

North Carolina 2024 State Report

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Introduction

North Carolina is a swing state expected to be important to the presidential candidates in the general election. Given this significance, it is useful to examine its election administration and primary election results. Changes in election policies can indicate what key issues may be encountered within the state. Turnout and results from the primary can also provide insight into what is to come in the state’s general election.

Summary of Findings

The North Carolina primary took place on March 5, 2024. The state [saw a turnout](#) of 24.1%, a substantial decline from the last several primaries, all of which had been more competitive for one party or another. 60.9% of votes [were cast in-person on Election Day](#), and 38.8% were absentee, early in-person, or mail-in votes. Donald Trump received 73.9% of the vote, with opponent Nikki Haley receiving the second-most Republican support. Biden received 87.3% of the vote as the only name on the Democratic ballot, with “No Preference” receiving the remaining votes.

Since the last general election, various changes have been made to election administration in the state. Laws were passed emphasizing election security: requiring a photo ID for in-person and mail-in voting, piloting a signature verification program, and banning private donations from use in election administration. Other legal efforts to

restructure the State Board of Elections encountered judicial opposition. Another legal battle about gerrymandering made its way to the Supreme Court, and a decision was recently made to uphold the state court's initial decision.

General Election Calendar

The general election will be held on **November 5, 2024**. The dates and deadlines of the 2024 general election calendar are [laid out by the North Carolina State Board of Elections](#). On **September 6, 2024**, absentee ballots will begin to be mailed out in response to absentee ballot requests. To participate in the November election, voters must have registered by 5 PM on **October 11, 2024**, although the deadline for military and civilian overseas voters submitting UOCAVA ballots [follows a different timeline](#). Early voting sites in North Carolina also [allow same-day registration](#), so voters not registered by October 11 can register and then immediately vote during the early voting period, which is not permitted on Election Day. Early voting begins on **October 17** and ends at 3 PM on **November 2**. The deadline to request an absentee ballot is 5 PM on **October 29**, and absentee ballots must be returned by 7:30 PM on election day.

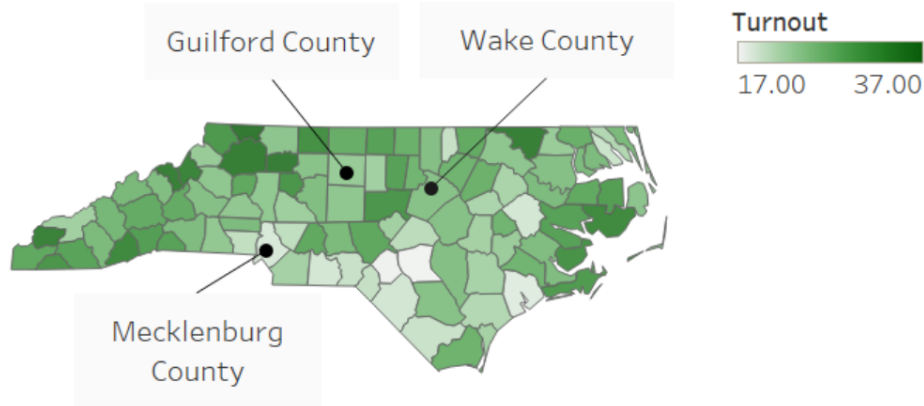
Analysis of 2024 Primary

Turnout

Unlike many states, North Carolina's primary on March 5 included the presidential race and selected nominees for state and local offices. North Carolina [law](#) allows unaffiliated voters to vote in any party primary they choose, but voters registered with a party are only permitted to vote in that party's primary. Between each party's 2024 primary, 1,799,534 ballots were cast in North Carolina out of 7,459,529 registered voters for a 24.1% turnout rate. Turnout varied [substantially by county](#), with some seeing turnout as low as 17% and others reaching almost 37%. Figure 1 depicts the percentage turnout by county. In the state's largest counties, the turnout was quite low. Mecklenburg County is the most populous county, containing Charlotte, with a turnout of only 18.7%. Wake County, home to the state's capital, Raleigh, had a turnout of 25%. Similarly, Guilford County, the third largest county by population, had a turnout of 23.6%. The counties with higher turnout,

topping out at 37%, are predominantly less populated and more rural, particularly in the western Appalachian portion of the state.

Figure 1: 2024 Primary turnout by county



Data Source: [NC SBE 2024 Primary Election Turnout](#)

This election saw an overall decline in turnout, both in terms of total voters and percentage of registered voters, from recent primaries in presidential years. Statewide, turnout percentage across the [past four presidential-year primaries](#) has been in the mid to low 30s. (See Table 1.) The 2020 primary saw a 31.2% turnout; the 2016 election had a 35.8% turnout. In 2024, turnout dropped to 24.1%. In 2020, the North Carolina Democratic presidential primary was competitive, one of the fifteen Super Tuesday states that effectively ended the presidential primary contest. In 2016, both the Democratic and Republican presidential primary contests were competitive. In 2024, of course, the presidential nominations for both major parties were uncompetitive.

Table 1: 2024 Turnout in North Carolina presidential primaries, 2016 – 2024

Year	Democratic	Republican	Other	Total	Registered
2016	1,161,481	1,155,045	15,519	2,332,045 (35.8%)	6,511,143
2020	1,343,388	808,494	11,096	2,162,978 (31.2%)	6,940,995
2024	714,403	1,077,798	7,333	1,799,534 (24.1%)	7,456,236

Data sources: Turnout, NCSBE election ftp site; registered voters, <https://www.ncsbe.gov/results-data/voter-turnout#primary>.

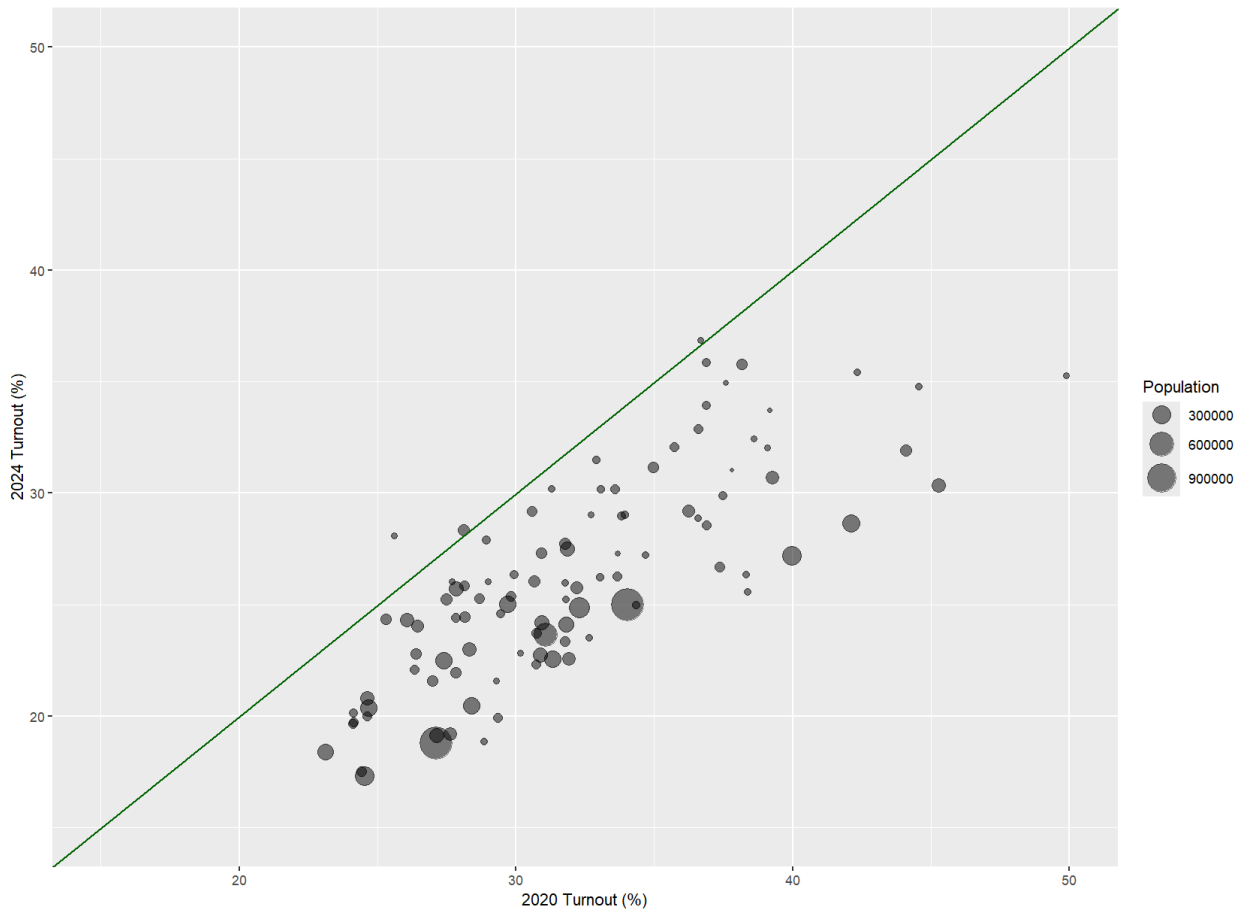
Note: Total turnout percentage calculated using registered voters as the denominator.

However, it is important to note that North Carolina also held primaries for statewide and local positions at the same time as the presidential primary. The nature of these primary contests no doubt influenced turnout in the primary. With the incumbent governor prohibited from running for reelection because of term limits, both Democratic and Republican gubernatorial primaries were contested. On the Democratic side, the incumbent attorney general, Josh Stein, easily defeated four other candidates. In the Republican primary, the incumbent lieutenant governor, Mark Robinson, similarly defeated two other candidates handily. Despite being similarly uncompetitive, it appears that Robinson’s primary may have pulled in more voters into the Republican primary than Stein pulled into the Democratic primary.

With such a notable drop-off, it follows that most counties also saw a decrease in turnout. Figure 2 maps counties, scaled for population, to their 2020 and 2024 primary turnouts. All but three counties saw a decrease in turnout, demonstrated by their location below the line. Of the three counties that did increase turnout, only one – Gates County – had an increase of more than one percentage point, but it is a very small county. Two trends stand out. First, turnout in the largest counties decreased by five percentage points or more, and sometimes as much as ten percentage points. Second, many of the counties with the highest turnout experienced the largest proportional decrease, with the few counties that enjoyed participation in the last presidential primary of a majority or near-

majority of their eligible voters falling into the low or mid-30 percent range in 2024. Because the larger counties tend to trend Democratic in voting patterns, the greater turnout decline in larger counties is consistent with the greater decrease in turnout in the Democratic primary.

Figure 2: 2020 Primary and 2024 Primary Turnout by County



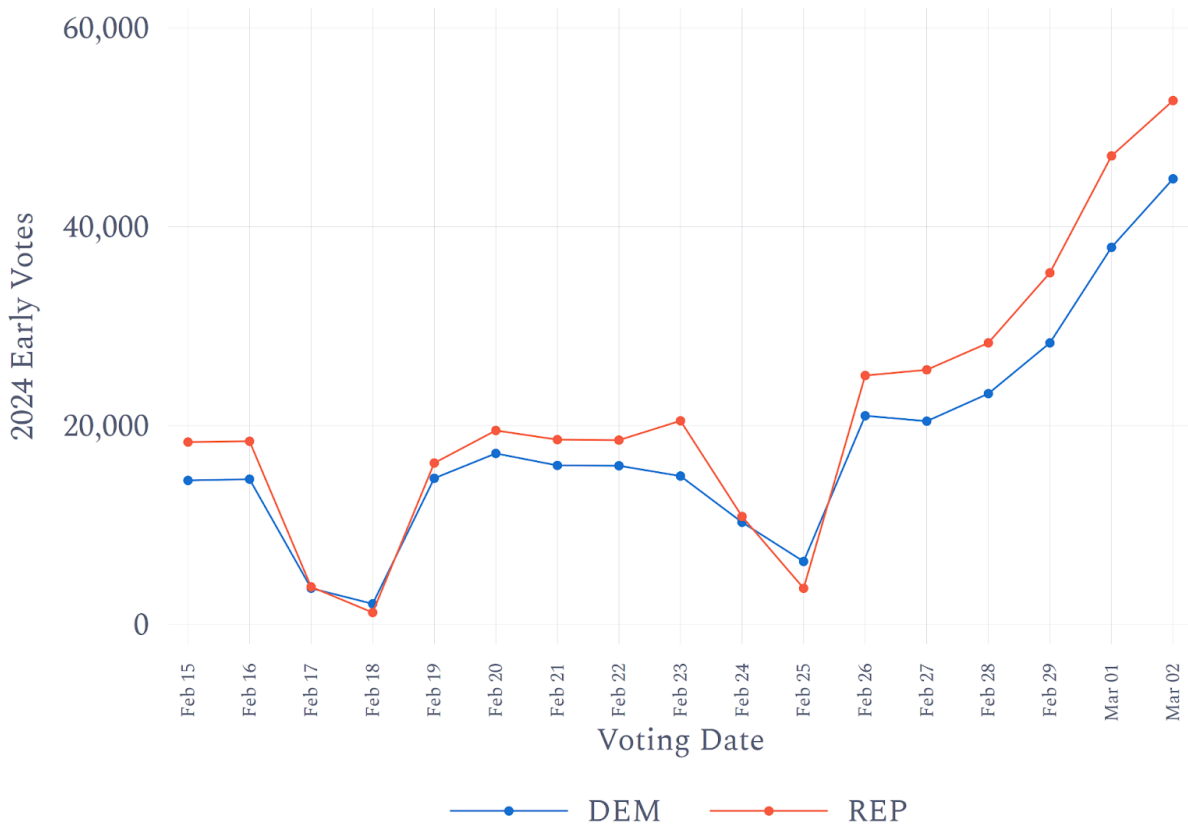
Data sources: [NC SBE 2024 Primary Election Turnout](#); [NC SBE 2020 Primary Results - County Status](#)

Vote Mode

Of the [almost 1.8 million votes cast](#), 38.8% were cast using either in-person early voting or absentee mail-in voting. This is slightly higher than the 37.3% from the 2020 primaries. It is worth noting that the 2020 primary occurred on Super Tuesday, a few weeks prior to any COVID-19 lockdowns.

Of those votes not cast in-person on election day, 96% were in-person early voting. Most of the rest were mail-in votes, with provisional votes comprising a fraction of a percent of all votes cast. 671,062 – 37.3% of total votes— were cast during the in-person early voting window. Figure 3 shows the votes cast each day of the early voting window, broken down by party. Of the 27,885 mail-in votes, 93.5% were civilian, with military and overseas making up the rest of the figure.

Figure 3: Timing of Early Voting



These options are available to all voters, and they are free to decide what voting method works best for them. However, the utilization of these options varies by different demographic features. Table 2 looks at the percent of votes cast on election day, early, and by mail in each party. Republicans had more Election Day voting than Democrats, who utilized both forms of absentee voting more heavily than Republicans. Still, Election Day votes made up the majority of votes cast for all parties.

Table 2: Voting Mode by Party Primary

Party	Voting Method (%)		
	Early	Election Day	Mail
Democrat	42.79	55.14	2.07
Other	25.21	72.49	2.30
Republican	33.72	65.08	1.20
Total	37.29	61.16	1.55

Tables 3 and 4 examine vote method by age, separating the Democratic and Republican primaries. In both party's primaries, voters aged 60+ used early voting the most compared to other age groups. In the Democratic primary, the majority of voters 60+ voted in-person absentee, but this was not reflected in the Republican primary. The 18-29 age range used mail voting more than other ages in both primaries, though twice as much among young Democrats than young Republicans. Tables 5 and 6 depict usage of each vote mode by each race, once again split for the party primaries. Despite differences between Democratic and Republican usage, the relative difference of usage between races is similar. In both primaries, all races used Election Day voting the most.

Table 3: Democratic Primary Vote Mode by Age

Age	Voting Method (%)		
	Early	Election Day	Mail
18-29	33.49	63.10	3.41
30-44	29.84	68.67	1.49
45-59	34.36	64.57	1.07
60+	50.53	47.03	2.44
Total	43.43	54.45	2.12

Table 4: Republican Primary Vote Mode by Age

Age	Voting Method (%)		
	Early	Election Day	Mail
18-29	23.84	74.48	1.68
30-44	21.64	77.59	0.77
45-59	26.93	72.48	0.59
60+	40.40	58.08	1.52
Total	34.24	64.54	1.23

Table 5: Democratic Vote Mode by Race

Race	Voting Method (%)		
	Early	Election Day	Mail
Asian	35.94	60.33	3.73
Black or African American	47.75	51.14	1.11
Indigenous	38.41	60.37	1.23
Other	34.74	63.12	2.13
Two or more races	38.07	59.61	2.33
Undesignated	38.27	58.16	2.54
White	40.42	57.04	2.54
Total	42.80	55.14	2.07

Table 6: Republican Vote Mode by Race

Race	Voting Method (%)		
	Early	Election Day	Mail
Asian	31.54	66.54	1.91
Black or African American	34.51	64.29	1.20
Indigenous	31.30	68.24	0.66
Other	28.78	69.93	1.28
Two or more races	29.95	68.23	1.83
Undesignated	29.52	68.41	2.07
White	33.98	64.86	1.16
Total	33.72	65.08	1.20

Beyond demographic breakdowns, Figures 4-6 show the usage of each vote mode by county. Mail voting seems to be most popular in the populated counties such as Mecklenburg and Wake, as well as some of the more rural counties in the western Appalachian portions of the state. These more rural counties, as well as some of the other less populated counties in the northern portion of the state, also saw higher usage of in-person absentee voting.

Figure 4: Election Day Voting

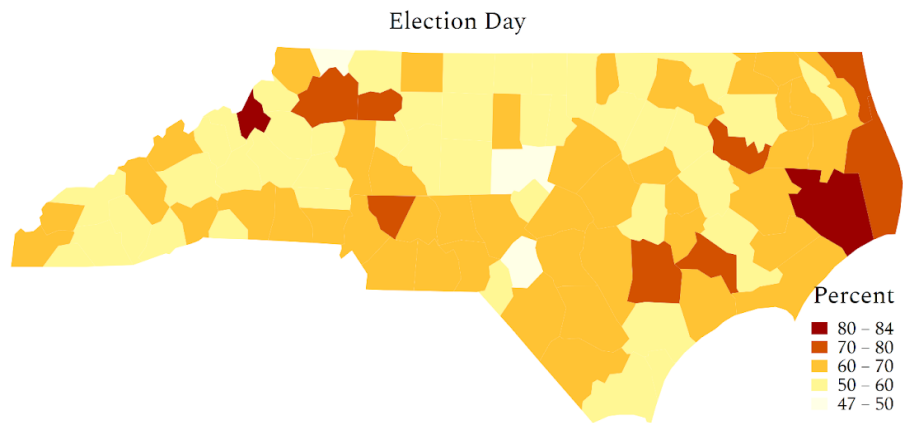


Figure 5: In-Person Absentee Voting

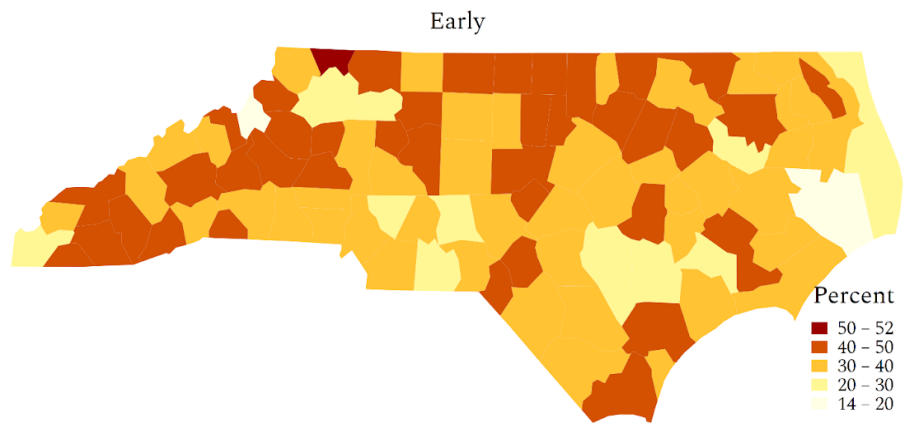
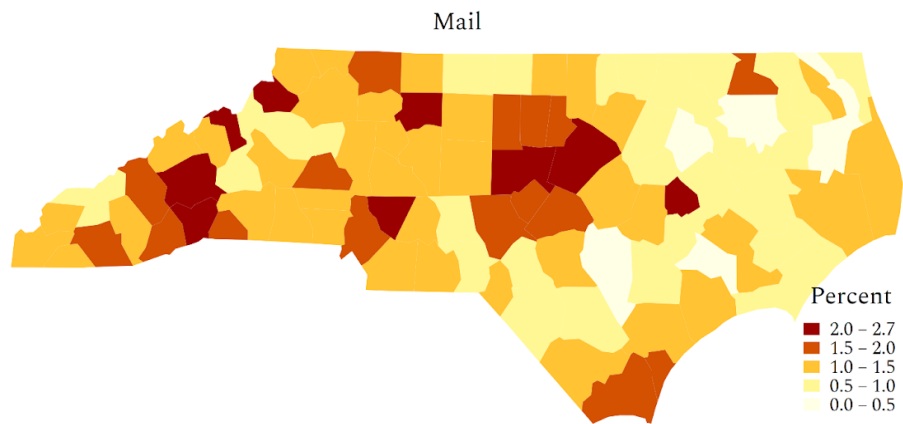
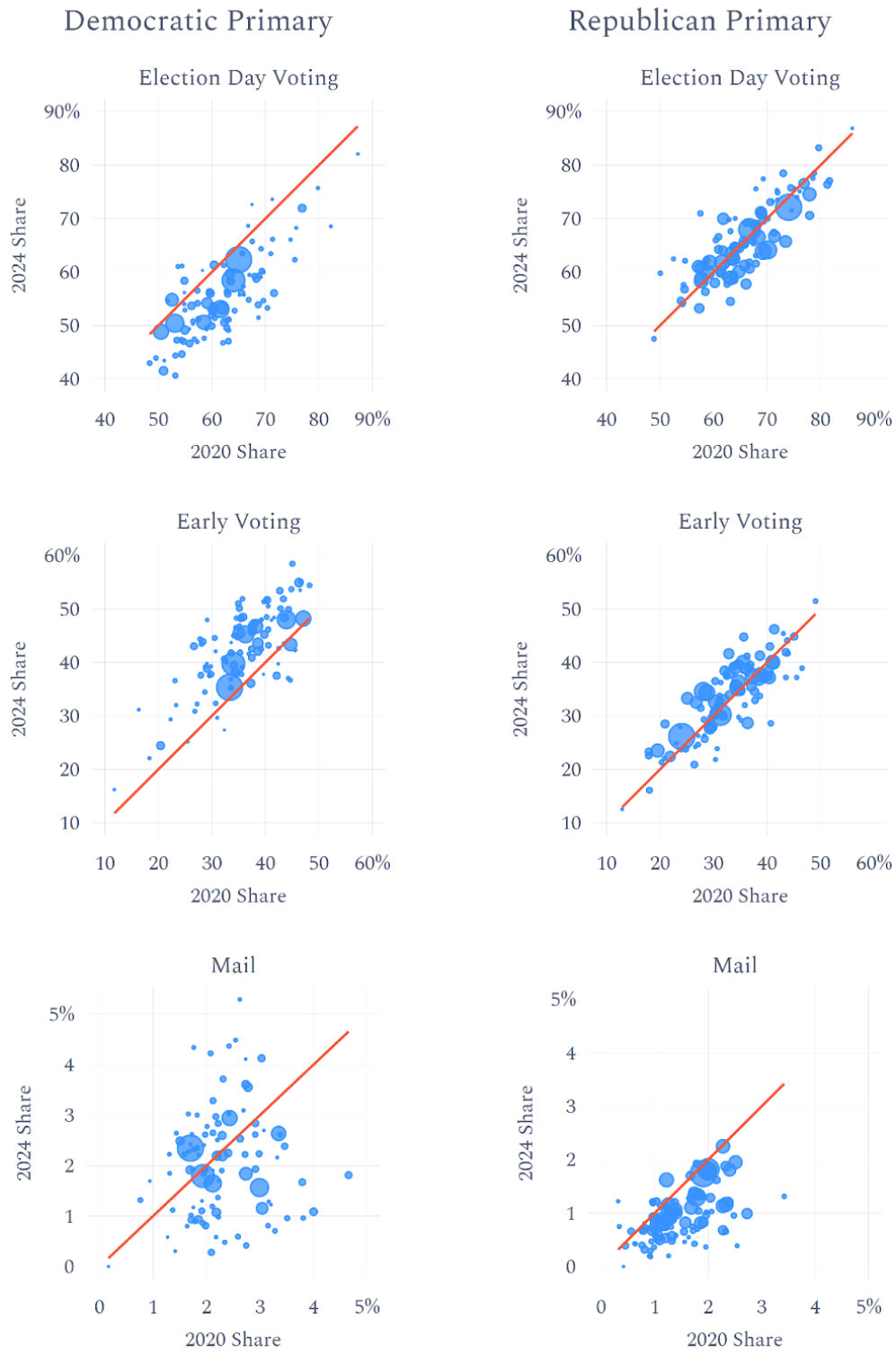


Figure 6: Mail Voting



The utilization of these vote methods has changed in a variety of ways since the 2020 primary. Figure 7 depicts these different changes for each of the party primaries. For Democrats, Election Day voting has decreased for almost all counties, particularly the most populated. In the Republican primary, there is more huddling around the equivalence line, with some counties increasing and others decreasing, but very few changing by large margins. Early voting has increased in most counties for both counties, though this increase is larger and more widespread among Democrats. Mail voting decreased significantly for many counties in the Republican primary. There was significant scattering for the Democratic primary, with significant shifts in both directions.

Figure 7: Partisan Distribution of Vote Mode by County



North Carolina 2024

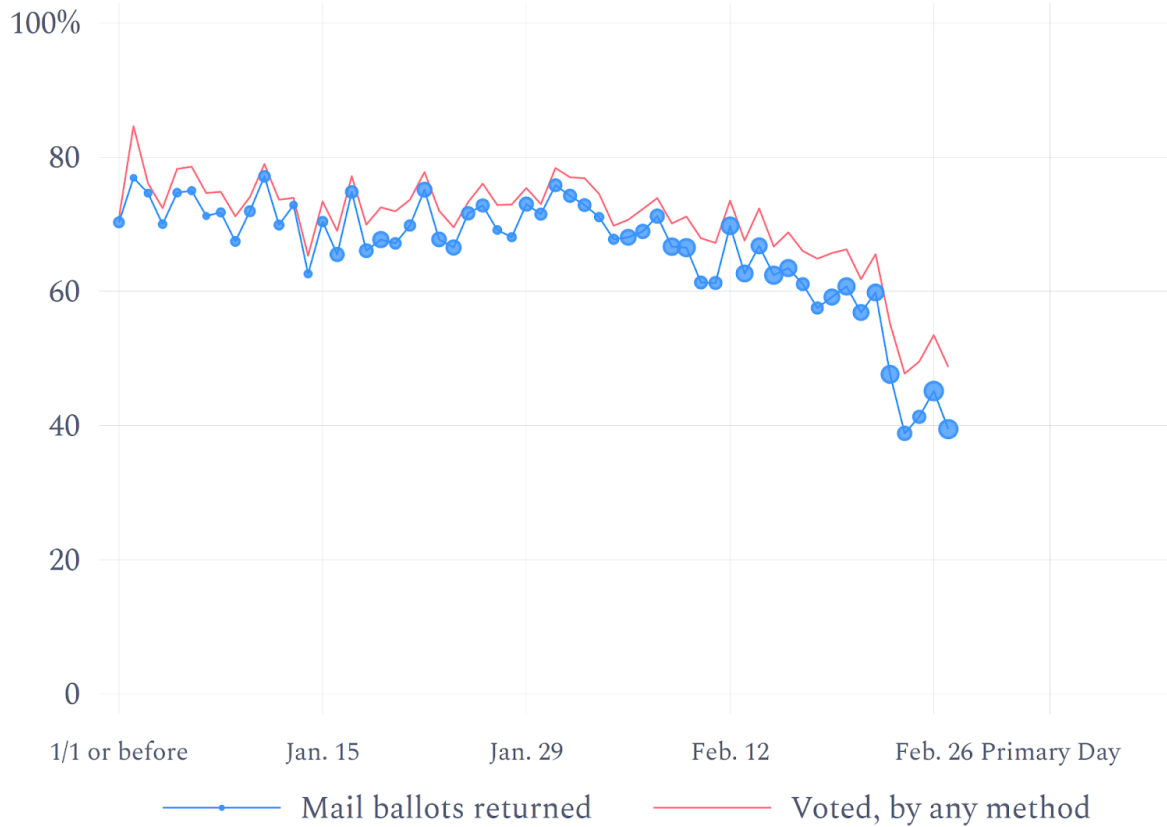
Unreturned and Uncounted Mail Ballots

Mail-in ballots made up a small portion of the overall vote count. However, the [mail-in ballot return rate](#) was fairly low: nearly twice as many mail-in ballots were requested and sent to voters as there were counted ballots in the final election results. This is in stark contrast with 2020 when only 12,067 mail ballots out of 2.2 million requested (0.5%) were unreturned.

Of the [47,266](#) mail-in ballots sent out to voters (excluding spoiled ballots), 20,074 (about 40%) remained outstanding after the vote counts were finalized. Of those who did not return a mail ballot, approximately 13% voted early, and 11% voted on Election Day. The remaining three-quarters of non-returned mail ballots—over 15,000—failed to vote in the primary.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of mail ballots that were returned by the date they were requested. The blue circles are sized in proportion to the number of ballots requested daily. The ballot return rate began dropping noticeably around February 12, falling precipitously for ballots requested on or after February 23, nearly two weeks before the primary. (Note that the deadline for requesting a mail-in ballot was a week before the primary, or February 27.) The red line represents the percentage of mail ballot requesters who ended up voting by any method, mail or in-person. The gap between the red and blue lines represents people who requested a mail-in ballot but ended up voting in person. That gap also widened around February 12, suggesting that many voters who requested ballots late realized they could not return the ballot in time to be counted.

Figure 8: Mail Ballot Return Rate by Request Date



The mail-in ballot rejection rate was also not negligible. Of the mail-in ballots received, 1,933 (about 4%) were not counted due to errors not remedied before polls closed on Election Day. North Carolina requires two witnesses and a newly enacted strict deadline for returning ballots by the end of Election Day. (In 2020, the two-witness requirement was waived.) Vote by mail policies are discussed further in a later section. This rejection rate is a reduction from the rejection rate of 9.7% in the 2020 primary, which itself was an increase from 6.6% in the 2016 primary.

Table 7 reports reasons for rejections of absentee ballots. The majority of rejections (60.5%) were due to the ballot being returned after the deadline. (Table 8 reports the dates when the late-arriving ballots were received.)

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Table 7: Reasons for Rejection of Absentee Ballots

Ballot Return Status	Frequency	Percent
Affidavit Incomplete	1	0.05
Affidavit Review Pending	5	0.26
Assistant Info Incomplete	11	0.57
Duplicate	2	0.10
ID Not Provided	2	0.10
No Time for Cute - Contacted	1	0.05
Not Properly Notarized	8	0.41
Pending Cure	147	7.60
Photo ID Curable	2	0.10
Photo ID Noncompliant	6	0.31
Returned after Deadline	1,170	60.53
Returned Undeliverable	93	4.81
Signature Different	4	0.21
Witness Info Incomplete	481	24.88
Total	1,933	100.00

Data source: NC SBE absentee ballot file

Table 8: 2024 Return Dates of Late-Returned Mail Ballots

Ballot Return Date	Frequency	Percent
	71	6.07
March 1	1	0.09
March 5	7	0.60
March 6	180	15.38
March 7	275	23.50
March 8	292	24.96
March 11	178	15.21
March 12	85	7.26
March 13	30	2.56
March 14	29	2.48
March 15	14	1.20
March 19	1	0.09
March 25	7	0.60

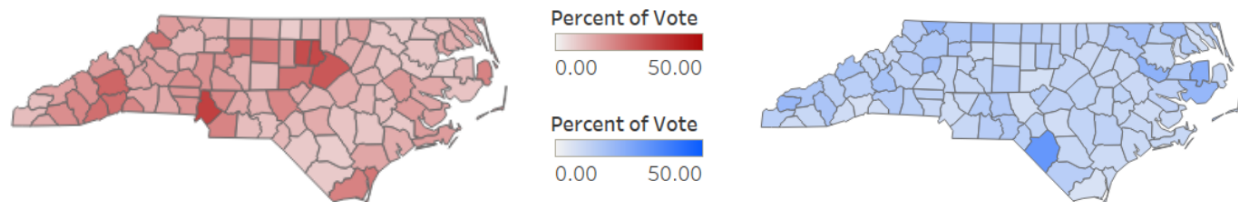
Data source: NC SBE absentee ballot file

Vote Distribution

In both the [Democratic and Republican primaries](#), the winners won with comfortable margins. President Biden won with 87.3%. No other candidates were on the Democratic ballot, but the “No Preference” option did receive 12.7% of the vote. Donald Trump received 73.9% of the vote in the Republican primary, with Nikki Haley in a distant second, garnering 23.3% of the vote. Keeping the scale in mind, and stipulating that each party’s winning candidate received the overwhelming majority of the vote, it can be

illustrative to look at the performance of the runner-up to understand how well the leading candidate had consolidated the support of primary election voters early in the primary season. Figure 3 breaks down this performance by county for each of the runner-up candidates.

Figure 9: Runner-Up Vote Distribution by County. Left shows Nikki Haley’s vote share; the right shows the “no preference” vote share.



Overall, there is not a strong relationship between counties with high vote share for the runner-up option in each partisan primary. Instead, the counties that saw the best performance for one party’s runner up options tended to have strong commitment to the other party’s winning candidate. For example, Haley performed best in [Mecklenburg](#) County, the state’s second-largest county. She received 44.8% of the Republican vote. In contrast, in Mecklenburg, “No Preference” was only selected by 9.7% of voters in the Democratic primary. [Robeson](#) County saw the highest choice for the “No Preference” option within the Democratic primary, garnering 37.31% of the vote. However, only 8.88% of voters selected Nikki Haley in the Republican primary. It may be worth noting that Robeson has a tendency to utilize the “No Preference” option much more than other counties: No Preference received 14.7% of the Democratic vote in the [2016](#) and [2020](#) primaries and 42.4% of the Democratic vote in [2012](#) when the only Democratic candidate was incumbent President Barack Obama.

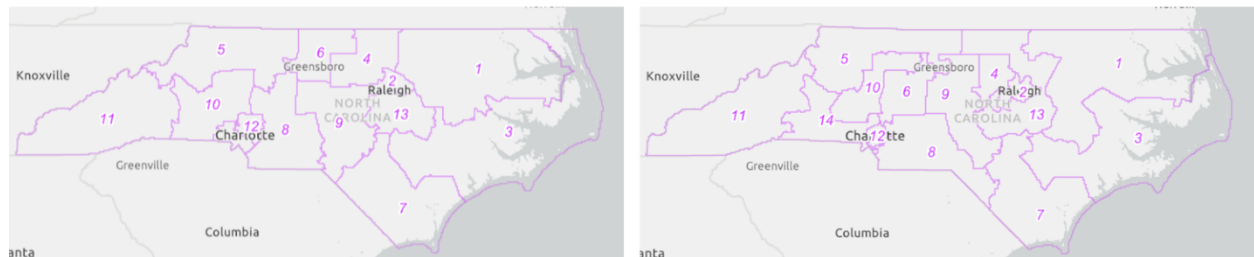
Legal Challenges and Changes

North Carolina Gerrymandering Case

North Carolina has recently seen a whipsawing of court decisions concerning drawing congressional districts. This started in 2020, when the North Carolina supreme court struck down a congressional redistricting plan passed by the legislature, on the grounds

that it was a partisan gerrymander disallowed by the state constitution. That opinion was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which [ruled](#) in a 6-3 decision in June 2023 that state courts can override actions by the state legislature regarding cases of federal redistricting and elections. Specifically, the [United States Supreme Court upheld](#) a decision made by the North Carolina Supreme Court in 2022 that struck down a congressional redistricting plan presented by the legislature. Despite the origin of this impactful United States Supreme Court case being the drawing of legislative district boundaries in North Carolina, the ramifications for North Carolina’s elections were limited. In 2023, after changes in the composition of the North Carolina Supreme Court due to the replacement of Democratic judges by Republicans, the court [overturned](#) its own previous decision, [finding instead that](#) “partisan gerrymandering claims present a political question that is nonjusticiable under the North Carolina Constitution”. New districts were drawn in 2023. Figure 4, which shows screenshots of a plug-in [available on the](#) North Carolina General Assembly [website](#), compares the previous districts from 2022 to the new lines.

Figure 11: District Line Comparison. On the left are the 2022 districts; the right shows the 2024 districts.



Source: [North Carolina General Assembly](#)

Recently Enacted Laws

Ban on Private Donations

In 2023, [Senate Bill 747](#) was passed regarding the responsibilities and limitations of the North Carolina State Board of Elections. The State Board will keep and preserve voted ballots, election results tapes, and executed ballot applications for “a period of 22 months after the corresponding election or as otherwise specified in federal law, whichever is greater.” In addition, the law specified that the State Board is not permitted to accept direct or indirect monetary donations or in-kind contributions from private donors for election administration or temporary employment. The backdrop for this election law change is [the plethora of private funds](#) made available to meet the challenge of

administering the 2020 elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The law also specifies that working as a precinct official or assistant or at an early voting location does not require a criminal record check unless other specified functions are being fulfilled.

Restructuring of the State Board of Elections

In 2023, Republican representatives within the state legislature proposed [Senate Bill 749](#) to restructure the State Board of Elections, which currently consists of five members, each appointed to a four-year term by the governor. The new legislation [would have replaced](#) this five-member board and the analogous county-level boards with four-member boards. In March, a panel of North Carolina judges [ruled](#) that this law is unconstitutional, leaving the structure of the board unchanged for the moment.

Vote by Mail Policy

In [Senate Bill 747, Section 48](#), the state legislature outlined a pilot program for a signature verification process for mail-in ballots. The pilot program consists of the State Board of Elections selecting 10 of the state's 100 counties, seeking a diverse range of population size, regional location, and demographic composition. In the selected counties, the county boards of elections became responsible for using signature verification software to check the signatures of voters on all mail-in absentee ballots received in the 2024 primary.

This pilot program [does not allow](#) mail-in ballots to be rejected as a result of the signature verification. Those flagged due to failure to verify the signature were used to understand the efficacy of the software but still counted so long as they were otherwise valid. This pilot program was strictly meant to provide insight into the efficacy of the software, guiding the possibility of statewide implementation moving forward. The pilot program was delayed because the State Board of Elections encountered difficulty finding a suitable software provider. Despite the initial May 1 report deadline, the program had been [postponed](#) to start validation in June.

In addition, SB 747 affected the period when mail ballots could be returned and counted. Previously, North Carolina provided a three-day grace period after Election Day for mail-in ballots to arrive and still be counted so long as they were otherwise valid. SB 747 eliminated this grace period, shifting the cutoff to 7:30 pm on Election Day. This change

was approved along party lines within the state legislature, with Republicans supporting the change and Democrats opposing it.

Third-Party Candidates and the Ballot

As of mid-July 2024, the Democratic, Republican, Green, Libertarian, and No Labels parties have secured spots on the North Carolina ballot. Other parties are working to get their candidates on the ballot in North Carolina. The We the People Party, formed to secure ballot access for independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., [was initially denied ballot access](#) in North Carolina. Still, the board of elections [approved](#) the party's appearance in a July vote. In the same meeting, the board rejected the petition by the Justice for All Party, supporting Cornell West's presidential bid. Previously, the board had [recognized](#) the Constitution Party.

Because of the strength of options other than President Biden and former President Trump within their own parties, given the overall context of an uncompetitive primary season for both major parties, it is reasonable to imagine that third parties may see comparatively large vote shares in North Carolina's 2024 general election contest.

Registration and Voting

Registration Policies

[In North Carolina](#), the official deadline to register to vote in the 2024 General Election is 5 p.m. Friday, October 11. Residents have the option to register in person, online, or by mail, though online registration is limited to existing NC Division of Motor Vehicles customers. Anyone who does not register before the October 11 deadline still has the opportunity to register and then vote during the early in-person voting period.

Registration Trends

Comparing the number of registered voters within the state at the time of the primary, North Carolina has consistently gained registered voters over the past four election cycles. [In 2012](#), there were 6.2 million registered voters at the time of the primary. [Four years later](#), the number had risen to 6.5 million. [By the 2020 primaries](#), there were 6.9

million voters registered. On the day of the [2024 primary](#), there were over 7.4 million registered voters in North Carolina.

For the first time, the largest portion of registered voters in North Carolina have registered as “Unaffiliated” rather than aligning with any particular party. While overall registration increased with time, Democrats have seen a decline in registered voters, falling from 2.7 million in [2012](#) to 2.4 million in [2024](#). While Republicans have gained over 280,000 registered voters, the number of Unaffiliated voters has grown by over 1.2 million.

Voter ID Policy

Efforts by the state legislature to institute a strict voter ID requirement have been ongoing for over a decade. Most recently, the state legislature passed Senate Bill 824 in 2018 to institute a strict photo ID requirement. This law was held up by [lawsuits](#) until 2023, when the North Carolina supreme court ruled in favor of the law. Voters are now [required to provide photo ID](#) to vote in person. Those voting by mail must send a copy of their photo ID alongside their ballot. The county boards of elections [can now issue](#) free Voter IDs specifically for voting. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, North Carolina is [one of eight states](#) that enforce a strict photo ID requirement at the polls. Thirty-six states require or request some piece of identification to vote. This remains a particularly controversial area of election policy, with [mixed evidence](#) on how it affects important political outcomes, and the policy change [has prompted](#) a prolonged legal back-and-forth.

Conclusion

Candidates, voters, and election administrators are gearing up for the fall election. As the election grows nearer, focus will likely shift more onto North Carolina, with the two major party nominees for president hoping to secure its electors. In U.S. House elections, the new district lines are expected to help Republican performance across the state. While Trump and Biden had no serious competition in their party primaries, there were noteworthy patterns of votes for options other than either of them, with other options receiving relatively large shares of the votes in some counties, and the number of third-party candidates that will be on the general election ballot will likely affect their vote share. Very active changes to the state’s election law in the last few years may show up in

indicators of election performance, for example, if stricter requirements on how voters are allowed to establish their eligibility and a shorter window for mail-in ballots to arrive for counting ultimately influences ballot rejection rates.