

Democracy North Carolina

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“Voter Confusion Index” Ranks NC Counties, Hotline & Website Set Up to Help Voters

A new analysis of voting precincts shows that Cumberland, Wayne, Durham, Pitt, and Pasquotank are the five counties with the most complex changes to their state legislative and Congressional districts lines – changes that can create confusion for voters and possibly lead to people receiving the wrong ballot at the polls.

[See data for 100 counties at: <http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/CountyPrecinctConfusion.xls>]

Eighteen other counties with a maze of district changes and ballot variations affecting a majority of their voters are ranked highest on a “Voter Confusion Index” prepared by the nonpartisan election watchdog group Democracy North Carolina. They are Johnston, Lenoir, Franklin, Nash, Craven, Lee, Greene, Hoke, Forsyth, Wilson, Wake, Granville, Robeson, Richmond, Guilford, Sampson, Mecklenburg and Scotland counties.

The changes result from the General Assembly’s statewide redistricting plans that redrew the boundary lines for state House, state Senate and U.S. Congressional districts to adjust for population shifts in the past decade. Critics charge that district lines were also redrawn to give one party a political advantage over another.

Most voters will go to the same precinct polling site where they voted in 2010, but their ballots will now have a different set of General Assembly and Congressional candidates because of district changes. In addition, the new plans split apart more than one fifth of the state’s precincts into two political districts for the same office, which means neighbors going to the same polling location will receive different ballots with a different set of candidates. For example, one voter will choose among candidates for House District A while another voter living down the block in the *same precinct* chooses among candidates for House District B.

More than twice as many precincts were split than in any previous NC redistricting plan. The Index shows that only 15 of the state’s 100 counties survived the 2012 redistricting process with no precincts divided and no changes in their General Assembly or Congressional districts. Most of the 15 counties have heavily white populations and are in western NC or along the coast.

“The Index reflects a mathematic formula for the number of cases of split precincts and new districts in a county,” said Bob Hall, executive director of Democracy North Carolina. “But most problems are the result of human mistakes – wrong ballots handed out, houses placed in the wrong district, people given the wrong information – and those mistakes, while thankfully rare, can happen anywhere in the state.”

On the Index, a score of 300 means the state House, state Senate, and Congressional districts are all new in every precinct in the county; a score 200 means two of the three are different throughout the county. The higher the score, the more districts and district lines have changed.

Forty-six of the 100 counties have scores of 200 or higher and 27 have scores of 300 or higher. The worst 10 counties on the Index reach 500 points and more because of the large number of precincts split up into multiple districts by complex boundary lines.

“We strongly recommend that you look up your ballot before going to vote,” said Hall. “That will help you become familiar with your candidate choices and alert you if you receive a different ballot at the polling place.”

To help voters cope with potential confusion, a special “Election Protection Hotline” has been set up to answer questions and help resolve problems. **The toll-free hotline is 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683).** The Spanish-language hotline is 888-VE-Y-VOTA (888-839-8682).

The Hotline operates daily throughout the primary election’s Early Voting period (April 19-May 5) and on Election Day (May 8). It is hosted by a public service program at the UNC School of Law in Chapel Hill, Democracy North Carolina, and the national Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law in Washington, DC.

In addition, a new Website at www.NCElectionConnection.com provides vital information, including rules about absentee voting and registration, a list of Early-Voting and Election-Day polling sites, and links to preview each voter’s own ballot.

“Voters need to be alert to possible mistakes and call the Hotline with their questions and concerns,” Hall said. “Trained staff are on hand to answer questions and pursue a constructive resolution of problems in consultation with local and state election officials.”

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ABOUT THE INDEX – see <http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/CountyPrecinctConfusion.xls>

The Voter Confusion Index shows each county’s number of Voter Tabulation Districts (VTD), which generally corresponds to precincts (Column B) and then the number of precincts split into sections by the boundary lines of state House, state Senate and U.S. Congressional districts (Columns C, D, and E). Some precincts are divided by district lines for more than one office. A total of 563 of NC’s 2,692 VTDs or precincts are divided by the state redistricting plans into over 1,400 sections, affecting two million adults. These voters go to the same precinct polling place, but neighbors will get different ballots. The data for these VTD/precincts comes from the General Assembly website on redistricting. For more on split precincts, see: <http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/SplitPrecinctsElectOfficialsPR012012.pdf>

The Index also shows the number of precincts in each county with Congressional, state House or state Senate district identifying numbers that have changed since the 2010 election as a result of redistricting (Columns H, I, and J). The changes mean voters in a precinct are now represented by officials from different districts; in a few cases, only the district number changed and the boundary lines are the same, but in most cases the boundary lines changed with the ID number.

The Index awards 5 points for each case of a VTD/precinct split by district lines and 1 point for each precinct with a different district number for House, Senate or Congressional representative. The total points are divided by the number of precincts in the county and multiplied by 100 to give the final Score. The counties are ranked on the Score, with the highest Score or most complex set of changes receiving a rank of 1 and so forth, down to the tied Rank of 86 for the 15 counties with Scores of 0 – i.e., no precinct was split and no district changed.