

North Carolina 2026 Report

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Introduction

North Carolina is a swing state that has seen many contentious elections for [U.S. President](#), [U.S. Senate](#), and [state-level offices](#), especially over the past fifteen years. It has had a divided state government since [2017](#): Republicans have controlled the state legislature, and Democrats have held the governorship.

State-level partisan infighting has carried a number of implications for election administration; the most notable change since the 2024 election has been the restructuring of the State Board of Elections. In late 2024, the power to appoint new members of the Board shifted from the governor (a Democrat) to the state auditor (a Republican). After new members were selected by the state auditor in 2025, the Board switched from a 3-2 Democratic majority to a 3-2 Republican majority. This change in partisan composition has led to several new proposed or adopted changes, including reductions in the number of early voting days, changes to voter registration requirements and registration drives, and new list maintenance procedures.

Using [data](#) from the 2026 primary election, North Carolinians appear to be voting early more frequently and voting by mail and on Election Day less frequently compared to the 2022 primary election. There has been a rise in the number of voters registered as unaffiliated and a drop in the share of voters registered as Democrats, but no significant changes in the number of Republican registrants. These voter registration trends are consistent with other [reports](#) and data from previous election years.

General Election Calendar

The dates and deadlines for the 2026 general election calendar are [set by the North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

- + **Sept. 4, 2026:** Absentee ballots start getting mailed out in response to requests.

- + **Oct. 9, 2026 (5 P.M.):** Voter registration deadline for non-UOCAVA voters.¹
- + **Oct. 15, 2026:** Early voting begins.
- + **Oct. 20, 2026 (5 P.M.):** Deadline to request an absentee ballot.
- + **Oct. 31, 2026 (3 P.M.):** Early voting ends.
- + **Nov. 3, 2026:** General Election. Absentee ballots must be returned by 7:30 P.M.

Data Availability

North Carolina provides county- and precinct-level data for the entire state dating back to 2000, including an archive of election results and voter registration statistics. Counties within the state publish their own precinct-level data related to election results, early voting statistics, voter registration, and voter demographics. Counties also release data on campaign finances for active committees and county- and municipal-level committees. More information on North Carolina's election data is provided in our [North Carolina Data Guide](#).

Election Administration Landscape

State Board of Elections Restructuring

In response to Hurricane Helene, the Republican-controlled North Carolina state legislature passed legislation in late 2024 primarily focused on providing disaster relief, but which also included changes to the powers of the governor. One of these provisions [shifted the authority to appoint new members of the State Board of Elections](#) from the governor (then Democrat Roy Cooper, now Democrat Josh Stein) to the state auditor (Republican Dave Boliek). The State Board of Elections is designed to be a [five-member independent agency in which no more than three members can be of the same party](#); the

¹ Early voting sites in North Carolina also allow same-day registration, so voters not registered by October 9 can register and then immediately vote during the early voting period, which is not permitted on Election Day.

2024 legislation included a stipulation that ended all current board members' terms and was passed as the power to appoint members shifted from a Democrat to a Republican. This has led to changes in the Board's composition and its subsequent administrative actions.

This legislation was subject to significant legal challenges after its initial passage. First, it was [vetoed](#) by then-Governor Roy Cooper, who argued that it was a "sham." His veto was [overridden](#) by the Senate (30-19 margin) and then the House (72-46 margin), allowing the legislation to take full effect. Cooper and current Governor Josh Stein then filed suit against Republican state legislative leaders. On April 23, 2025, a panel of judges ruled that the law was unconstitutional because "[the duty to faithfully execute the laws has been exclusively assigned to the governor.](#)" Boliek and other Republican leaders appealed, and the N.C. Court of Appeals released a "[unanimous, unsigned order blocking the trial court's decision.](#)" The Court of Appeals' order came on April 30, and [Boliek named the new board members](#) on May 1. This shifted the partisan composition of the Board from a 3-2 Democratic majority to a 3-2 Republican majority.

After the new members were appointed, [the Board selected Sam Hayes](#) as its executive director, replacing Karen Brinson Bell.² Governor Stein had requested that the North Carolina Supreme Court step in and block the enforcement of the law, but the court [declined to halt the changes](#). This partisan shift in control of the State Board of Elections led to several new administrative changes in North Carolina ahead of the 2026 midterm election cycle. These changes include, but are not limited to, reducing the number of early voting days, collecting more voter registration data, no longer providing printed registration applications to voter registration organizations, and implementing new list maintenance procedures.

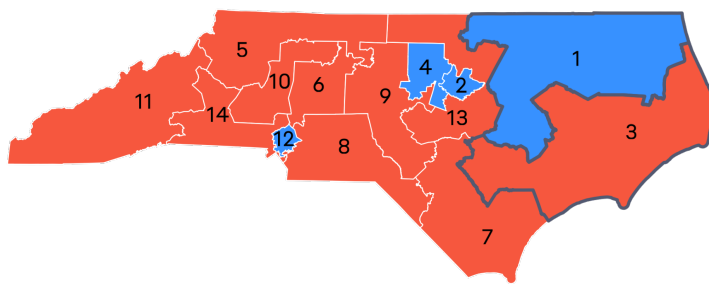
² Karen Brinson Bell currently serves as Principal and Co-founder of Advance Elections as well as the Election Policy Fellow at the MIT Election Data + Science Lab.

Recent Policy and Law Changes

Redistricting

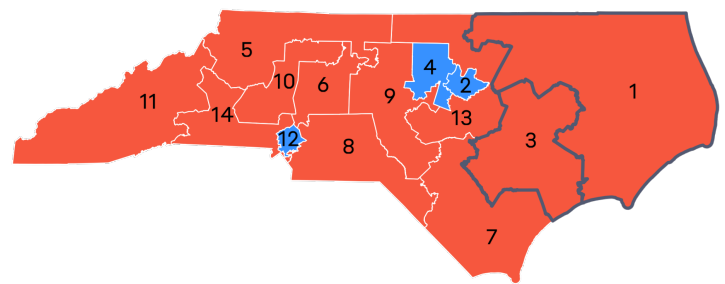
In October 2025, [North Carolina became the first swing state to redraw its congressional maps](#) after President Trump launched a nationwide redistricting campaign aimed at preserving Republican control of the House of Representatives. Before the redistricting, [Republicans held 10 out of the 14 districts, and Democrats held the remaining 4](#).

North Carolina Congressional Districts (2023-2025)



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina General Assembly

North Carolina Congressional Districts (2025-present)



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina General Assembly

These figures depict two versions of the North Carolina Congressional Districts. The one on the left shows the districts before the most recent redistricting effort, and the one on the right shows the current districts. They are colored by their partisan leaning: red for Republican districts and blue for Democratic districts. In both maps, most districts lean Republican. Shapefile data from the [North Carolina General Assembly](#).

Republicans focused their efforts on the northeast region of the state: District 1. The seat is currently held by Democratic incumbent Don Davis, who has been in office since 2023. In a statement, Phil Berger (the N.C. Senate Leader) said that their motivation for redistricting was to “[protect President Trump’s agenda, which means safeguarding Republican control of Congress](#)” and cited redistricting efforts in other states, like

California and Texas, as justification for this effort. To pursue this goal, Republicans redrew the boundaries of NC-1 and NC-3 to flip the former from Democratic to Republican. In doing so, they made NC-3 [a less “red” but still safely Republican district](#). According to the [Cook Political Report](#), NC-1 is now a “Lean Republican” district.

Reduction of Early Voting Days

North Carolina has also moved towards limiting the number of early voting opportunities. While there has been some backlash over the [lack of early voting locations on some college campuses](#), the reduction of early voting days has received more substantial attention and caused the most controversy. As early as January 2026, some counties [lost Sunday early voting](#) after a decision by the N.C. Board of Elections, and by May 2026, Republicans in both houses of the North Carolina General Assembly had put forth legislation to curtail the number of early voting days and to remove Sunday voting statewide. [Senate Bill 1084](#) would cut the number of early voting days in North Carolina from 17 to 10, and [House Bill 66](#) would cut it to 6. As of June 2026, neither bill has passed, but both have created controversy.

Republicans have argued that having 17 days of early voting is [excessive](#) and that it is difficult to find enough poll workers to properly staff election locations for such a long period. Some local election officials concurred, noting a slump in the middle of the early voting period. Other local election officials have [worried](#) that the reduction in early voting would limit voter access by increasing crowds or discouraging turnout. Democrats, in turn, have argued that these limitations amount to voter suppression and accuse Republicans of targeting Black voters, who make up a high proportion of the voters who participate in [Sunday early voting](#). Democrats and voter rights groups also [contend](#) that reducing the number of early voting days may make it [more difficult](#) for voters to cast their ballots, especially since early voting has been the [most popular way](#) for North Carolinians to vote since the 2020 general elections and the 17-day period has [broad bipartisan support](#) among citizens.

The legislature's [previous attempt](#) to cut down the number of early voting days in North Carolina was included in a broader 2013 election administration bill that was struck down by the federal courts for targeting Black voters with "[almost surgical precision](#)."

Griffin v. NCSBE: Case and Impacts on Voter Registration

During the 2024 general election, N.C. Supreme Court candidate and N.C. Court of Appeals judge Jefferson Griffin (R) lost to incumbent justice Allison Riggs (D) by only 734 votes. After two recounts, Griffin [filed hundreds of protests](#) to invalidate over 60,000 votes. He argued that the N.C. State Board of Elections had registered thousands of voters incorrectly by failing to require some voters to provide driver's licenses or Social Security information, failing to require photo ID for some overseas/absentee voters, and allowing absentee ballots from dependents of North Carolinians. The ballots that Griffin requested to be voided were disproportionately cast by [Black](#), [Democratic](#), and [young](#) voters.

After battling the outcome of the election for six months in state and federal courts, Griffin [conceded](#) to Riggs two days after a federal district court judge [ordered](#) that the election be certified. Though Griffin's challenge was unsuccessful, the prolonged spotlight on uncollected driver's license and Social Security information has led to recent changes to voter registration in North Carolina.

The federal district court's decision that stopped Griffin's challenges came in May 2025. In response to a [Trump administration lawsuit](#) in late June, the State Board of Elections launched the [Registration Repair Project](#), which is an effort to collect missing driver's license and Social Security information from voters. Executive Director Hayes presented a [plan](#) to gather this information by mailing out notices to voters for whom the NCSBE did not have this data on file. The plan also stipulated that voters who did not provide this information would have to cast provisional ballots the next time they voted. It was [unanimously supported](#) by the bipartisan Board. By July 2025, [103,270](#) voters who needed to update their information had been identified.

Voters in North Carolina can check whether they need to update their registration using the [Registration Repair Search Tool](#), which is updated daily and lists all voters missing

the data required by the Board. As of June 2026, over 65,000 voters still need to update their registration. Voters can update their information [online if they are registered drivers](#), in person at their [local county elections office](#), or by responding to the letter from the State Board of Elections.

List Maintenance and the SAVE Database

In November 2025, the North Carolina Board of Elections entered into a [memorandum of agreement](#) with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigrations Services (USCIS) to cross-reference North Carolina voter records with the Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) database. Executive Director Sam Hayes stated that the agreement would help maintain the voter registration list by identifying noncitizens. In April 2026, [the Board voted](#) to use voters' names, birthdays, and the last four digits of their Social Security numbers to check the citizenship of all registered voters against the SAVE database, ensuring every registrant was a citizen. Later that month, the Board [released an update](#) and said it had submitted over seven million voter records to the SAVE system to check for noncitizens, as well as duplicate and deceased voter registrations. The statement stated that the Board had identified about 34,000 deceased citizens from the list, but did not provide any figures for noncitizens (the new citizen verification procedures had not gone into effect at the time of the statement's release). Election officials have [noted](#) that while these findings underline the importance of updating voter rolls, list maintenance is routine and that finding deceased individuals on the voter rolls does not necessarily mean that their names were used to cast votes illegally.

In June 2026, a [federal court ruling](#) barred DHS from using the SAVE database to verify voters' citizenship status because it relies on Social Security numbers to search for registered voters. Unless this ruling is later overturned on appeal by the Trump administration, the Board may no longer be able to use it for voter verification.

Changes to Voter Registration Drives

In previous election years, the North Carolina Board of Elections printed physical copies of voter registration forms for organizations to give out at voter registration drives. However, the Board announced in March 2026 that it would no longer provide paper registration forms for these drives, citing “[significant and ongoing costs](#)” as the reason for the change and noting that physical forms would still be available to individual voters and to government agencies that register voters. The change means that groups hosting registration drives in 2026 would need to print the requisite forms themselves.

Several groups have protested the new policy, and [thirty non-partisan voting rights organizations](#) signed a letter sent to Executive Director Hayes in May 2026. They argued that neglecting to print the forms violates the [National Voter Registration Act of 1993 \(NVRA\)](#), which requires that states “make the federal mail-based registration form available at governmental and private entities for distribution, with a particular focus on distributing forms to nongovernmental voter registration programs.” [In the letter](#), the groups expressed concern that this change would prevent some organizations that could not afford to print forms from holding drives at all. Other critics have argued that efforts to limit voter registration drives would disproportionately affect parts of the electorate that may have more difficulty registering through the DMV, such as [voters](#) in rural areas, the elderly, and those without a driver's license.

The new policy follows other efforts in the state to limit external voter registration drives and related spending. In 2024, the State Board of Elections printed about [1.3 million forms](#) for voter registration drives and requests from government agencies. This cost the Board over \$269,000, though it was partly attributable to higher engagement during a presidential election year and to reprinting forms to accommodate changes throughout the 2024 cycle. Following the 2024 election, [House Bill 127](#) (2025) sought to ban individuals or private groups from holding voter registration drives and to permit the distribution of voter registration forms only by election board or DMV employees. While it did not pass, the bill suggests broader interest among lawmakers and the State Board in limiting external voter drives, though similar efforts in other states have been found unconstitutional and [struck down](#).

Voter ID Amendment

[Senate Bill 824](#), which required voters to present photo ID to vote, was enacted in 2018. The law [requires](#) voters to present a photo ID to election workers, complete an ID Exception form, or include a photocopy of an ID with their mail ballot. After it was passed, the law was temporarily suspended due to a [lawsuit](#) that claimed it discriminated against Black voters. After years of legal back-and-forth, the N.C. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the law, and the photo ID requirement came into full effect for the [2024](#) elections.

As previously discussed, Jefferson Griffin [contested the results](#) of his race for the North Carolina Supreme Court that year, challenging over 67,000 votes. Among the voters whose ballots were challenged, more than 60,000 did not have IDs or Social Security numbers on file; 5,500 votes were cast by overseas and military voters who did not include photocopies of their IDs, and 500 ballots were from “[never residents](#)” (U.S. citizens who have never lived in the United States, but are lawfully allowed to vote in the state’s elections because they were born to parents from North Carolina; for example, the children of military members stationed overseas). However, a [study](#) by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice found that about a quarter of the votes Griffin had claimed as “never residents” had previously been cast by people who had lived in North Carolina.

Griffin’s case was extensively litigated in the North Carolina court system. The case concerning overseas and military votes was [unanimously rejected by the NCSBE](#), as the board had told those voters beforehand that proof of ID was not required. However, the North Carolina Court of Appeals later overturned this ruling in April 2025. Also in [April 2025](#), the North Carolina Supreme Court made the decision to reject votes from “never residents” but to include the ballots from voters who did not have an ID or Social Security number on file due to clerical errors; the court provided a 30-day cure period for military and overseas voters to send proof of ID.

The legal dispute ended in [May 2025](#), when a federal judge ordered the election results to be certified, and Griffin officially conceded to his opponent, Allison Riggs. In [July](#) of that year, the State Board of Elections voted to amend a rule so that military and overseas voters would be included in the state's photo ID requirements in future elections. In [June 2026](#), a North Carolina Superior Court ruled that voters who had never resided in North Carolina or the United States would no longer be allowed to register and vote in the state's elections beginning in 2026. As of the publication of this report, no appeal has been filed in this case.

Following the confusion over voter ID during the 2024 election, [Senate Bill 921](#), a proposed constitutional amendment, passed the state Senate and House in December 2024. Because it passed through both chambers of the state legislature, the [North Carolina Voter Identification Amendment](#) will appear on North Carolina's ballot in November during the 2026 elections. If passed by voters, this amendment would amend sections 2 and 3 of the state's constitution to require all voters, regardless of the method they use to cast their ballots, to present photo identification for their votes to be counted. Currently, [twenty-four states](#) require voters to present photo IDs.

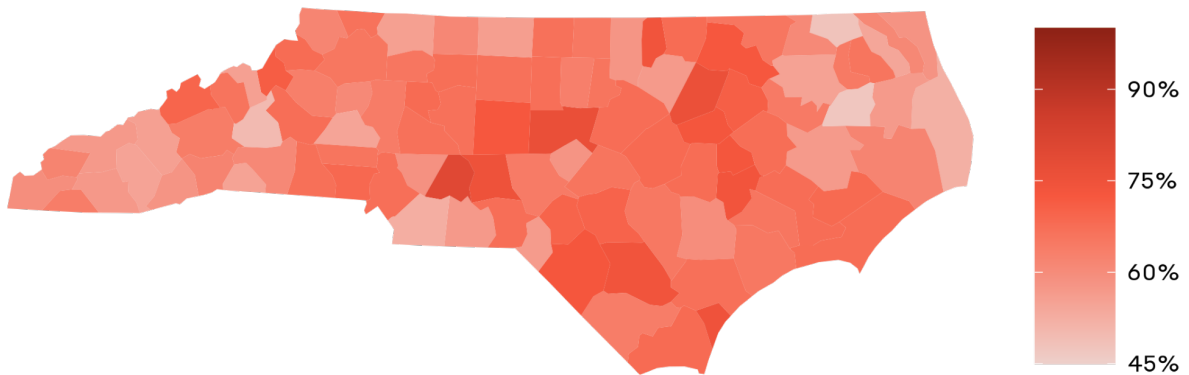
2026 Primary Election Analysis

Notable Results and Contests

U.S. Senate Race

In the summer of 2025, incumbent Senator Thom Tillis (R), who was facing increasing criticism and a [censure](#) from his own state party for support of LGBTQ+ rights and other issues, [announced](#) that he would not seek re-election. Although there was no incumbent after Tillis decided not to run for re-election, the Republican primary was largely uncompetitive. The party selected Michael Whatley (the chair of the Republican National Committee from 2024 to 2025 and the chair of the North Carolina Republican Party from 2019 to 2024) as their nominee on March 3, 2026.

Michael Whatley Vote Share in Republican Primary



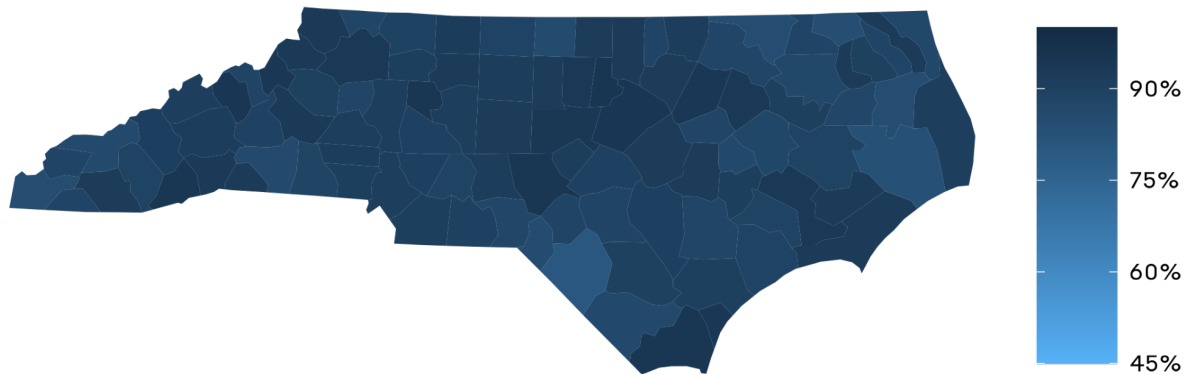
Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

This image depicts a county-level map of North Carolina colored by the proportion of votes that Michael Whatley (the winner of the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate race in North Carolina) received. The color scale is from light to dark red, so counties with a smaller Whatley vote share are colored by a lighter red than those with a larger Whatley vote share. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

In the Republican primary, Whatley received the plurality of votes in every county. His vote share ranged between 47.2% (Washington County) and 79.9% (Stanly County). He received the majority of the votes in all but three counties (Washington, Gates, and McDowell).

His Democratic opponent is former governor Roy Cooper, who served as the 75th governor of North Carolina from 2017 to 2025.

Roy Cooper Vote Share in Democratic Primary



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

This image depicts a county-level map of North Carolina colored by the proportion of votes that Roy Cooper (the winner of the Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate race in North Carolina) received. The color scale is from light to dark blue, so counties with a smaller Cooper vote share are colored by a lighter blue than those with a larger Cooper vote share. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

The Democratic primary was even less competitive than the Republican primary, although voter turnout was higher. Cooper received the majority of votes in every county. His vote share ranged from 80.3% (Robeson County) to 95% (Durham County). In general, there were over 100,000 more participants in the Democratic primary than the Republican primary ([419,224 voters versus 295,805](#)). This figure includes unaffiliated voters, who may opt into either primary.

Three other candidates are running for the seat in the general election: Shannon Bray (Libertarian), Brian McGinnis (Green), and Shaunesi Deberry (Independent).

For a little over a decade, both U.S. Senate seats for North Carolina have been occupied by Republicans. The [last time a Democrat won a U.S. Senate election in N.C. was in 2008](#) (Kay Hagan), and the [last time a Democrat won an open seat was in 1974](#). This race is expected to be one of the most expensive U.S. Senate races in the 2026 midterm election cycle and could [affect the chamber's partisan balance](#).

N.C. State Senate District 26

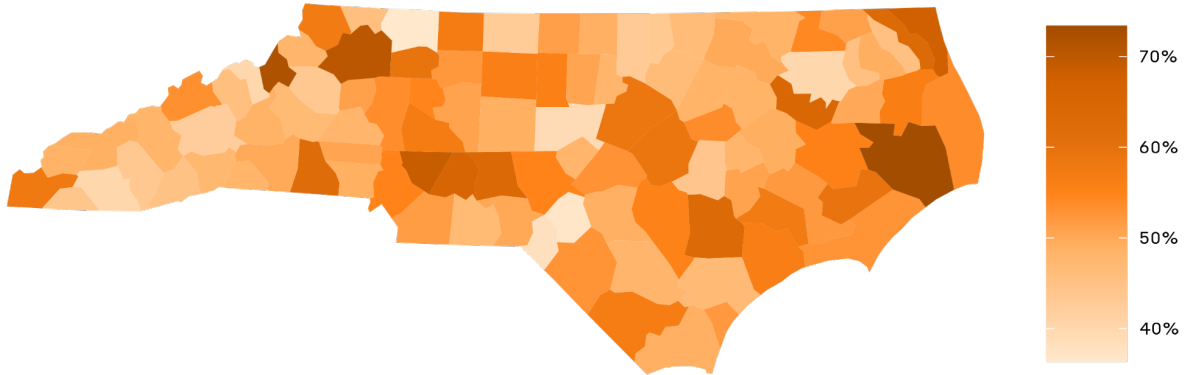
District 26 in the North Carolina State Senate is made up of two counties: Rockingham and (part of) Guilford. The current occupant of District 26 is Senate President Pro Tempore Phil Berger. He has been [in office since 2000](#), has been the Senate Leader since 2011, and is widely regarded as [one of the most powerful politicians in North Carolina](#). In the 2026 Republican primary, Rockingham County Sheriff Sam Page chose to [run against Berger](#) for the District 26 seat. Page, who has been the sheriff [since 1998](#), previously [broke with Berger](#) in 2023, when the senator backed an unpopular casino proposal that Page opposed. On paper, this appeared to be a relatively straightforward race: the incumbent Senate leader with [high-profile endorsements and a significant war chest](#) versus a local elected official who had faced allegations that he created a “[hostile work environment](#).” However, the competitiveness and the unexpected result of this primary contest show that this race was not easily predictable.

According to the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#), Page beat Berger in the Republican primary by only 23 votes (13,135 versus 13,112). In Rockingham, 9,065 votes went to Page and 4,526 went to Berger. In the parts of Guilford that are in District 26, 8,586 votes were cast for Berger and 4,070 were cast for Page. The county-level breakdown indicates that Page was carried by the support he received in Rockingham, where twice as many people supported him as compared to Berger. Berger [conceded the race after two recounts](#)—a machine recount and then a hand recount of a sample of ballots from the two counties. Neither recount found a discrepancy with the original count.

In the general election, Page will face Democrat [Steve Luking](#). Given that voters in District 26 have consistently elected Republicans in previous elections, Page is favored to win the race and become the next State Senator in this district.

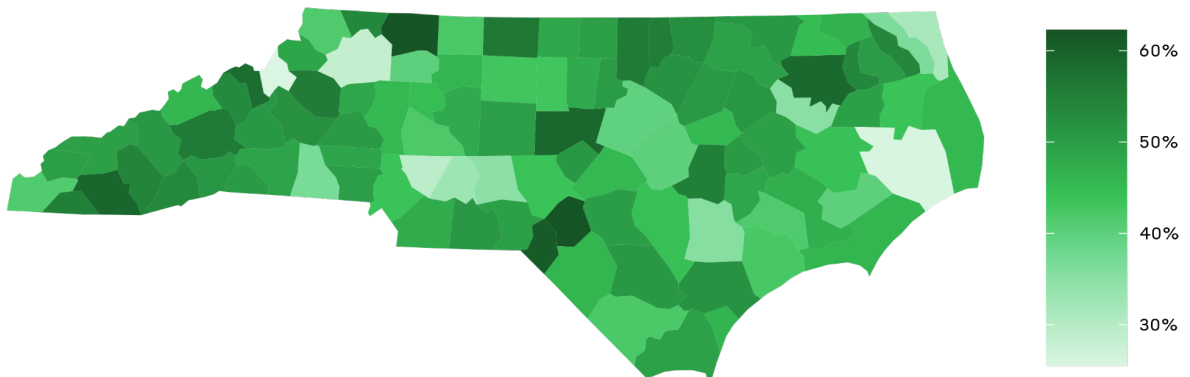
Voting Methods

2026 Election Day Voting Rates



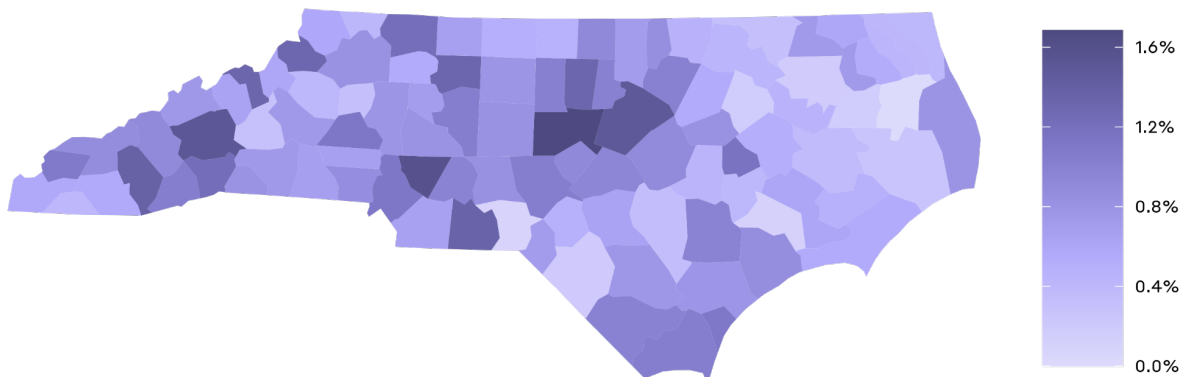
Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

2026 Early Voting Rates



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

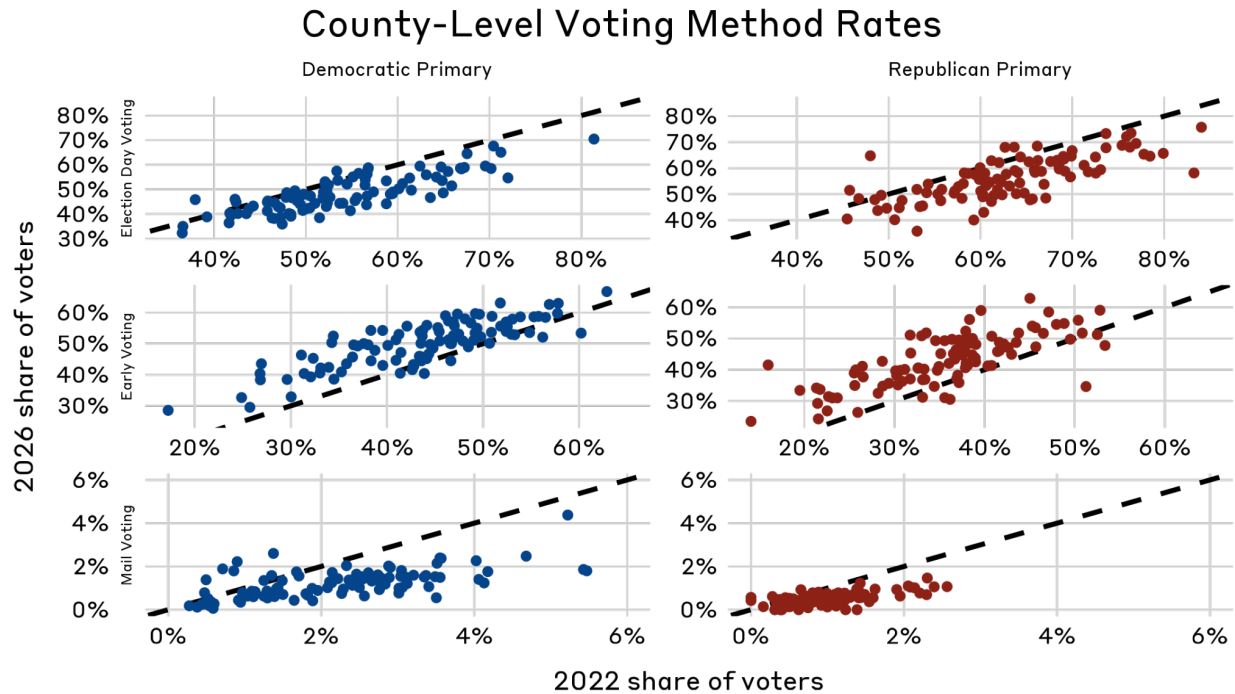
2026 Mail Voting Rates



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

The three images above show county-level maps of North Carolina colored by the percentage of voters who used a certain voting method. The first map depicts Election Day voting rates in orange, the second shows early voting rates in green, and the third shows mail voting rates in purple. Darker colors correspond to larger rates in all three graphs. Note the different legend scales on each of the three graphs. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

Voting on Election Day (either in person or curbside) was the most popular voting method in most counties during the 2026 primaries. About 52% of voters in each county voted on Election Day. Early voting was also relatively popular statewide (47%), and a majority of voters chose to vote early in 39 counties. Mail voting rates were low across North Carolina for this election, but slightly higher in some rural counties in the western part of the state.

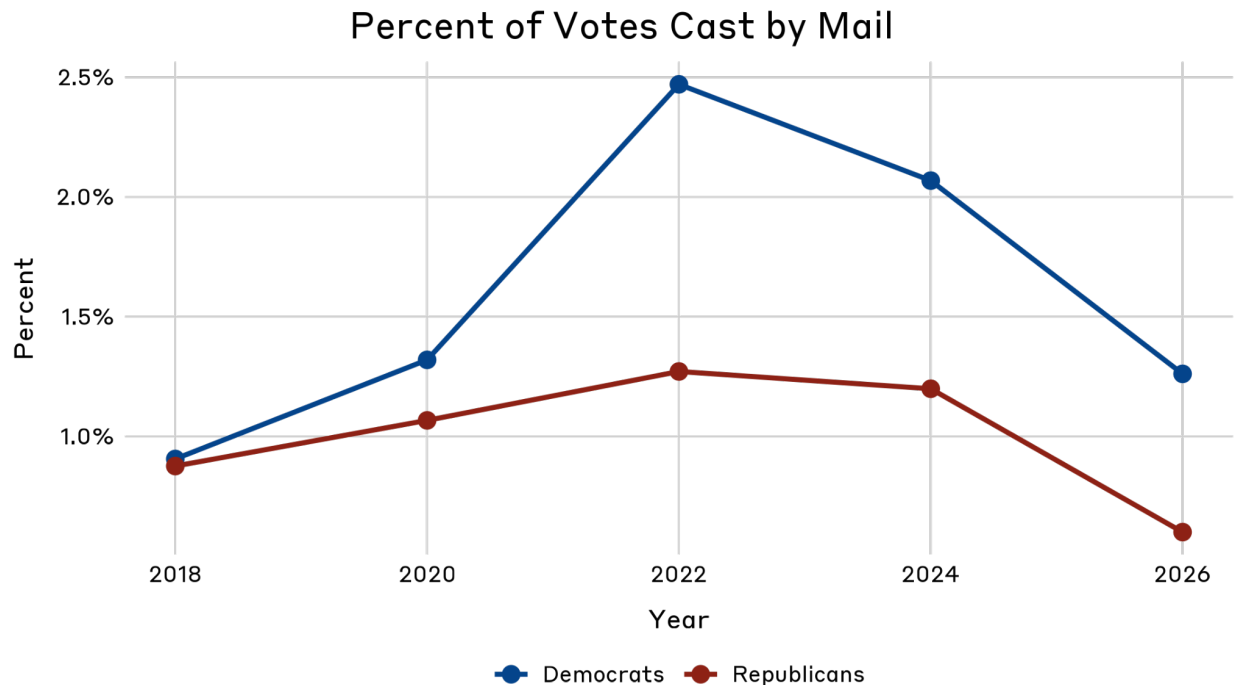


Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
 Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

The six graphs above compare the 2026 share of voters who voted using a particular voting method with the 2022 share. Each point represents one county, and the line is included to highlight where points would fall if there were no change from 2022. Results are broken out by partisan primary. The graphs on the left show participation rates by voting method for Democratic primary voters, and the graphs on the right show voting methods for Republican primary voters. The top two graphs show the share of voters who participated in Election Day voting, the middle two graphs show early voting, and the bottom two graphs depict mail voting. Note the difference in axis scaling across the different voting methods. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

When these voting method rates are broken down by partisan primary and compared with 2022 rates, it can be observed that the share of voters participating in Election Day voting and voting by mail has decreased in many counties since 2022. On the other hand, early voting rates seem to have increased in nearly every county, despite [restrictions in some counties](#) on Sunday voting and the closure of early voting locations on several campuses.

These trends are common across voters in both the Democratic and Republican primaries.

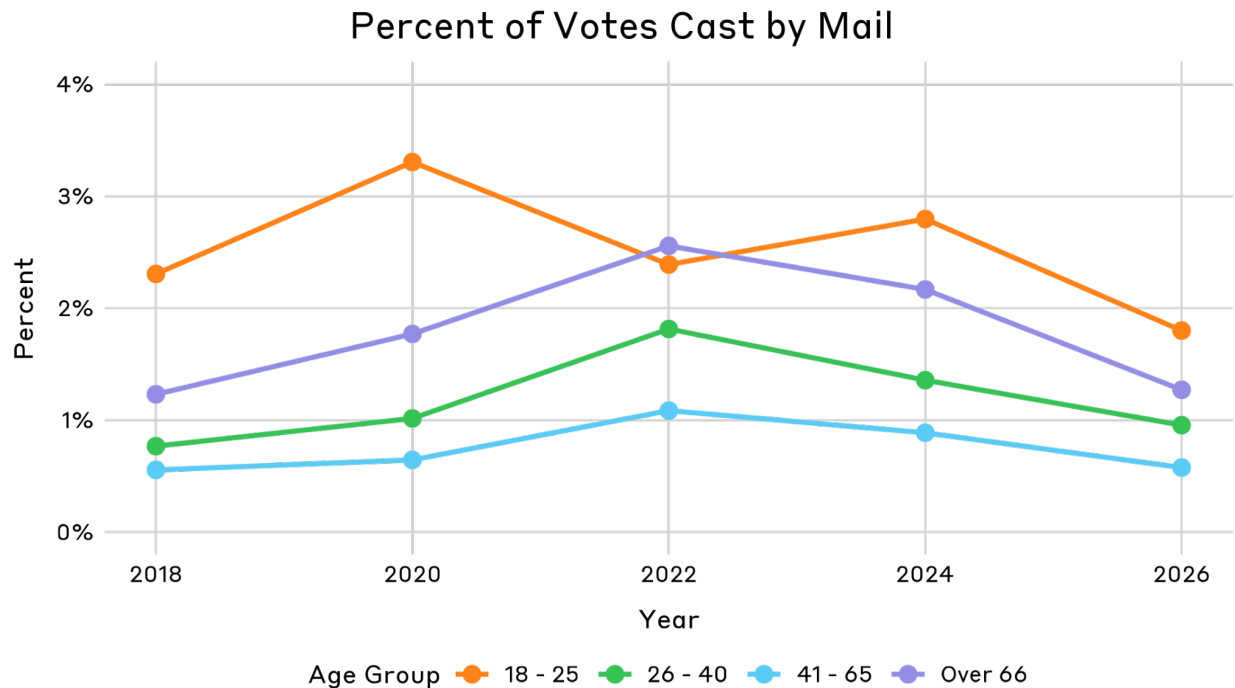


Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

This figure depicts the percent of votes cast by mail by Democrats and Republicans in N.C. primary elections from 2018 to 2026. The blue line, which is always above the red line, shows the share of Democrats voting by mail. The red line corresponds to the share of Republicans voting by mail. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

Stepping away from the county-level breakdown, there is a partisan difference in the share of North Carolinian voters who vote by mail. Mail voting rates were similar for Democrats and Republicans in 2018, but a gap between the two major parties emerged in 2020 as Democrats began voting by mail at higher rates, presumably due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Democrats' mail voting rates peaked in 2022 and have since declined. While Republicans also voted by mail at larger rates from 2018 to 2022, the increase was not as substantial as it was for Democrats. Democrats' vote-by-mail rates appear to be returning

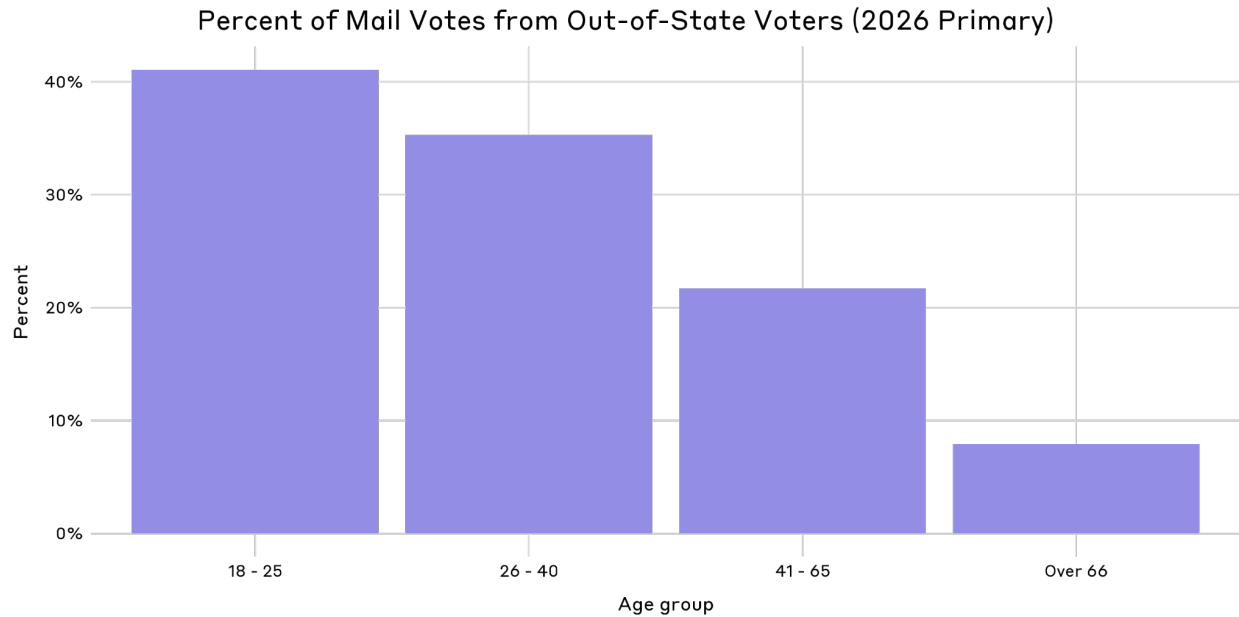
to pre-pandemic levels, while Republicans' rates were slightly lower in 2026 than they were in 2018.



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

This line graph shows the percent of votes cast by mail in primaries from 2018 to 2026 across different age groups: 18-25, 26-40, 41-65, and over 66. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

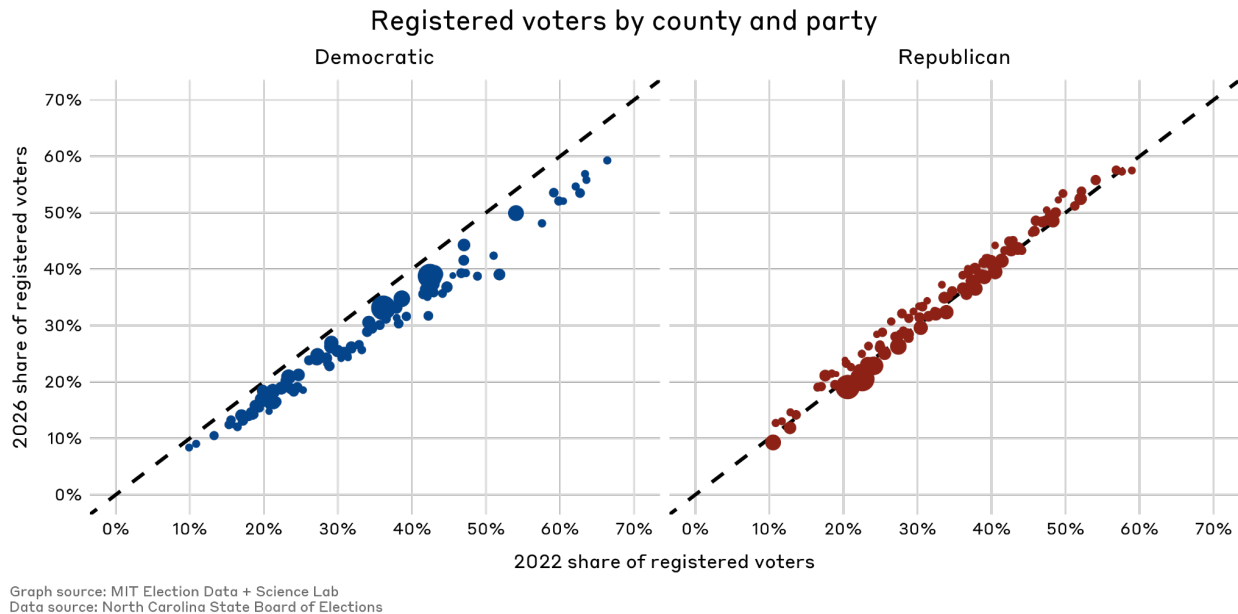
Across different age groups, there are a few notable differences in the share of voters who vote by mail. Voters aged 18 to 25 and those over 66 tend to use mail voting at higher rates than voters aged 26 to 40 or 41 to 65. Mail voting has been declining since 2022 across all age groups except voters aged 18 to 25 (these voters saw a slight increase from 2022 to 2024, but their vote-by-mail rate dropped in 2026). A potential explanation is that young voters who are registered in North Carolina may end up mailing in their ballots from a different state more often than older voters do, primarily because many of them are away at college outside the state.



The figure above shows the percent of mail votes cast from voters out-of-state

In the 2026 primary, the percentage of mail votes sent in from out-of-state was higher among younger voters. The difference in this proportion between the 18-25 age group and the 26-40 age group is statistically significant, indicating that voters in the youngest age group vote from out-of-state at the highest rates. These results suggest that many of the younger voters who chose to vote by mail may have done so because they were located outside of North Carolina at the time of the primary, likely because they are college students.

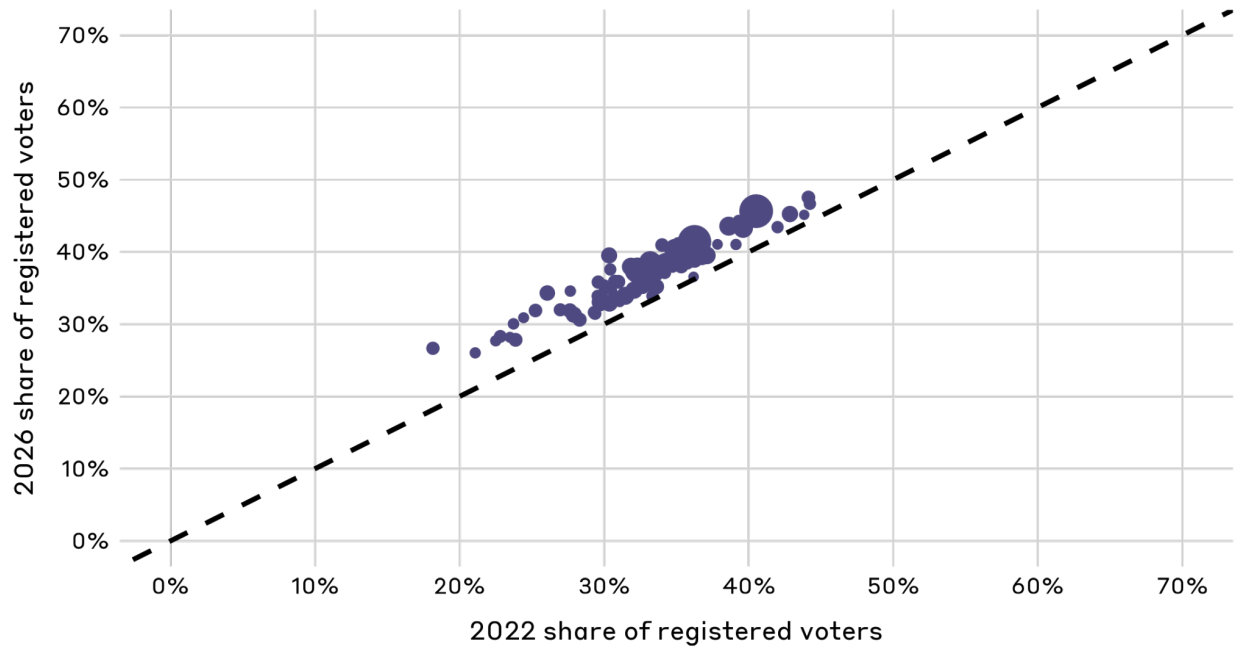
Voter Registration



This figure shows the change in the share of voters who registered as Democrats and Republicans from 2022 to 2026. Each point represents one county, and the line for each graph is included to highlight where points would fall if there were no change from 2022. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

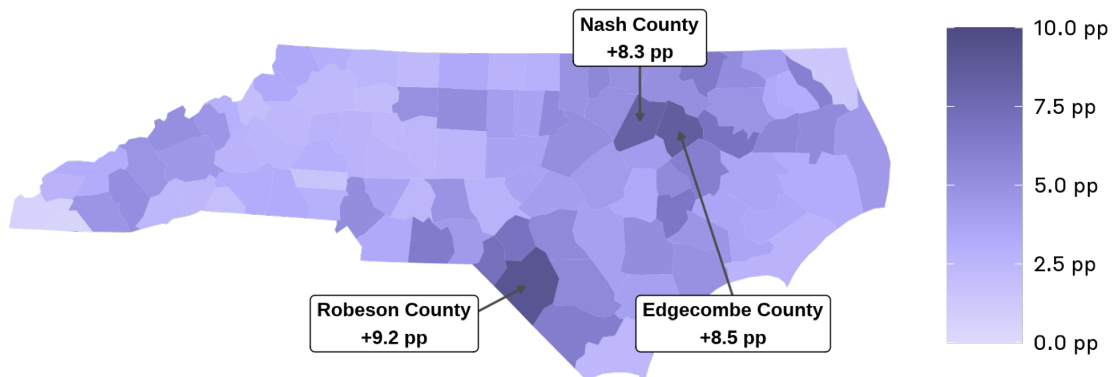
In every North Carolina county, there was a drop in the share of voters who were registered as Democrats from 2022 to 2026. The share of Republicans increased from 2022 to 2026 in many smaller counties and remained relatively similar in larger counties. The decline in the share of Democrats may be partly explained by examining trends in the number of unaffiliated voters.

"Unaffiliated" Registrants



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

Change in Share of "Unaffiliated Voters"

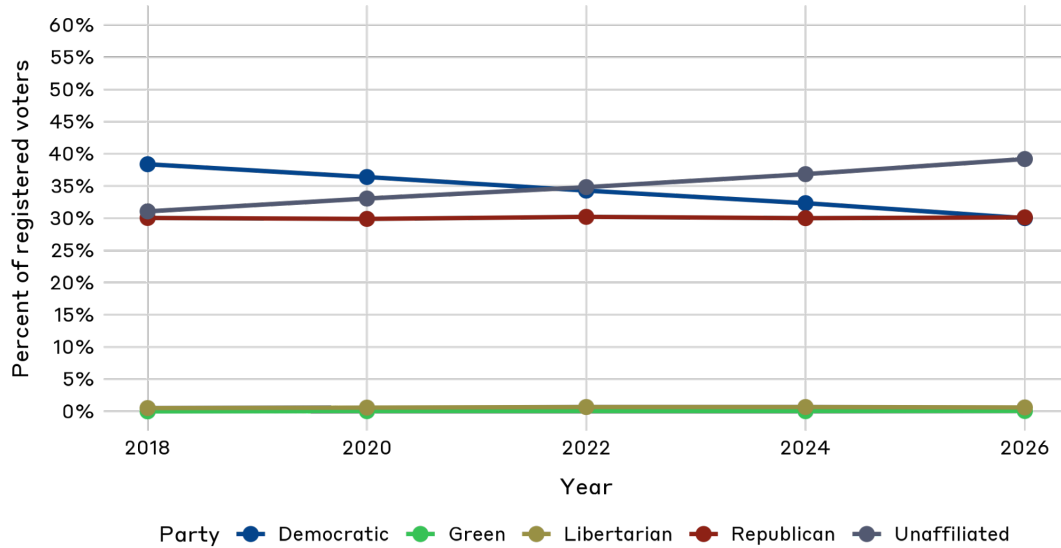


Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

The first graph depicts the change in voters who registered as unaffiliated from 2022 to 2026. Each point represents one county, and the line is included to highlight where points would fall if there were no change from 2022. The map above also shows the difference between 2022 and 2026 on a county-level map of North Carolina. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#).

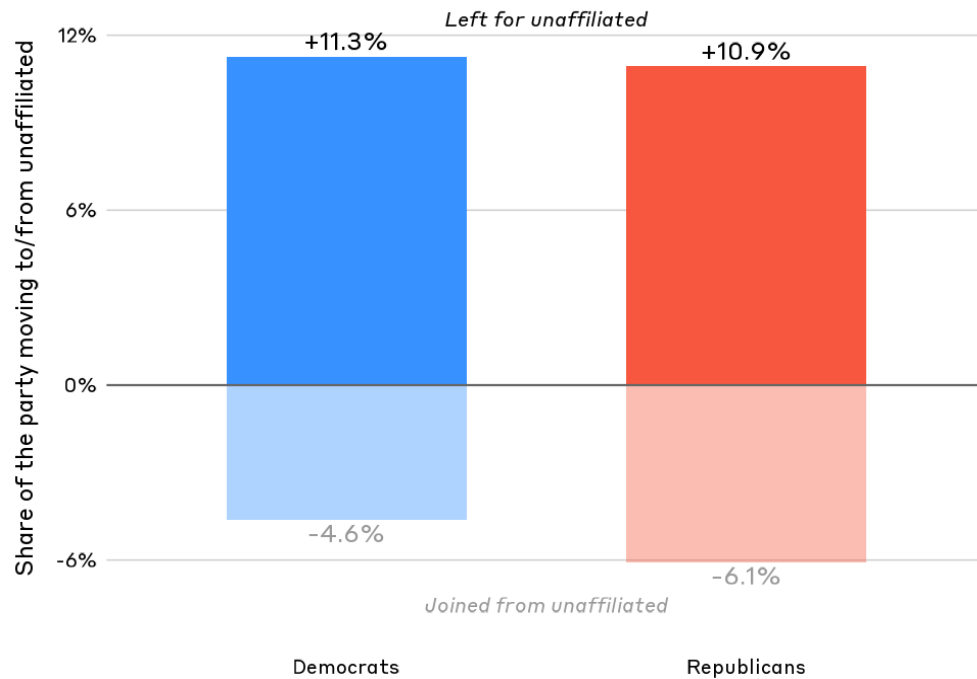
Between 2022 and 2026, North Carolina saw an increase in the share of voters who registered as unaffiliated in every county in the state. This difference was largest in Robeson, Edgecombe, and Nash counties, which have also seen recent shifts in voting trends. While Robeson was historically considered a Democratic county, [a majority of its voters supported President Trump in the 2016 presidential election](#), and [Republicans have been winning elections more frequently since then](#). Nash, although it has traditionally been a Republican county, [has become more competitive in recent federal and state elections](#). On the other hand, the change in unaffiliated levels has been almost negligible in counties like Clay and Cherokee, which are located on the [westernmost edge of Appalachian North Carolina and remain uncompetitive Republican counties](#). The differences in county-level party preferences suggest no clear partisan trend among counties with the largest increases in the share of unaffiliated voters.

Partisan Composition of Registered Voters in North Carolina



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

Flows To and From Unaffiliated, 2016 to 2024



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: NCSBE voter history file; voters who cast a ballot in both the earlier and the 2024 general election.

The top graph shows the percentages of voters who register as members of different partisan groups and how they have changed from 2018 to 2026. The bottom graph shows, for Democrats and Republicans, the share of each party's voters who left the party to register as unaffiliated (above the zero line) and the share who joined the party from unaffiliated status (below the zero line), among voters who cast a ballot in both the 2016 and 2024 general elections; both parties lost voters to unaffiliated status at similar rates. Data from the [North Carolina State Board of Elections](#)

From the county-level analysis and the overall trend, it is apparent that while the share of registered Republicans has remained relatively constant since 2018, the share of registered Democrats has been steadily declining and the share of unaffiliated registrants has been increasing. Among voters who cast a ballot in both the 2016 and 2024 general elections, Democrats and Republicans left their party to become unaffiliated at similar rates—around 11% each—and moved from unaffiliated back into a party at broadly similar rates as well, though slightly favoring Republicans. Because long-standing voters leave both parties for unaffiliated status at comparable rates, the decline specific to Democrats appears to stem less from existing Democrats abandoning the party than from the changing composition of the electorate.

When registration is broken out by age and party, it is clear that the Democratic share of registered voters has been declining across all age groups, and the unaffiliated share has been increasing across all age groups. It is worth noting that the youngest bracket of voters (ages 18 to 25) in North Carolina has consistently had the smallest share of voters registered as Democrats compared with other age groups, and the largest share registered as unaffiliated. The reverse is true for the oldest bracket of voters (over 66), who have had the largest Democratic share across all years and the smallest unaffiliated share. These results indicate that younger voters are more likely to register as unaffiliated than older generations.

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This pattern is consistent with analysis by [Chris Cooper](#), a political science professor at Western Carolina University. In a [piece for *The Assembly* in October 2025](#), he revealed similar trends in voter registration data and argued the rise in the number of unaffiliated voters was due to a generational shift in the voting base. Cooper found that only 1% of the total gain in unaffiliated voters was due to voters switching their party registration, meaning the rest came from voters being added to the registry. Using state voter registration data, he points out that “unaffiliateds” make up the highest share of registrants among voters aged 18 to 45. Because many older voters are affiliated with a political party and the [number of registered Democrats has traditionally outnumbered the number of registered Republicans](#), Cooper argues that as these [overwhelmingly Democratic](#) older voters pass away, they are replaced by younger voters who register as unaffiliated at higher rates.

[According to Cooper](#), there are a few explanations for why younger voters are increasingly registering as unaffiliated. Part of it may be due to a broader increase in dissatisfaction with the two major parties, but he also points out that the structure of North Carolina’s primary and voter registration systems may also be a significant contributor. In North Carolina, unaffiliated voters can choose to participate in either the Democratic primary or the Republican primary, while registered Democrats and Republicans may only vote in their own party’s primary. This open primary system was adopted by Republicans in 1988 and Democrats in 1996, and unaffiliated voters have increasingly made up a larger share of registrants since then. This flexibility may have made it more appealing for voters to register as unaffiliated, which could be a reason why many young voters are choosing not to register as Democrats or Republicans.

Election Reporting Timelines

Election Night:³

Time	Description
7:30 pm	Polls close.
7:30 - 9 pm	Absentee-by-mail votes are reported in the Results File and the Election Results Dashboard .
8 - 9:30 pm	Early voting results reported.
8:30 - Midnight	Precinct results reported.
After election night ^{***}	Military and overseas absentee ballots will be added to the results.

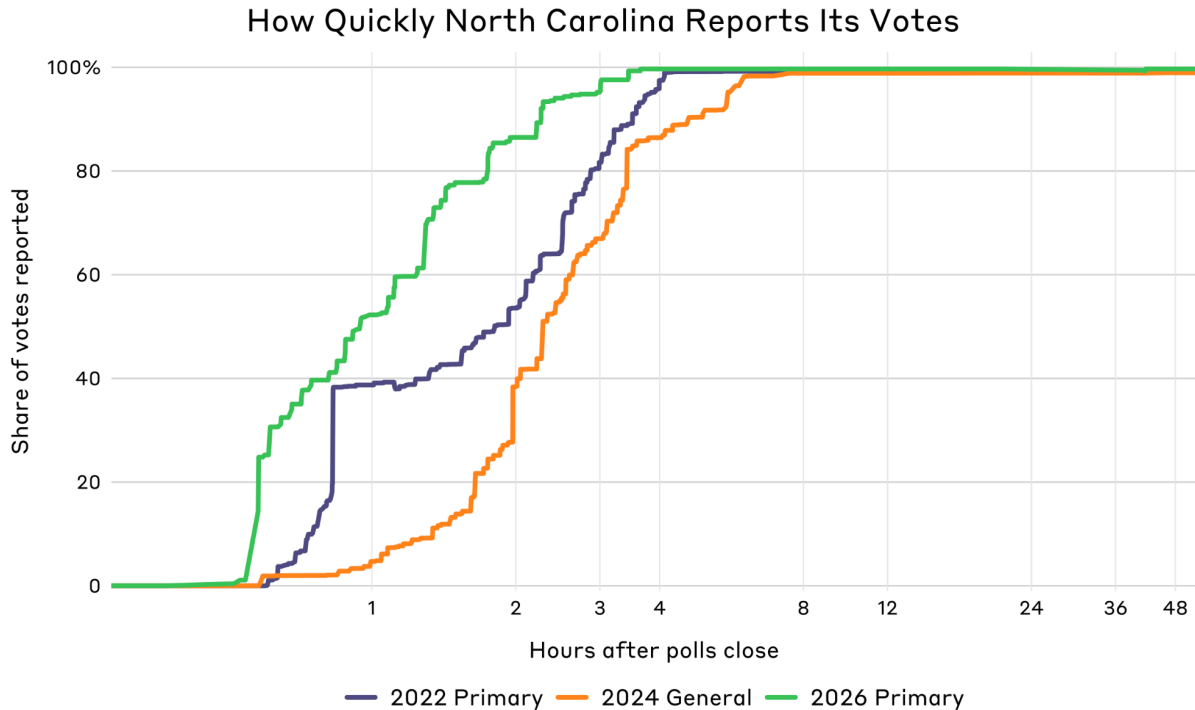
^{***} After Election Night:⁴

- + Election boards count both absentee ballots received on Election Day and those mailed by Election Day by military and citizens abroad (that arrive through [5 PM on Nov 12](#)).
- + County boards research and meet publicly to consider and count provisional ballots.
- + Every county conducts a hand count of ballots in 2 randomly selected voting sites.
- + During the County Canvass, County Boards of Elections certify their results at public meetings, held at 11 AM on Nov 13.
- + Any mandatory recounts take place after the County Canvass but before the State Canvass that will take place on or before Dec. 4.
 - Any recount demands must be received before 5 PM on Nov 16 or Nov 17 ([based on jurisdiction](#)).

³ based on [information provided by the North Carolina State Board of Elections](#)

⁴ based on a 2024 [press release from the North Carolina State Board of Elections](#)

- + Results in each contest are not considered official until certified by the State Board at 11 AM on Dec 4.



Graph source: MIT Election Data + Science Lab
Data source: North Carolina State Board of Elections

The figure above highlights North Carolina's vote reporting speed across the 2022 primary, 2024 general, and 2026 primary. The x-axis shows the hours after the polls close, ranging from 0 to 48 hours (2 days). The y-axis is the percentage of the total vote reported.

Looking at North Carolina's vote reporting speeds across the last two midterm primaries (2026 and 2022) and the last general election (2024), it can be seen that North Carolina reports their votes very quickly. Votes were counted faster during the midterm primary elections than in the 2024 general election, but it took less than 8 hours after the polls closed to report 100% of the votes cast in all three elections. While this is no guarantee of how long it will take to count the votes cast in North Carolina in the 2026 general election, it is likely that vote reporting will follow a similar timeline after the polls close in November.