

Absentee Voting Checks and Balances in North Carolina

American elections serve as a model for the world, thanks to our rigorous system of checks and balances and our neighbors serving as election workers faithfully carrying out those duties.

Working in teams made up of people from both parties, poll workers and election officials count, canvass, and audit votes – whether they are cast in-person, by mail, or by service members overseas. These election workers verify voters' identities. They inspect ballots. They resolve errors. They confirm that every legal ballot is counted as voters intended them.

When these checks and balances are complete, then the final phase of our election process happens: certification. This is the straightforward step in the process when election officials declare the winners.

This memo outlines the numerous safeguards in North Carolina that assure only eligible absentee votes are counted, from rigorous voter verification at the application stage to bipartisan teams reviewing ballots when they are returned. For greater detail about the post-election process and a detailed timeline, [please visit the rest of our series on checks and balances in North Carolina elections.](#)

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All North Carolina Voters Are Eligible to Vote by Absentee Ballot

Any qualified voter in North Carolina may vote by absentee ballot in a statewide primary, general, or special election on constitutional amendments, referenda or bond proposals, and any qualified voter of a county is authorized to vote by mail ballot in any primary or election conducted by the county board of elections.¹ Generally, a voter will need to submit an application for each election the person intends to vote by mail, but a voter with an illness or disability that is expected to last through the calendar year may request an absentee ballot for all elections for the remainder of the year.²

All Absentee Voters are Verified Before Being Sent a Ballot

A voter submitting a request for an absentee ballot must include the following information:

1. Their name and address, and the name and address of the voter's near relative or verifiable legal guardian if that individual is making the request;

¹ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-226(a).

² N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-226(b).

2. The address of the voter to which the application and absentee ballots are to be mailed, if different from the voter's residence address;
3. Either the voter's driver's license number or special identification card number, or the last four digits of the voter's Social Security number.
4. The voter's date of birth;
5. The signature of the voter or of the voter's near relative or verifiable legal guardian if that individual is making the request;
6. A clear indicator of the date the election generating the request is to be held, unless the request is for an annual ballot; and
7. Optionally, the voter's telephone number and email address.³

The application can only be returned to the county board of elections by the voter, the voter's near relative or legal guardian, or a member of a multi-partisan team trained and authorized by the county board of elections pursuant to statute.⁴ Alternatively, the voter can submit the application online through a portal established by the state board.

Upon receipt of a timely application by the county board, the board must verify: that the applicant is a registered voter; that the request was submitted on a form created by the state board; that the form was only completed or returned by the voter or a person legally authorized to do so on the voter's behalf; and that the form contains all required information.⁵ If the application fails to meet any of these conditions, the request is not valid and will be rejected.

The county board must keep a detailed record of all absentee ballots issued, including the voter's identifying information, their precinct, the date the request was received, and the date the ballot was mailed.⁶ The county board is responsible for transmitting this information to the state board to maintain a statewide list of those who have requested mail ballots.⁷ Beginning with the opening of the polls on Election Day, this list is a public record.⁸

The Bipartisan County Board of Elections Verifies All Absentee Ballots

When completing an absentee ballot, the voter must fill out the ballot in the presence of two witnesses or a notary public.⁹ The same requirement applies for folding the ballot, sealing it inside of the return envelope, and completing the certificate.¹⁰ Those two witnesses (or the notary) must then sign their names as witnesses and provide their address.¹¹ The voter must also include a copy

³ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-230.2(a).

⁴ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-230.2(c).

⁵ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-230.2(d)-(e).

⁶ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-228(a).

⁷ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-228(d).

⁸ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-228(c).

⁹ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-231(a).

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

of their acceptable voter ID or ID exception form when returning the ballot.¹² Permitted exceptions to the photo ID requirement include a reasonable impediment to showing a photo ID (lack of transportation, lost or stolen ID, disability or illness, family responsibilities, work schedule, or lack of birth certificate or other underlying documents required); religious objection to being photographed; or the voter was a victim of a natural disaster within 100 days of Election Day.¹³

Voters may return ballots by mail or commercial courier service, or in person to the county board of elections or to an early voting location.¹⁴ A 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 may also deliver a ballot on a voter's behalf.¹⁵ Voters with a disability that prevents them from being able to return their ballot in person may have any other individual of their choosing return their ballot other than a candidate who is not also a near relative.¹⁶

An absentee ballot must be received by the close of polls on Election Day in order to be counted.¹⁷ A ballot additionally may not be counted if the voter failed to complete any of the steps outlined above.¹⁸ However, voters can cure a deficient mail ballot envelope by completing a cure certification if the voter did not include required ID documentation, did not sign the ballot envelope, or signed in the wrong place, or for certain other minor deficiencies.¹⁹ Curing a lack of ID requires either providing the required documentation or attestation.²⁰

If a ballot is deemed deficient due to being received with the envelope unsealed or a missing signature, printed name, or street address from either a witness or an individual who assisted the voter in completing their ballot, or such individual signed in the wrong place, the voter cannot have their ballot counted with a cure certification but will be notified of the deficiency and sent a new ballot.²¹

The county board of elections meets at 5 p.m. on Election Day to begin counting all absentee ballots other than those that have been challenged. Any voter in the county is permitted to attend the meeting and observe the process.²²

Voters Can Confirm Ballot Status through Online Ballot Tracking

North Carolina statute does not require an online mail ballot tracking system. Nevertheless, a voter can access an online portal to do so through [Ballottrax](#) by providing their first and last name, date of

¹² N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-230.1(e).

¹³ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.16(d) & N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.16(e).

¹⁴ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-231(b).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Disability Rights N.C. v. N.C. State Board of Elections*, E.D.N.C. Case No. 5:21-CV-361 (11 Jul 2022)

¹⁷ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-231(b).

¹⁸ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-234(1).

¹⁹ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-230.1(e).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-234(2).

birth, and zip code. This tool adds additional transparency to the mail ballot process in North Carolina.

Additional Steps Ensure Ballots Counted as Voters Intended

There are a number of [additional checks and balances](#) that apply to absentee and in-person ballots in North Carolina. These include:

- Election officials publicly test tabulation equipment prior to the election to make sure it is working correctly;
- Before the county canvass in presidential elections, the county board of elections will conduct a hand count audit of randomly selected precincts to ensure the accuracy of automatically tabulated results; and
- The county board of elections will conduct the county canvass at a meeting open to the public.

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