768,000 to 566,000.*

Action: NC General Assembly Prioritize Competitiveness as a Redistricting Principle

Participants split between strongly opposing prioritizing competitiveness and ambivalence, with a few leaning toward moderate support. Those supporting the proposal noted that competition within districts would expand choice and new ideas, thus increasing voter motivation, public discussion, and the number of coalitions and third-party candidates. Competitiveness would require representatives to pay more attention to their constituents, improving constituent services. In addition, participants believed that more competition would positively affect the quality of candidates, moderate more extreme candidates, and make campaigns fairer overall.

Participants who were opposed argued that citizens have sorted themselves residentially to live near other like-minded voters, making it exceedingly difficult to draw competitive districts. In addition, drawing more competitive districts could negate a geographically homogenous population's voting preference. Participants also emphasized the increased money required to win in more competitive districts as a potential downside of this proposal. Candidates in such districts would be required to spend longer campaigning and fundraising, which could discourage some from running for office. In fact, many participants agreed that prioritizing competitiveness would distract from concerns about campaign finance and dark money in politics. A final downside was the possibility of extreme turnover every two years.
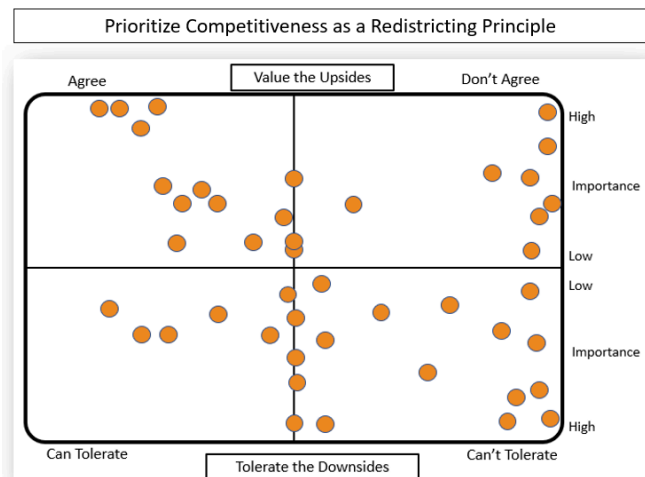
Concern: Running for and serving in public office is hard for the average person to do

Running for office is an exceedingly expensive endeavor for candidates. In the fall of 2022, two races for seats on the NC Supreme Court attracted over $15M in spending.[15] In that same period, at least seven candidates running for high-profile battleground seats in the state Senate raised over $1M.[16] In contrast, the median North Carolinian household income between 2018 and 2022 was $66,186.[17]Consequently, candidates often rely on outside and corporate funding, adding complexity to the electoral process.

In addition, the extended early voting period poses a challenge for candidates. With in-person early voting lasting 22 days, candidates are required to maintain campaign momentum and encourage voter turnout while balancing other responsibilities. This places additional pressure on candidates running for office, who must manage the demands of a part-time role alongside their full-time job responsibilities.

Furthermore, the low salary for elected officials restricts the pool of potential candidates. North Carolina state legislators receive a mere $13,951 annually, necessitating that they have flexible jobs or independent wealth to support their legislative responsibilities.

Finally, the physical safety of elected officials has become a growing concern for those considering a run for office. Instances of harassment, threats, and violence against public officials are on the rise, prompting some, like Jameesha Harris, a councilwoman in New Bern, NC, to take steps to ensure their personal safety. Harris acquired a concealed carry license and handgun after receiving death threats and having her home address leaked. She is not alone. The National League of Cities released a 2021 report which found that 87% of local officials surveyed observed an increase in attacks on public officials in recent years, and 81% reported directly having experienced harassment, threats, or violence.

After a series of discussions and voting, participants identified three possible actions that could address their concerns about barriers to running and serving in public office. Although not all participants agreed on which solutions should be discussed, these rose to the top:

1. *The NC General Assembly should have clearly defined session lengths with a required end date*
2. *Limit the number of terms legislators can serve*
3. *The legislature should be officially and financially a full-time job*

Participants discussed the benefits and downsides of each proposed action and voted on polarity charts to indicate their position on the benefits and their tolerance of the downsides.

[i15] https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-general-elections-campaign-finance-30d71143153a30f76e76ecf6b652522e

[16] https://www.wral.com/story/spending-1m-for-a-14k-job-big-money-flows-obscured-by-complexity-in-nc-legislative-races/20556143/

[17] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/POP010210

This chart summarizes the group's agreement on the actions' benefits and downsides.

AREAS OF BROAD AGREEMENT	AREAS OF VARYING DEGREES OF AGREEMENT	AREAS OF STRONG DISAGREEMENT
Defined session lengths with a hard stop *NCGA is designated as a full-time job, officially & financially (handful opposed)*		*Term limits for legislators*

Action: Clearly Defined Session Lengths with a Required End Date

The vast majority of the group supported the benefits of this option, with some feeling more strongly than others. Upsides that were mentioned included improving legislators' connection to their district, increasing efficiency and reducing waste, allowing legislators to manage their other jobs better, improving life for legislators' families, and building trust with the average citizen. Some participants theorized that a limit on session length would increase the quality of legislators and allow more outside observers to be involved. They also saw advantages in predictability for participants and agencies funded by the state budget.

Participants noted that limits on the legislature, such as session length requirements, would strengthen the Governor and executive branch. Some viewed this as a benefit, while others viewed it as a downside. The expectation is that if sessions were shorter, the Governor, cabinet, and executive agencies would have more time to work without intervention from the general assembly. Further, any limits on the legislature, in turn, tend to strengthen the Governor's power.

Clearly Defined NC GA Session Lengths With a Required End Date
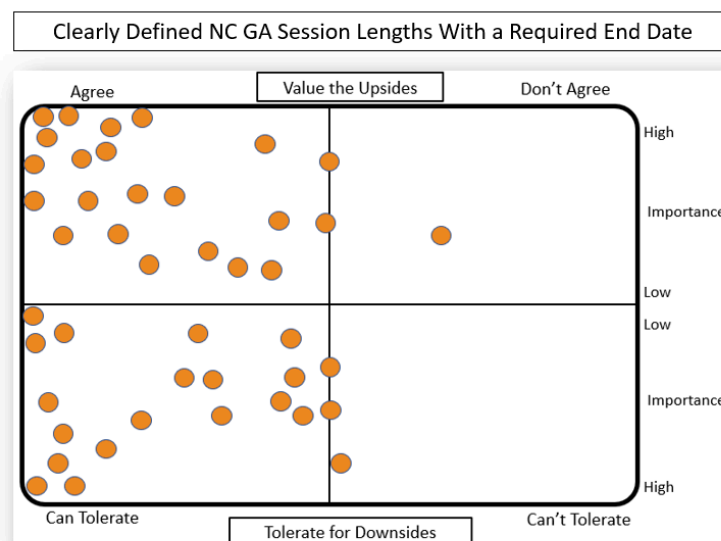
Participants also expressed worries about the potential for a rushed deliberation process in anticipation of a session deadline and manipulation of the legislative clock and schedule. In general, there was a high tolerance for the proposal's downsides.

Action: Term Limits for Legislative Service

About half of the group supported this proposal to varying degrees, with the remainder split between strongly opposed, moderate opposition, and neutral or unsure. Some potential upsides named by participants were creating a generational shift in power, increasing the number of competitive districts, and increasing voter involvement and turnout. Participants also thought the term limits would reduce the number of incumbents, which would limit the ossification of positions resulting in more competitive elections. Others put forth the idea that the change could force generational shifts in power.

Participants concerned about the downsides noted the loss of institutional knowledge and the challenge candidates seeking statewide office would face in building name recognition due to frequent turnover. Similar to the previous action, some participants thought this proposal would empower unelected officials and the Executive Branch. Another concern was that term limits could limit voter choices and weaken voter power.

Most participants could tolerate the downsides or felt neutral, but those who opposed the proposal felt strongly that the downsides were significant.
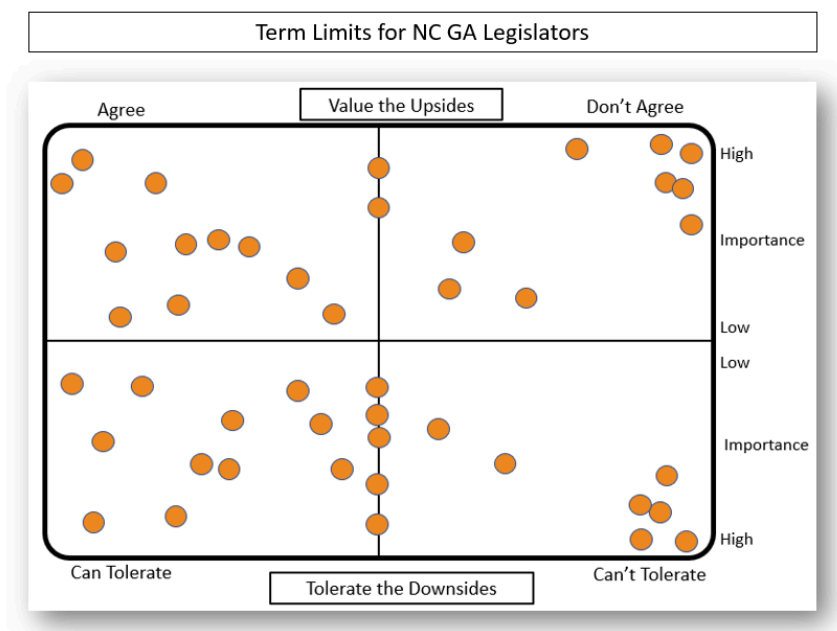
Term Limits for NC GA Legislators

About half of the group supported the proposal, while the other half were less sure or neutral, with the exception of three strongly opposed participants.
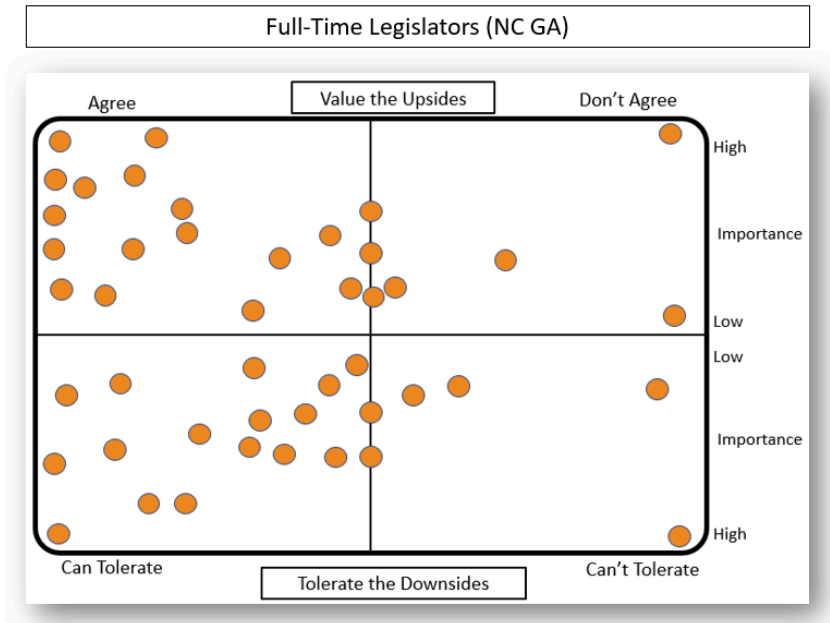
Several participants highlighted the potential benefit of attracting more qualified and diverse candidates, including younger or working-class people, which would mitigate elitism in the legislature. Many believed that making the role full-time would foster reliability among legislators. However, a primary concern was the expense of implementing the proposal. In addition, some thought this would result in more career politicians, which may not align with the original objectives of the legislature.

Notably, there was a proposal to link legislator compensation to the area's median income or teacher pay, which would allow for an improvement in the current salary while also mirroring some constituents' earnings.

There was a wide variance in the level of importance participants assigned to this proposal. Those who agreed with the benefits agreed fully, but some indicated it was not that important to them. Those who were neutral also deemed it low in importance. For the most part, those in support could tolerate the downsides, but again, the level of importance was moderate to low. Of the four who disagreed, one individual showed a high level of importance on both opposition to the benefits and tolerance of the downsides. The others felt this was of low importance regardless of the degree to which they disagreed.

What We Learned

What Participants Gained from and Valued about the Process

The primary goal of NCLF is to shape how our participants view themselves as leaders and how they engage with other leaders with whom they disagree. While much of this report is about the substance of the discussion on how NC should conduct elections, it is important to focus on the impact the program had on its participants. To help assess this, NCLF begins each cohort with a pre-program survey and concludes with a post-program survey. We also ask participants for feedback on the program at our final meeting and in some cases, follow up with participants to ask about how they have changed their behavior months after the program.

While NCLF intentionally selects participants with a range of subject-matter expertise on the topic at hand, most participants enter the conversation simply by being policy leaders with a greater-than-average level of knowledge and degree of certainty regarding their own and others' viewpoints. Given that many of the participants' work was closely related to elections with some being directly involved in political campaigns and election administration, this was also true for this cohort, as demonstrated in the pre-program survey.

> *Over half of the participants stated they felt extremely or very knowledgeable about the subject (64%), were confident in their opinions on the best way to conduct elections (68%), and were convinced they understood people who disagreed with them (68%). However, participating in the Forum proved beneficial in both areas: 85% attested that they learned more about the topic, 92% said they better understood their own values, opinions, or priorities, and 100% agreed that they better understood those with different values, opinions, or priorities.*

In the pre-program survey, respondents were concerned that it would be challenging to come to a shared understanding of the facts, get to know people, fully share their personal opinions, and move past grandstanding to really listen to one another. By the end of the program, those concerns were abated. 100% of participants strongly agreed with the statement that they had formed relationships with one or more people with differing views. Several commented that the forum created a unique space for listening and dialogue, where people could "dig into their values," "digest different points of view," and "get to know people as people and not labels."

At the last meeting, participants reflected on the forum. Many said the process showed them that the issue of how to conduct elections was much more complex than they had first thought and changes that had first seemed feasible were not as easy as they had assumed. Several reiterated how impressed they were with the Board of Elections procedures for maintaining election integrity, acknowledging that fraud was highly unlikely. Further, they gained a deeper understanding and respect for the commitment and work of both election administrators and elected officials. Some participants were leaving with more questions like, "What are the right criteria for redistricting," "Would a majority-vote primary have the desired effect," "How would universal automatic registration work in practice," and "If one change is not enough to make a difference, is there a combination of ideas that might."

Something that stood out at the last meeting was a sense of camaraderie. There was a lot of laughter in the room and expressions of appreciation for the relationships that had developed over the four meetings. One person said, "Relationships matter." Another expounded by saying that they came to value the context of different people's beliefs and someone else added, "When you get in a room and you get to know people as people, you can get to real conversations." They recognized that while they may share the same values, these values manifest differently for different people because of their unique contexts. Reverence for the vote was given as an example. It was why some participants believed in universal automatic registration and why others opposed it.

Finally, the group was acutely aware of the upcoming presidential and state elections and spent time considering their responsibility as leaders. Giving personal testimony of what they know to be true and resharing the "good stuff" as a "positive force in the algorithm" were offered as two ways to counter disinformation and increase trust. Another participant said they would "lean into" moments when saying or doing the right thing might mean disappointing their friends. Some saw the importance of continuing the conversation in their own communities through civic education and intentional conversations.

What NCLF Learned

NCLF's emphasis on small groups, personal stories, and a deliberate process was reaffirmed in the feedback received from its seventh cohort. Participants cited skilled facilitation, the structure and pace of the process, informal social time, and the intentional use of small and large group discussions as strong assets of the program. Personal story-sharing continued to be called out as an especially effective tool for getting past people's resumes to who they really are. Further, we learned that for some participants, including facilitators in that activity goes a long way to building trust with them. As one participant put it, "Small and large group circles... The circles are the thing."

Due to the extended budget process at the NCGA, the first meeting was postponed and held on what was originally scheduled to be the second meeting in November in Winston-Salem. As a result, the field trip to the Forsyth County Board of Elections happened during the first meeting rather than the second. This proved fortuitous for a variety of reasons. The experience became a touchstone for the group and they referenced it on several occasions throughout the Forum. From this, NCLF learned that a high-quality, shared experiential learning activity early in the process can accelerate trust and relationship building. In addition, the onsite tour allowed participants to see "behind-the-scenes" and talk directly to the staff responsible for its operations. This hands-on approach was incredibly effective in creating a shared foundation of understanding among participants. It also had the effect of putting to immediate rest many concerns and fears about election fraud. NCLF learned that the impact of such experiential activities is well worth the effort and that it is important to remain flexible with the agenda to allow for such opportunities.

We continue to gauge how much "homework" participants can reasonably be expected to do between sessions given their busy schedules. Providing readings in advance can help facilitate more informed deliberations during the forum, but several participants have appreciated not having to prepare ahead of time. Having buddies meet in person for at least one hour has been "life-changing" for some participants. However, we continue to hear from others who are disappointed and frustrated that they could not connect with their buddy. We will keep testing new strategies with the intention of creating the best experience possible for as many people as possible.

As with prior programs, we also concluded that NCLF could have more impact by repeatedly engaging alumni of our cohorts in additional programming, and 84% of respondents indicated an interest in participating in alumni programming. This would enable NCLF to build a network of NC leaders committed to a constructive, respectful, cross-partisan policymaking environment.

Finally, participants expressed strong praise for the program, and on the post-program survey, 100% said they would recommend that a friend or colleague who was invited to participate do so. In some cases, they have been interested in working with NCLF to replicate the program in their own region or on another topic area. This enthusiasm has reinforced for NCLF that there is a lack of fora in which leaders can engage deeply on issues, particularly with people who hold different ideological viewpoints or come from different sectors or areas of expertise. These arenas are very needed, and NCLF should continue to fulfill this need.

Conclusion

For our democracy to thrive, policy leaders must be able to work together to create broadly acceptable solutions to our state's greatest challenges. In 2023–24, a group of NC leaders addressed important concerns related to conducting elections in NC. They found some solutions they agreed on, some that were negotiable, and some about which they had very significant disagreements. In the process, participants came to understand what values, experiences, and perceptions lay under their disagreements, and they came to trust, respect, and perhaps even like each other.

Even in these politically fractious times, it is possible to bring together a widely diverse group of policy leaders and provide them with the opportunity to gain the will, skills, and relationships that will enable them to engage constructively with each other in the future. NCLF has provided, and should continue to provide, this opportunity to North Carolina's leaders.

Acknowledgements

Shortly after the conclusion of this forum, participant Tom Farr passed away. Tom was an active and engaged member of the cohort. His expertise and thoughtful contributions enriched our discussions and we are deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to know him.

APPENDIX A - Participants

Val Applewhite, Senator, NC General Assembly

Brian Biggs, Representative, NC General Assembly

Mary Wills Bode, Senator, NC General Assembly

Terry Brown, Representative, NC General Assembly

Javiera Caballero, City Council Member, City of Durham

Damon Circosta, Former Chair, NC State Board of Elections

Chantalle Couba, Partner, Korn Ferry

John Cummings, Vice Chairman, Robeson County Commissioners

Lige Daughtridge, City Council Member, City of Rocky Mount

Tare "T" Davis, 1st Vice President, NC Association of County Commissioners

Tom Farr, Partner, Nelson Mullins

Kate Fellman, Founder and Executive Director, You Can Vote

Monica Gibbs, Activist/Consultant, Gibbs Consulting LLC

Lilyn Hester, Head of Southeast External Affairs and Government Relations, Google

Andy Jackson, Director, Civitas Center for Public Integrity, John Locke Foundation

Jeff Loperfido, Chief Counsel for Voting Rights, Southern Coalition for Social Justice

Edward Lopez, Professor of Economics and Distinguished Professor of Capitalism, Western Carolina University

Kevin McLaughlin, Vice President, Government Affairs and External Relations, Duke Energy

Juan Pleitez, Research Assistant, NC General Assembly

Nelson Powell, Senior Vice President, First Bank & Trust Company

Lindsey Prather, Representative, NC General Assembly

Patti Ramseur, President, NC Bar Association

Benton Sawrey, Senator, NC General Assembly

Julie Scott Emmons, South Regional Director, Government Affairs, Human Coalition

Reggie Shuford, Executive Director, NC Justice Center

Phil Strach, Attorney, Nelson Mullins

Tim Tsujii, Director of Elections, Forsyth County Board of Elections

Craig Turner, Alamance County Commissioner, Alamance County/The Vernon Law Firm

Joy Vermillion Heinsohn, Executive Director, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation

Kyle Villemain, Founder, The Assembly

Jeff Zenger, Representative, NC General Assembly

APPENDIX B - Full List of Elections-Related Concerns, as Identified by Participants and Grouped by NCLF

Summary of Concerns Shared

- People's votes don't count/matter.
- Gerrymandering prevents the results from being representative, pushing winners towards extremes.
- There is a lack of trust in the integrity and transparency of the system.
- It's too hard to vote.
- Running for and serving in public office is hard for the average person to do.
- It is hard to hire/retain staff and poll workers because of the toxic environment/disinformation, constant flux in rules, and voter harassment.
- Legal protection for voters' right to register, vote, and have votes matter is decreasing.
- The ability to vote is not valued.
- Elections are more about tribal affiliation than about policy issues, candidate character, or what is good for the people.
- Two-party "duopoly" system is failing.
- Campaign finance laws are too complex.
- Election changes might not preserve what is currently good in the election system.
- Electing judges does not produce good results.

Detailed List (individual concerns + categories as grouped during meeting):

- Votes don't count / matter
  - Because elections are not representative, decisions of government are not valid
  - Even if vote, voices are not heard in government, especially black communities
  - Some voters' voices matter more than others, so it's okay if some people can't vote
  - People who register as Unaffiliated don't have a voice in the current process
- Gerrymandering prevents the results from being representative, pushing winners towards extremes
- There is a lack of trust in the integrity and transparency of the system
  - Many people don't believe in the accuracy of results and won't vote as a result
  - People believe absentee votes aren't being counted
  - People believe voting rolls are inaccurate – the integrity of the voting rolls
  - People distrust electronic voting machines
  - There is fraud in the system:
    - Collection of absentee votes
    - Impersonation fraud
    - Haulers of voters to curbside voting
    - Nursing home voters [but see NCSBE rules]
    - Residency – vote in wrong places, double voting
- Young people don't trust parties – register Unaffiliated
- Election observers are too restricted – lack of transparency

- It's too hard to vote
  - The voting system is archaic/inconvenient
  - Requirements discourage participation
  - Fewer early voting locations or Early Voting locations are changed
  - Cutting back on the early voting period
  - No same-day registration and voting on election day
  - Inadequate number of polling places and hard-to-find appropriate polling places
    - Polling in churches discourages some voters
    - Polling in schools impacts students and parents
  - Voter ID requirements will discourage or prevent people from voting
  - Hard to register to vote online
  - Technology is hard for some people to use
  - Hard or confusing for transient voters to update their registration
  - Lack of good information re: voting and elections and requirement rules – access to information
    - Information is confusing
    - Lack of accurate, objective information about candidates for voters
    - Sample ballots/slate cards interfere with independent decision-making
  - Voter intimidation at polls

- Running for and serving in public office is hard for the average person to do
  - Campaigns cost too much
  - Early voting period is too long for candidates
  - Pay of elected officials is too low, restricts who can run
  - Physical safety of elected officials is a problem

- It is hard to hire/retain staff and poll workers because of the toxic environment/disinformation, constant flux in rules, and voter harassment
- Legal protection for voters' right to register, vote, and have votes matter is decreasing.
- The ability to vote is not valued:
  - Multiple access points to voting "cheapens voting"
  - Voting is no longer a civic ritual
- Elections are more about tribal affiliation than about policy issues, candidate character, or what is good for the people
  - Power of negative advertising
  - Influence of super PACS and dark money
- Two-party "duopoly" system is failing
  - Party primaries push candidates toward extremes
- Campaign finance laws are too complex
- Election changes might not preserve what is currently good in the election system
- Electing judges does not produce good results
  - Partisan elections don't produce qualified, impartial judges
  - Appellate judge candidates are not known by voters
  - Restrictions on judicial candidates make it hard to communicate/know about them