

2020 Voting Options and Safety Tips

There have been questions raised about the reliability of voting by mail, while at the same time, people are concerned about being exposed to COVID-19 if forced to stand in long lines for in-person voting.

Fortunately, North Carolina is ahead of the game when it comes to getting ready for a presidential election in the face of the challenges that 2020 has presented. State and local officials have already put several provisions in place for online voter registration, securely voting by mail, and the early one-stop voting that has existed here for many years.

Staying safe from COVID—your choices

Polling places will be under the same rules as any other establishment. Assuming no major changes between now and the Nov. 3 election, voters at polling places should wear a face covering. Scientific studies have shown that most infections are caused by droplets in the air from people who are already infected with the virus. Hence, wearing a mask significantly reduces the risk of being infected.

However, masks don't *completely* eliminate the COVID risk. The good news is that you have alternatives to waiting in line on Election Day. For many years, North Carolina has offered one-stop early voting, meaning that voters have several opportunities for in-person voting in the three weeks prior to Election Day. One-stop sites are almost always far less crowded than polling places on Election Day, greatly reducing the risk of being infected with any viruses.

In addition, the vote-by-mail options for 2020 have been expanded and streamlined to make it easier to vote. The state establishments of both parties are committed to helping you vote safely and securely. However, potential problems with the U.S. Mail mean that you should get your ballot request in as soon as possible and send it in early. You can also deliver your absentee ballot to your County Board of Elections office prior to Election Day, if you are concerned about mail delivery.

For maximum safety, we recommend using one of the options other than voting in-person.

Below are details about voting by mail and early voting

Voting by mail—here's what you need to do

If you're already registered to vote and wish to vote by mail, you may do so without needing any reason for not voting in person. Most people will be able to secure a mail-in absentee ballot by simply going online and requesting it. The rules for voting by mail are as follows:

I To receive a mail-in absentee ballot for an election, a voter or the voter's near relative (spouse, brother, sister, parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, mother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, stepparent, or stepchild) or legal guardian, or any member of a multi-partisan assistance team (MAT) authorized to assist voters, must first use the State Absentee Ballot Request Form to request the ballot.

I Voters who are blind or disabled, or who cannot read or write may receive assistance in completing the request form. Effective July 1 for the 2020 general election, any member of a multi-partisan assistance team, or MAT team, may assist any voter in completing a State Absentee Ballot Request Form. MAT team members may also deliver a completed request form to the county board of elections and serve as a witness for the casting of an absentee ballot. If the assistance is provided by someone other than a near relative or legal guardian, that person's name and address must be listed on the State Absentee Ballot Request Form.

The request for a ballot may be emailed, faxed or hand-delivered to the voter's county board of elections by the voter, near relative or legal guardian, or a member of a MAT team. The deadline is 5 p.m. on the Tuesday before the date of the election, or October 27 in this year.

State law requires that mail-in ballots and instructions for them be ready for distribution 60 days prior to the election (Sept. 4 in 2020). They will be sent out to all voters who requested them in a timely manner following that date, or after having requested them prior to the Oct. 27 deadline.

As mentioned previously, any absentee ballot can also be hand-delivered by the voter to their County's Board of Elections office up to 5 p.m. on Election Day.

One-stop early voting in person—begins Oct. 15

For those who wish to vote in person but do it using a one-stop early voting polling place, many North Carolina counties have already announced their schedules for early voting. The earliest date for one-stop voting is Thursday, Oct. 15, and early voting will be offered through Saturday, Oct. 31. Many polling places will be open every day of that period, but some will be closed on Sundays.

The State Board of Elections website is updating its list of early-voting sites in all 100 counties at <https://www.ncsbe.gov/Voting-Options/One-Stop-Early-Voting>, but you might also check with your own county's Board of Elections.

Regardless of how you choose to vote, a photo ID is not required. Although voters in North Carolina approved a change to the state Constitution in 2018 to require a photo ID, the amendment has been caught up in a court challenge and will not be enforced until it is upheld by the courts. Those who vote by mail will need the signature of one witness to their marking the ballot. The requirement used to be two witnesses, but the number was lowered to one by a vote of the General Assembly to facilitate voting during the COVID pandemic.