



Youth Voting Access in North Carolina

Issue Background Sheet | Last Updated May 12, 2023

Why We Need Youth Voting Access in North Carolina

- **Young people face significant barriers to voting in North Carolina.** Youth lack experience with the voting process, move more frequently, and are less likely to have a photo ID. While we have some tools to encourage young voter turnout, we can do much more.
- **Young North Carolinians are less likely to vote than their older peers.** Only about 1 in 4 eligible young North Carolinians voted in the 2022 General Election.¹
- **North Carolina is a national leader in higher education, with over half a million students attending a college or university in our state.** Despite this, North Carolina is not a national leader in helping students exercise their freedom to vote.
- **Young North Carolinians deserve to have a say in the decisions that impact their lives.** Placing unnecessary restrictions on their freedom to vote weakens our democracy.
- **Priming young North Carolinians to become engaged voters is essential to the future of our country.** This is a shared value for all North Carolinians – no matter our color, background, or political party.

Jump to:

- [Voter Identification & Student ID](#)
- [On-Campus Voting](#)
- [Preregistration](#)
- [Registering to Vote as a College Student](#)
- [Arguments Against Youth Voting Access + Rebuttals](#)
- [Looking Ahead](#)
- [Talk to the Experts](#)
- [Helpful Data](#)
- [Further Reading](#)

¹ [“State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout Data and the Impact of Election Laws in 2022,”](#) Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University’s Tisch College of Civic Life, April 6, 2023.

Voter Identification and Student IDs

Talking Points

- Voter ID laws were created to make it harder for North Carolinians to vote – especially young, Black, Latiné, and low-wealth voters.
- Younger Americans are less likely to have a photo ID than older voters.
- North Carolina only allows some student ID cards to be used as voter ID – which has led to confusion among students, school administrators, and election officials.²

What's the Law?

Under North Carolina's new photo ID law, all voters must present identification containing their photo when voting in person in North Carolina. College students may be able to use their student ID as voter ID, depending on what school they attend. Each college or university must gain prior approval from the NC Board of Elections (NCSBE) to have their school's student ID accepted as voter ID (reapproval is needed every two years).³ The NCSBE produces a list of schools whose IDs have been approved; as of May 2023, this list is not available for the 2023 municipal elections.

The following types of photo ID are accepted for voting in North Carolina⁴:

Any of the following that are valid and unexpired OR has been expired for one year or less:

- NC Driver's License or DMV-issued ID
- US Passport
- NC voter ID issued by the County Board of Elections
- Government employee ID (if approved by NCSBE)
- Student ID from a college or postsecondary school (if approved by NCSBE)
- Driver's license or DMV-issued ID from another state, DC, or US territory (if voter registered within 90 days before the election in which they are voting)

Any of the following:

- Military ID
- Veterans ID
- Tribal enrollment ID issued by a state or federally recognized tribe
- ID issued by US or NC government assistance program

Note: Voters 65 and older can use any expired ID listed above as long as the ID was unexpired on the voter's 65th birthday.

² Rebekah Barber, "[The long fight over using student IDs to vote in North Carolina](#)," Facing South, October 22, 2019.

³ North Carolina General Statute 163-166.17.

⁴ North Carolina General Statutes 163-166.16.

Voter Identification and Student IDs (continued)

History

2013: The NC General Assembly (NCGA) passes a law requiring voters to present a photo ID when voting in person, via [House Bill 589](#). Student ID was not included in the list of accepted IDs. Voter ID was in place for the 2016 Primary election.

2016: A federal court rules House Bill 589 to be unconstitutional. As a result, Voter ID was not enforced in the 2016 General, 2017, 2018, or 2019 elections.

2018: Voters amend the NC Constitution to require voters to present a photo ID. Shortly after, the NCGA passes [Senate Bill 824](#) to define the accepted forms of identification. Student ID was included in the list of acceptable IDs.⁵

2019: Courts stop voter ID from taking effect in 2020. Voter ID was not enforced in the 2020, 2021, or 2022 elections.

2023: The NC Supreme Court upholds voter ID. Barring further legal action, voter ID will be required for all future elections.

Fast Facts

- Younger Americans are less likely to have a photo ID than their older peers.
 - About one in three Americans aged 18-19 – and about one in four Americans aged 20-24 – do not have a driver’s license.
 - 15% of Americans aged 18-19 do not have any non-expired government-issued photo ID.⁶
- Young Black and brown Americans are less likely to have a photo ID than young white Americans. About one in 10 Latiné Americans aged 18-29 – and about one in 10 Black Americans aged 18-29 – do not have a photo ID.⁷
- Out of North Carolina’s 137 colleges and universities⁸, only 38% had their student ID approved to use as voter ID in 2019⁹.

⁵ The bill permitted the use of student IDs from schools that received prior approval from the NC Board of Elections. However, many schools did not meet the requirements. In response to the confusion and controversy surrounding the student ID requirements, the NCGA passed House Bill 646 in 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Data from the National Center for Education Statistics, accessed May 9, 2023.

⁹ [“Acceptable Photo IDs for Voting in 2020,”](#) North Carolina Board of Elections, December 2019.

On-Campus Voting

Talking Points

- On-campus voting gives students a safe and convenient way to cast a ballot.
- Because many students lack their own transportation, on-campus voting is critical to ensure young voters can make their voices heard.
- Very few voting sites in North Carolina are located on college and university campuses. Any attempt to reduce this number threatens young North Carolinians' freedom to vote.

What is the law?

- A county board of elections may approve a voting site on a college or university campus. However, there is currently no requirement that any school must operate an on-campus voting site in North Carolina.¹⁰
- On-campus voting is just like voting at any other voting site – all of the same rules apply, and anyone can use the site for voting (not just those in the campus community).

Fast Facts

- Out of over 350 Early Voting sites, only 12 were located on a college or university campus during North Carolina's 2022 General Election. Just two were located on the campus of a Historically Black College or University (HBCU).¹¹
- Some states require campus communities to offer on-campus voting options. No states prohibit a voting site from operating on a college or university campus.¹²
- In April 2022, a top Republican legal strategist advised donors that conservatives must work to limit voting on college campuses.¹³

¹⁰ National Conference of State Legislatures, "[Polling Places](#)," October 18, 2022.

¹¹ Appalachian State University, Cape Fear Community College, Central Carolina Community College, Duke University, East Carolina University, Elon University, Isothermal Community College, NC Central University, NC State University, UNC-Charlotte, Western Carolina University, and Winston-Salem State University.

¹² National Conference of State Legislatures, "[Polling Places](#)," October 18, 2022.

¹³ Josh Dawsey and Amy Gardner, "[Top GOP lawyer decries ease of campus voting in private pitch to RNC](#)," The Washington Post, April 20, 2023.

Preregistration

Talking points

- Preregistration allows young North Carolinians to register ahead of time, so that when they show up to the polls at 18, they are ready to vote.
- Preregistration is popular and widely used in North Carolina. As of 2019, more than one in three 16 and 17-year-olds in North Carolina were preregistered to vote.¹⁴
- Preregistration has been shown to be an easy, low-cost, and effective way to increase turnout among young voters.¹⁵
- Preregistration allows young voters to register during two major milestones: high school civics class and while applying for a driver's license.
- Ending or significantly changing preregistration could create a significant administrative burden and confusion among both voters and local election workers.¹⁶

What is preregistration?

- Preregistration gives 16- and 17-year-olds the ability to submit a voter registration form before they turn 18. This form is processed when the voter is old enough to vote.
- Preregistration does not give 16- and 17-year-olds the ability to vote. North Carolina law requires all voters to be at least 18 years old (or if voting in a primary, 18 years old by the date of the general election).
- North Carolinians who choose to preregister must indicate on their application that they understand that they must be 18 years of age on or before Election Day in order to vote.

How does preregistration work?

1. A 16- or 17-year-old completes a voter registration application.
2. Applications received by the county board of elections or DMV are sent to the State Board of Elections to hold until the voter is old enough to be registered to vote.
3. When the voter is old enough to cast a ballot, their registration application is processed in the same way as other registrations.

¹⁴ Brianna Velasco and Alejandra Gonzalez, "[Students in North Carolina Take Advantage Of Voter Preregistration Law](#)," The Civics Center, December 9, 2019.

¹⁵ John B. Holbein and D. Sunshine Hillygus, "Making Young Voters: The Impact of Preregistration on Youth Turnout," American Journal of Political Science, March 3, 2015.

¹⁶ Anne Blythe, "[Elimination of NC voter preregistration program creates confusion for DMV and elections officials](#)," The Charlotte Observer, July 3, 2014.

Preregistration (continued)

History

2009: The state legislature creates preregistration via [House Bill 908](#). The bill had overwhelming support from both Republicans and Democrats. Preregistration was successfully implemented and used from 2009 - 2013.

2013: The state legislature eliminates preregistration via [House Bill 589](#). Cutting preregistration was one small piece of many anti-voter reforms within the bill, and few arguments were made for eliminating preregistration during the bill's debate.

2016: Preregistration is reinstated after a federal court blocked House Bill 589. Preregistration has been used in North Carolina since this time.

Fast Facts

- About half of US states allow some form of preregistration, including several Southern states: Louisiana, Florida, and Virginia.¹⁷
- Many North Carolina high schools include a section on preregistration in civics class.¹⁸
- Every North Carolina high school student is required to pass a civics course —which should include “instruction on voter registration.” This requirement was created in 2019 via [House Bill 924](#) and was supported by nearly every Republican legislator.

¹⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures, “[Preregistration for Young Voters](#),” January 20, 2023.

¹⁸ “[How Do I Pre-Register and Vote in North Carolina?](#),” Caroline K-12, Accessed April 29, 2023.

Registering to Vote as a College Student

Talking Points

- Same-Day Registration is a critical resource for young North Carolinians, who tend to move more frequently – and must update their registration more often.
- Under federal law, students have the right to register to vote where they go to school.

What's the law?

In North Carolina, students have the right to register to vote at the address they consider to be their permanent home. This may be their residence in their college community, their family's house, or somewhere else.¹⁹ The right of college students to register to vote where they attend school is protected by federal law.²⁰

A student may only be registered to vote in one location, and there are strict penalties in place to ensure voters do not vote in more than one location. The penalty for intentionally voting in more than one precinct or more than one state in the same primary or election is a Class I felony.²¹

Why can students choose where they register to vote?

Students sometimes must move to another county or state to pursue education. Sometimes a student will consider this move to be temporary and will view another location to be their permanent residence (for example, their parent's home). In other cases, a student will consider their campus community to be their new permanent home.

¹⁹ NC General Statutes, 163-57.

²⁰ *Symm v. United States*, 439 U.S. 1105, 1105 (1979).

²¹ North Carolina General Statute 163-275.

Arguments Against Youth Voting Access and Rebuttals

“It’s too easy for students to vote in North Carolina.”

Students go through the same verification process as all other voters when they register to vote, and have the same access to voting sites and options as other North Carolinians.

“Helping students vote only benefits Democrats.”

Increasing voting access for students benefits all political parties. From 2010-2013, the number of young North Carolinians who used preregistration registered at nearly equal rates for the top three political parties: Unaffiliated (39%), Democrat (31%), and Republican (29%).²²

Looking Ahead

Young voters consistently have the lowest turnout rates among other age groups. North Carolina should work to address this by:

- Requiring public colleges and universities with a student population of 4,500 or greater to have a voting site on campus.
- Encouraging local election boards to request the use of private colleges and universities with a student population over 4,500 or greater as voting sites.
- Committing public funding for a student voting coordinator at all public colleges and universities, who will organize student voting efforts on campus and make opportunities for voting more accessible.
- Investing in programs that provide young voters with identification for voting.

Read more about our vision for democracy in NC:
[2023 Blueprint for a Stronger Democracy](#)

Talk to the Experts

These organizations are leading the fight to protect and expand youth voting access:

- [Common Cause North Carolina](#)
- [Democracy North Carolina](#)
- [NextGen North Carolina](#)
- [North Carolina Voters for Clean Elections](#)
- [Southern Coalition for Social Justice](#)
- [You Can Vote](#)

²² “A Tool for Youth Empowerment: Voter Pre-Registration & Education,” Democracy North Carolina, accessed April 28, 2023.

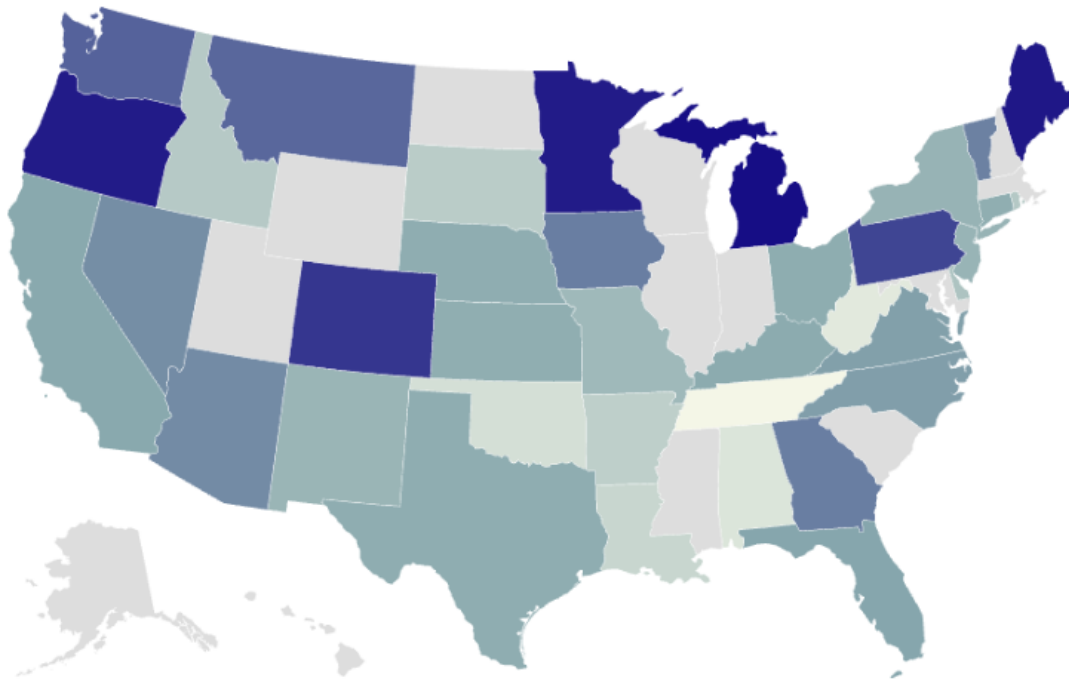
Helpful Data

Among North Carolina voters aged 18-29 who were eligible to vote in the 2022 General Election, less than 1 in 4 (23%) cast a ballot.

2022 Youth Voter Turnout: State by State

CIRCLE estimates of youth voter turnout (ages 18-29) in the 2022 midterm elections. Turnout is the percentage of eligible voters (whether or not they were registered) who cast a ballot

12.7% 36.5%



Source: [“State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout Data and the Impact of Election Laws in 2022,”](#) Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University’s Tisch College of Civic Life, April 6, 2023.

Among registered voters, young North Carolinians have the lowest voter turnout rate when compared to other age groups.

North Carolina Voter Turnout, by Age Group - 2022 General Election

Age Group	Voters Who Voted	Turnout
Age 18-25	233,441	24.1%
Age 26-40	629,298	34.2%
Age 41-65	1,743,544	59.0%
Age 66+	1,180,621	71.3%

Source: [“2022 General Election Turnout,”](#) North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed May 9, 2023.

North Carolina Voter Turnout, by Age Group - 2020 General Election

Age Group	Voters Who Voted	Turnout
Age 18-25	587,340	60.0%
Age 26-40	1,194,333	64.8%
Age 41-65	2,447,884	82.0%
Age 66+	1,314,455	84.1%

Source: [“2020 General Election Turnout,”](#) North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed May 9, 2023.

Further Reading

[A Tool for Youth Empowerment: Voter Preregistration & Education | Democracy NC](#)
[Students in North Carolina, Know Your Voting Rights! | You Can Vote](#)
[Preregistration for Young Voters | National Conference of State Legislatures](#)
[Voting with Student ID in 2023: The State of the Law & Pending Legislation | Voting Rights Lab](#)