

# Same Day Voter Registration in NORTH CAROLINA



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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We have analyzed the likely impact on voter turnout should North Carolina adopt same day registration.<sup>i</sup> Under the system proposed in North Carolina, eligible voters who miss the 25 day registration deadline may take advantage of same day registration during a period that lasts 19 days to three days prior to the election. During this time, voters may go to designated locations, and with the appropriate documentation, both register and vote. Since no state uses a system exactly like the one proposed in North Carolina, we estimated the impact of adopting Election Day Registration (EDR) to simulate the impact of same day registration in North Carolina. While our results must be interpreted carefully, we believe that they represent faithful estimates of the proposed reform. Availability of same day registration procedures similar to traditional Election Day Registration procedures should give voters who have not previously registered the opportunity to vote. Since North Carolina currently has one of the most restrictive registration requirements in the nation, requiring registration 25 days prior to Election Day, we may in fact be underestimating the impact of the proposed reform.

Consistent with existing research on the impact of EDR in other circumstances, we found that SDR would likely lead to substantial increases in voter turnout. We offer the following estimates of increases in turnout for North Carolina, and for specific groups of North Carolinians under SDR:<sup>ii</sup>

- » Overall turnout could go up by 5.4 percent.
- » Turnout among those aged 18 to 25 could increase by 10.8 percent.
- » Turnout for those who have moved in the last six months could increase by 9 percent.
- » Turnout for African Americans could increase by 5.9 percent.
- » Turnout among the poorest citizens could increase by 6 percent, while turnout among the wealthiest citizens would likely increase by only 3.2 percent.

## Dēmos

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## INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of voter registration in the United States is to make sure that only eligible citizens vote. Voter registration also provides election officials with convenient lists they can use to notify voters about upcoming elections, as well as other information about elections and voting. Lastly, when individuals enter a polling place, a voter registration list gives poll workers the information they need to authenticate voters before they cast ballots.

At the same time, the process of voter registration imposes costs on voters—such as forcing voters to register well in advance of an election, which might involve a complicated process of determining where and how to register—and these costs have been shown in various studies to serve as barriers to many potential voters<sup>iii</sup>. In North Carolina, eligible citizens have to register to vote at least 25 days before the election. For some eligible citizens, especially those who have recently moved, requiring registration before Election Day might make it very difficult for them to cast a ballot. Given that non-registered, but otherwise eligible citizens are not on the lists that election officials or other political groups use to mobilize voters, some non-registered eligible citizens may not be aware of an upcoming election or about how and when they can register to vote.

In the last few decades, the costs associated with voter registration have been the focus of significant federal legislation. In 1993, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) required states to provide voter registration forms in places where residents register their motor vehicles, and in other state agencies like public assistance offices. Finally, NVRA required that states allow for mail-in voter registration. More recently, in 2002, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) attempted to significantly improve voter registration practices across the nation by requiring states to develop computerized, statewide voter registries, and also requiring all states to adopt provisional or “fail-safe” voting.

Currently, there are six states that have substantial experience allowing eligible citizens to register to vote on Election Day: Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.<sup>iv</sup> Iowa and Montana only recently adopted EDR. These six states have shown that Election Day voter registration (EDR) is an effective way to increase voter participation without complicating election administration or leading to increased voter fraud. Research regarding the experiences of these other six states has shown that:

- » **Voter participation is somewhere between 3 and 6 percentage points higher than were EDR not used in those states;**
- » **Citizens who have recently moved or are younger find it easier to register and vote;**
- » **Election administration, when EDR is thoughtfully implemented, can be improved and EDR does not significantly worsen the Election Day experience of poll workers or voters;**
- » **And, there is no evidence that the prospects for election fraud are increased.<sup>v</sup>**

Thus, based on the previous experience of these states, previous research we’ve conducted, academic research on voter participation and Election Day voter registration, and new research we present below, we believe that if appropriately implemented, North Carolina will have a positive experience once same day registration is in place. In particular, we show below that both voter registration and turnout are estimated to increase—possibly by over 5 percent—once same day registration is implemented in North Carolina. Having more voters on the rolls will improve election administration and give election officials throughout the state better information when they want to contact voters about upcoming elections and provide them with related information. Finally, increasing voter participation should lead to a stronger democracy and a strengthened civic culture in North Carolina.

## EDR, REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT

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Generally speaking, states with EDR have higher rates of voter registration and turnout than states that do not have EDR. Based on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2004, states with EDR reported registration rates of 86.4 percent, while states without EDR reported registration rates of only 79.1 percent.<sup>vi</sup> These numbers are consistent with data from previous elections: states with EDR have consistently had higher registration rates.<sup>vii</sup> EDR states also had demonstrably higher levels of voter turnout in 2004. According to the official voting statistics reported by secretaries of state and the U.S. Census Bureau estimates of state population, EDR states had a voter turnout rate of 70.3 percent in 2004 while non-EDR states had a turnout rate of only 54.7 percent.<sup>viii</sup>

Were North Carolina to implement the proposed same day registration plan well, and the state experienced the typical increase in voter turnout that other states have seen once they have implemented EDR, voter participation could increase substantially. Furthermore, voter participation might increase noticeably among sectors of the population that typically vote at lower rates, such as newly relocated eligible citizens or young voters. Previous research has shown that EDR often helps these voters. In the next section of this report we return to this issue, and provide precise estimates of SDR's potential impact on registration and turnout in North Carolina.

## SDR IN NORTH CAROLINA

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To estimate the potential impact of EDR we turn to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2004 Current Population Survey (CPS) and use a methodology that we have employed in past research on voter turnout, which is documented in the technical appendix of this report. In summary, we estimate statistical models predicting whether individual respondents in the 2004 CPS report being registered and whether they voted. In this estimation, we control for many factors, including the voter registration process in the state. We control for the respondents' age and level of education, whether or not they have moved recently, their ethnic background, and whether or not they are a native-born citizen or have been recently naturalized. We then used these estimates to simulate the outcome of North Carolina using EDR in the 2004 election.<sup>ix</sup> As we stated in the beginning of this report, we believe that the impact of the proposed SDR plan in North Carolina would be similar to the impact of EDR if implemented correctly.

Estimates of SDR's potential effect on voter turnout in the 2004 election in North are provided in Table 1.<sup>x</sup> First, we see that our analysis predicts that North Carolina's turnout would increase under SDR. Most importantly, our analysis predicts a 5.4 percent increase in voter turnout if North Carolina moves to SDR.

We might also see other substantial increases in voter turnout for those who might be most affected by SDR:

- » **Turnout among those aged 18 to 25 could increase by 10.8 percent under EDR.**
- » **Turnout for those who have moved in the last six months could increase by 9.0 percent under EDR.**
- » **Turnout for African-Americans could increase by 5.9 percent under EDR.**
- » **Almost 90,000 additional poor voters would go to the polls, compared to an additional 43,000 voters in the top of the income range.**
- » **Over 75,000 additional citizens, who are not high school graduates, would vote compared to only 44,000 new voters with college degrees.**

Thus, those eligible citizens who are most typically affected by Election Day Registration in other states would also

be strongly affected in North Carolina.

## CONCLUSION

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Over the last 35 years, one of the more consistent conclusions in the study of turnout has been that making the registration and voting process easier will increase turnout among eligible voters.<sup>xi</sup> Our analysis of the impact of SDR in North Carolina is merely another piece of evidence supporting this claim. By comparing voter turnout in states with EDR and states without EDR, we have been able to estimate the impact SDR would have in North Carolina, which is currently a very low turnout state.<sup>xii</sup> Adoption of SDR could raise turnout by over 5 percent according to our estimates, and it could raise turnout substantially more among groups such as young voters and voters who have moved in the period preceding the election.

The trend in the United States has been to ease the barrier that registration places on voting by moving the deadline closer to Election Day. Moving toward same day registration would ease that barrier for thousands of North Carolinians, and bring more participants into the democratic process.

## TECHNICAL APPENDIX

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To estimate the impact of SDR in North Carolina we analyzed individual survey data collected by the Census Bureau. Each month the Census Bureau surveys approximately 50,000 households in the Current Population Survey. In even numbered years the November survey includes a battery of questions asking respondents whether or not they were registered to vote, how they registered, and if they voted. The CPS is considered to be the “gold standard” of datasets for analyzing individual-level factors affecting turnout, and turnout across states. The Census Bureau has a higher response rate than any other survey and the sample size is large enough to draw statistically valid samples within a state. Whereas the typical media poll might have 1,500 respondents nationwide, the November 2004 CPS included 1,643 respondents from North Carolina.

Our model incorporates factors that have been shown in extensive research on voter turnout to be correlated with an individual’s decision on whether or not to vote. We include categorical variables to indicate whether or not the person is in one of five age groups: 18 to 25, 26 to 35, 36 to 45, 46 to 60, or 61 to 75. We include categorical variables for education placing the respondent as having less than a high school degree, a high school degree, some college education, a BA or beyond. For annual family income, we include brackets of less than \$20,000, between \$20,000 and \$40,000, between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and above \$60,000. The respondent’s ethnicity is measured as white, black, or Latino. We also included variables indicating whether or not the respondent was a naturalized citizen, and if so, whether they had come to the United States within 10 years of the 2004 election or within 16 years of the 2004 election. We also included a variable for whether the respondent lives in an urban or rural area.

We include variables at the state level for the number of days before the election that registration closes and for the presence of a competitive election. We include three categorical variables indicating the presence (or absence) respectively of: a senate, gubernatorial, or presidential race within the state that was decided by a margin of 5 percent or less.

To be able to determine the impact of SDR on particular groups of the population, and because we expect that SDR will have larger effects on those who have the most difficulty meeting the burden of pre-election registration, we include interaction terms between the availability of EDR, and the respondent’s age, education and income, as well as whether or not the respondent had moved previously and whether the respondent was a native born citizen or a naturalized citizen (and if so, whether recently immigrated or not).

Given these specifications, we estimated the model on all respondents in the CPS. Doing this gave us estimates of the model parameters. We then compute the predicted probability of each respondent in our sample in North Carolina voting under that current legal conditions—that is the state’s requirement that voters register well before Election Day. We also compute the probability of each respondent in the sample in North Carolina voting under the counterfactual condition that North Carolina had Election Day registration available. By aggregating those predicted probabilities over different sub-groups of interest, we are able to estimate the impact of SDR on any sub-group within the population, or we can estimate the impact of SDR on all voting age persons in North Carolina. Again, we are assuming that the impact of SDR will closely resemble the impact of EDR. able to estimate the impact of EDR on any sub-group within the population, or we can estimate the impact of EDR on all voting age persons in Iowa.

**Table 1: How People Report Registering to Vote in States Without and With EDR, 2004**

|                                      | Non-EDR | EDR  | North Carolina |
|--------------------------------------|---------|------|----------------|
| Department of Motor Vehicles         | 23.0    | 3.9  | 25.7           |
| Public Assistance Agency             | 1.1     | 0.2  | 0.8            |
| Mail-in Registration                 | 13.6    | 2.0  | 5.7            |
| School, Hospital, or Campus          | 6.6     | 3.1  | 5.9            |
| Government voter registration office | 33.9    | 37.5 | 35.2           |
| Registration Drive                   | 10.0    | 2.3  | 8.7            |
| At polls on primary or election day  | 4.6     | 38.8 | 10.9           |
| Other                                | 7.1     | 12.2 | 7.1            |

Source: Computed by authors, based on analysis of the Current Population Survey, US Bureau of the Census, November 2004.

**Table 2: Simulated 2004 Registration Increases in North Carolina under SDR**

|  | Estimated Percentage Point Increase w/ SDR | Estimated Additional Registrants w/SDR |
|--|--|--|
| Entire State                                 | 5.4  | <b>329,870</b>                         |
| Persons who have moved in the last 6 months  | 9.0  | 64,710                                 |
| Persons Age 18-25                            | 10.8                                       | 96,052                                 |
| Persons Age 26-35                            | 5.7  | 70,052                                 |
| Persons Age 36-45                            | 4.6  | 47,095                                 |
| Persons Age 46-60                            | 4.8  | 71,171                                 |
| Persons Age 61-75                            | 4.0  | 40,075                                 |
| Persons Age 76-90                            | 3.9  | 17,265                                 |
| African Americans                            | 5.9  | 83,977                                 |
| Latinos                                      | 6.5  | <b>5,184</b>                           |
| Whites                                       | 5.2  | 233,714                                |
| Lower Income (\$0-\$20,000 household income) | 6.0  | 86,567                                 |
| Middle Income (\$20,000 - \$40,000)          | 7.8  | 158,283                                |
| Upper Income (\$40,000 - \$60,000)           | 3.1  | 39,331                                 |
| Top Income (\$60,000 and above)              | 3.2  | 43,331                                 |
| Rural  | 3.8  | 101,241                                |
| Urban  | 6.9  | 236,261                                |
| Persons with grade school education          | 7.0  | 77,145                                 |
| Persons who are high school graduates        | 5.8  | 122,105                                |
| Persons with some college                    | 5.0  | 86,458                                 |
| College graduates                            | 3.7  | 43,659                                 |

Source: Computed by authors, based on analysis of the Current Population Survey, US Bureau of the Census, November 2004.

**Table 3: How People Report First Registering in States Without and With EDR, 2004**

|                                      | Non-EDR | EDR  | North Carolina |
|--------------------------------------|---------|------|----------------|
| Department of Motor Vehicles         | 23.0    | 3.9  | 25.7           |
| Public Assistance Agency             | 1.1     | 0.2  | 0.8            |
| Mail-in Registration                 | 13.6    | 2.0  | 5.7            |
| School, Hospital, or Campus          | 6.6     | 3.1  | 5.9            |
| Government voter registration office | 33.9    | 37.5 | 35.2           |
| Registration Drive                   | 10.0    | 2.3  | 8.7            |
| At polls on primary or election day  | 4.6     | 38.8 | 10.9           |
| Other                                | 7.1     | 12.2 | 7.1            |

Source: Computed by authors based on analysis of the Current Population Survey, US Bureau of the Census, November 2004

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> This report is similar to an analysis we produced for Dēmos on the impact of Election Day Registration (EDR) in Iowa, and borrows liberally from that report in the general discussion of the impact of voter registration laws.

<sup>ii</sup> We use a ‘5 percent increase’ to refer to an increase of 5 percentage points, or 5 percent of voting age population, not 5 percent of those already voting. Thus we will refer to an increase from 50 percent turnout to 55 percent turnout as a 5 percent increase.

<sup>iii</sup> How voter registration imposes costs on potential voters was originally researched by Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

<sup>iv</sup> North Dakota does not currently require voter registration. Iowa and Montana recently adopted Election Day registration.

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, R. Michael Alvarez and Stephen Ansolabehere, “California Votes: The Promise of Election Day Registration”, *Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action*, 2002; R. Michael Alvarez, Jonathan Nagler and Catherine Wilson, “Making Voting Easier: Election Day Registration in New York”, *Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action*, 2004; M.J. Fenster, “The Impact of Allowing Day of Registration Voting on Turnout in U.S. Elections from 1960 to 1992,” *American Politics Quarterly* 22(1) (1994): 74-87; B. Highton, “Easy Registration and Voter Turnout,” *The Journal of Politics* 59 ( 2 ) (1997), 565-575; S. Knack, “Election-Day Registration: The Second Wave,” *American Politics Quarterly* 29(1) (2001), 65-78.

<sup>vi</sup> These statistics are computed by the authors from the November 2004 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey. We do not use the EAC provided registration numbers because in some cases the EAC numbers report registration figures higher than the voting age population for the country, thus we do not view them as reliable indicators.

<sup>vii</sup> See, for example, Table 2 in Alvarez and Ansolabehere (2002): there registration in non-EDR states in the 2000 election was 77.3 percent, in EDR states it was 88.8 percent; turnout in non-EDR states in the 2000 election was 50.5 percent, while in EDR states it was 65.8 percent.

<sup>viii</sup> Turnout figures are taken from the Bureau of the Census, 2007 Statistical Abstract of the United States, Table 408. These data are in turn based on reports of secretaries of states on votes cast for president and on census bureau estimates of state voting age population.

<sup>ix</sup> The reported registration and turnout rates in the CPS data differ from those found in the EAC’s Election Day Survey. The CPS data are based on surveys of households, and thus are affected by both sampling error and response error.

<sup>x</sup> We provide estimates of the potential effect on voter registration of North Carolina’s move to SDR in the 2004 election in Table 2, using the same methodology as discussed in the text and in our technical appendix. We also provide in Table 3 data from the CPS on how voters in the 2004 survey reported first registering, in non-EDR states, EDR states, and in North Carolina.

<sup>xi</sup> R.E. Wolfinger and S. J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); J.E. Leighley and J. Nagler, “Individual and Systemic Influences on Turnout: Who Votes? 1984,” *Journal of Politics*, 54 (1992): 718–740.

<sup>xii</sup> North Carolina rates 42nd in the nation according to Census Bureau estimates of reported turnout, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004”, *Current Population Reports*, P20-556, U.S. Census Bureau.

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## ABOUT DĒMOS

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Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action is a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization committed to building an America that achieves its highest democratic ideals. We believe this requires a democracy that is robust and inclusive, with high levels of electoral participation and civic engagement; an economy where prosperity and opportunity are broadly shared and disparity is reduced; and a strong and effective public sector with the capacity to plan for the future and provide for the common good. Founded in 2000, Dēmos' work combines research with advocacy—melding the commitment to ideas of a think tank with the organizing strategies of an advocacy group. *As with all Dēmos publications, the views expressed in this briefing paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Dēmos Board of Trustees.*

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