



STATE BOARD OF ELECTIONS

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Memorandum *House Bill 658*

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House Bill 658, as now before the General Assembly, would reduce the period for one-stop, in-person absentee voting ("early voting") by one week. If enacted, the bill would have two direct consequences. It would not accommodate voters' needs and it likely would increase the costs of elections.

Voter Impact

The bill would limit voters' participation choices. In-person voting is extremely popular in North Carolina. One reason for the popularity is that early voting allows voters flexibility in planning their in-person trip to the polling place. Reducing the early voting period by one week would lessen that flexibility and almost surely cause some voters to be unable to vote in person.

The bill likely would cause the in-person voting experience to take more of the voter's time. In the past, voters have faced long lines at polling places. That experience is largely historical, thanks in part to the continued efforts of state and county elections officials to streamline the voting process, but also thanks to the early voting opportunity. With the chance to vote now including a 17 day span for early voting and Election Day, voters naturally have spread themselves out, increasing their convenience by shortening their waits. Reducing the early voting period would result in increased waits, both at early voting sites and at Election Day polling places.

Increased Election Costs

Reducing the early voting period likely would increase the cost of elections. On the surface, reducing the early voting period might seem to be a cost reduction, since county boards of elections would be able to operate early voting sites for fewer days. However, that perceived savings would be more than offset by cost increases for several reasons. The logistics required to maintain an appropriate level of service for North Carolina's voters have associated costs.

First, the popularity of early voting (and corresponding reduction in the proportion of voters voting on Election Day) has allowed counties to combine precincts in certain locations. Shortening the early voting period would reduce this trend. Polling locations would have to be examined to ensure that the facilities are large enough to handle the increased capacity. County boards of elections may have to purchase additional voting equipment for existing precincts (at considerable expense) and some counties may have to open new precincts, equip them (also at considerable expense,) and send the statutorily-required first class mail notice alerting voters of the precinct change. Counties surely will have to employ additional election-day poll workers to handle the increased election-day turnout.

Second, with a shorter early voting period, an increased number of voters may turn to by-mail absentee voting. Having changed their operations to accommodate the popularity of in-person absentee (early) voting, county elections offices will experience the expense of transitioning to an increased level of by-mail absentee voting.

Third, the state and the counties will face the expenses associated with a voter education campaign. This would ensure voters are aware of the reduction in service time and that confusion is minimized.

Fourth, early voting as now conducted gives counties cost-saving flexibility. The marked difference in turnout numbers between the 2008 Presidential general election and the lower-turnout 2010 general election (illustrated by the chart and graph on page 3) shows the value. County boards of elections have the ability to set the number of additional early voting sites based on projected turnout for different types of elections. Increasing the number of permanent precincts to handle the number of North Carolina voters is a permanent cost that is not flexible based on need.

The Utility of Early Voting

The popularity of early voting among voters clearly is evidenced by the proportion of voters choosing to use it. Counties have responded to that voter preference by implementing the early voting period as permitted by current law. The required early voting period currently extends from the third Thursday to the last Saturday prior to the election. The statute allows for the local option of additional hours and days. During the 2008 Presidential election, 89 counties utilized this option to open early, remain open late, and operate during weekends.

The chart below and the graph shown at the end of this narrative represent the voters who chose to cast their ballots during the first week of early voting in both the 2008 Presidential General Election and the 2010 General Election.

FIRST WEEK TURNOUT FOR EARLY VOTING

| | 2008 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Female | 397,878 | 104,173 |
| Male | 302,575 | 102,844 |
| Unknown | 5,992 | 1,034 |
| | | |
| Democratic | 417,617 | 93,459 |
| Republican | 164,538 | 77,900 |
| Libertarian | 494 | 186 |
| Unaffiliated | 123,796 | 36,506 |
| | | |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 2,456 | 749 |
| Asian | 3,792 | 420 |
| Black or African American | 225,813 | 36,640 |
| Other | 7,629 | 1,292 |
| Two or More Races | 2,762 | 346 |
| Unknown | 10,318 | 1,698 |
| White | 453,675 | 166,906 |
| | | |
| TOTAL FIRST WEEK EARLY VOTERS | 706,445 | 208,051 |

