

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SHORTENING EARLY VOTING PERIODS:  
A CASE STUDY FROM MECKLENBURG COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

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A capstone submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in Government Analytics

Baltimore, Maryland  
May 2016

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## 1. Abstract

Early voting is a widely available convenience voting option, yet research into exactly who casts a ballot early has produced mixed results. Researchers have simultaneously shown that early voters are wealthier and whiter than average, or older and more habitual voters, or more heavily minority than average. Most research has used self-reported survey data both for turnout and method of voting. The author utilizes state-compiled data from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina combining registered voters' demographic and method of voting information for all elections over a ten-year time horizon. The results show that self-identified minority racial status is associated with between a 6.9 and 16.9 percentage point increase in the likelihood that a voter will choose to vote early over a non-minority voter during the last four federal elections beginning in 2008. These findings will inform ongoing litigation in North Carolina and across the country about the disparate impact of reductions in the availability of early voting as well as the need for election administrators to more efficiently deploy resources in preparation for early voting.

***Keywords:*** *Early Voting, North Carolina, Mecklenburg County, Minority Voting*

\* The author thanks Dr. Jennifer Bachner for her assistance and guidance throughout the capstone writing process. Others deserving appreciation for their subject matter expertise and support include Dr. Charles Stewart III of MIT and Dr. John Fortier of the Bipartisan Policy Center.

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## **2. Introduction**

Voting in the United States is a civic duty fraught with contradiction. The right to vote has been extended to the broadest slice of the population as has ever before been allowed to vote in the nation's history. Yet, while more citizens are technically eligible to vote, it is certainly not the case that all voters are similarly situated when it comes to their ability to cast a ballot. Similarly, while voting technology and procedures today are demonstrably better than in the past, voter confidence in election administration is poor and the voting public is suspicious of the fairness of the electoral process. Finally, while voters today have many more convenience options when casting a ballot—in-person before or on Election Day, through the mail, provisionally at the polls, and in some cases, electronically over the Internet—voter turnout has not spiked as many had predicted. These contradictions baked into the voting system necessitate in depth research about who interacts with the voting process in which ways and what the implications are for further policy change.

Voters interact with the voting process differently in many ways, most of which are outside their control. In some jurisdictions, casting a ballot may be restricted mostly to neighborhood polling places on Election Day via paper ballots that take longer to complete than in other jurisdictions. That singular method of voting could result in prohibitive lines at polling places that end up turning away voters. In other jurisdictions, election administrators and the legislators who have crafted the jurisdiction's laws provide for numerous alternative voting options meant to alleviate the barriers to voting on Election Day itself. One convenience voting method—early voting—is a popular addition to the menu of voting options in those jurisdictions it is available. While the

method's impact on increasing voter turnout is minimal, it is clear that a substantial portion of the electorate in those jurisdictions where it is available do appreciate the choice and use it consistently. So what happens when voters become conditioned to a convenience voting method only to find the option diminished or eliminated in the future?

In many ways, perceptions about the voting processes employed in jurisdictions across the country have colored the political debates and rigorosity of the policymaking process. Ohio, for example, has featured prominently in the debate about the implementation and subsequent alteration of the early voting process. For the 2008 election, the state added a 35-day window of early voting to its menu of options for voters to cast a ballot. Voters quickly became accustomed to the new option and successfully fought an attempt to curtail the window in 2012. However, by 2014, the window was reduced by the legislature to 29 days.<sup>1</sup> The alteration was a significant reduction in the availability of early voting. Roughly 17% of the previously available dates on which to vote were eliminated. While this created a political and legal battle, Ohio still has one of the most generous early voting windows in the country. The state was looking to save costs and to eliminate a controversial—and accidental—loophole that let voters register to vote and cast an early ballot on the same day at the very beginning of the lengthy early voting window. Those changes, though, were perceived as disparately impacting certain groups of voters that, while not constitutionally guaranteed the right to cast an early ballot, had come to count on the option. The state has been in court defending its actions ever since the policy change was made.

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<sup>1</sup> Getachew, DeNora. "Voting 2014: Stories from Ohio." Brennan Center for Justice. December 5, 2014. <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/voting-2014-stories-ohio>.

North Carolina has made a similar reduction in its early voting window in recent years. The state shortened the available days on which to cast an early ballot to 10 days from 14 days, which represents a roughly 29% reduction to the early voting window. The change in the early voting window was part of a comprehensive election administration law passed in North Carolina in 2013.<sup>2</sup> The law has been challenged in federal court, though, the statutory changes were allowed to proceed as the case works through the legal system. Detractors of the law argue that many of the changes disparately impact select groups of voters. One of their biggest complaints is about the alteration of the early voting window; opponents contend that the law will depress turnout of minority voters. As in Ohio, the reduction to the early voting window also eliminated the same day registration process that allowed voters to register and cast an early ballot in one transaction at the beginning of the early voting window. What makes the North Carolina example better situated for academic research is that the state collects and makes available the data to show exactly which types of voters are likely to be more directly impacted by a reduction in early voting days than others.

Mecklenburg County is the largest jurisdiction in the state of North Carolina, and it encompasses all of the city of Charlotte. According to the United States Census Bureau, the county has just over 1,000,000 residents, three-quarters of whom are of voting age. The county is about a third Black or African American and nearly half composed of non-White residents. The county's size and diversity, as well as the

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<sup>2</sup> HB 589 was passed and signed into law in 2013. The law was immediately challenged in federal court. On April 25, 2016, a federal district court judge issued a 485-page ruling weighing the constitutional and Voting Rights Act violations alleged by the plaintiffs. The judge largely upheld the law, though, it is expected the ruling will be appealed to the United States Court of Appeals for the 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit and then to the Supreme Court of the United States. The ruling is available in full at <http://electionlawblog.org/wp-content/uploads/nc-voting.pdf>.

inclusion of a major city, makes it an ideal jurisdiction within the state of North Carolina to study with respect to the effects of policy change.

Mecklenburg's voters have seen their voting process change a few times over the past four federal election cycles. The state, which was a relatively early adopter of early voting, has passed legislation to alter the process. By that time, voters had become accustomed to the voting option. While it does not raise turnout in most cases, early voting as a convenience option appears to be more popular among self-identified minority voters than White voters. While courts tend to evaluate the legality of voting statutes based on their effect on overall turnout, it is clear from the data that any change to early voting in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina at this point will disparately impact minority voters who are between 6.9 and 16.9 percentage points more likely than their White neighbors to use the convenience option.

This paper will first outline the literature about convenience voting generally and early voting specifically. It will then focus on the unique and valuable data collection conducted in North Carolina as well as the ordinary least squares regressions conducted on data from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina that show the impact of a reduction to the early voting window on different groups of voters. The paper then discusses the results of those analyses before concluding with a warning about the implementation and alteration of early voting processes, procedures, and law.

### **3. Academic Literature**

Changes to the voting process can expand or restrict eligibility and/or access to the polls. Not all expansions of access are inherently good and not all reductions in access are necessarily bad. For example, early voting expansion has, to many observers

on both sides of the political debate, been a generally good addition to the menu of voting options where it is available. However, reasonable policymakers can debate whether a 10 day or 35 day window is more appropriate. Similarly, a jurisdiction aiming to save money and resources might want to shorten a lengthy early voting window, especially when their data show that few voters actually cast ballots on the many days in the middle of the window. Decisions to reduce the window can, thus, be purely nonpartisan, administrative decisions necessitated by budgetary and other resource allocation constraints. Or those reductions can be made by one party looking to subtly disenfranchise voters predisposed to vote for the opposing party.

### **3.1 Convenience Voting Options**

The conventional good government reformer argues that the rate of turnout in the United States is too low, too tilted toward dedicated partisans at the extremes, and in need of reform. These reformers tend to coalesce behind policies that they believe make the voting process more accessible to voters who want to participate, but who have been unable to cast ballots on the traditional Tuesday Election Day in the past. One notable reform has been the rapid evolution of limited absentee or by mail voting to a majority of states adopting no-excuse absentee voting for all voters.

Another is the expansion of the once little-known practice of in-person early voting during which a voter casts a ballot (usually in the same method as he would at the polls on Election Day) during some defined period before Election Day.<sup>3</sup> These reforms are often proposed to address concerns that poorer voters might have difficulty voting during the 12-15 hours their polls might be open on Election Day by allowing them to

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<sup>3</sup> Stein, R. M., & Vonnahme, G. (2008). Engaging the unengaged voter: Vote centers and voter turnout. *Journal of Politics*, 70(2), 487-497.

cast a paper ballot absentee by mail starting up to 45 days before the election or to cast their ballots on the voting equipment designated for voters before Election Day at their increased convenience during a window of early voting prior to Election Day.

### **3.2 Absentee Voting as Convenience Voting**

The findings for how no-excuse absentee voting and early voting reforms change the electorate are relatively settled in the literature. Absentee or exclusively by mail voting (as is now done in Washington state and Oregon) tend not to be associated with an increase in turnout for high profile elections.<sup>4</sup> For example, federal midterm and presidential elections conducted in high absentee or mail jurisdictions would not expect to see significantly higher turnout than similarly situated states without much absentee or by mail voting.

While these findings hold for higher turnout elections, absentee or by mail voting is associated with higher turnout during traditionally lower turnout races like local and other non-statewide contests. As noted in the United States Census Bureau's biennial voting supplements, voters are seemingly busier and unable to get to the polls during nonpresidential federal elections than they are for presidential contests. It reasons that the barriers and commitment to voting resulting in low turnout rates during elections without any federal candidates on the ballot present participation problems that are even more difficult to overcome. Therefore, when jurisdictions push absentee or by mail voting for traditionally lower turnout and nonfederal elections, mail voting options seem

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<sup>4</sup> Berinsky, A. J., Burns, N., & Traugott, M. W. (2001). Who votes by mail? A dynamic model of the individual-level consequences of voting-by-mail systems. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 65(2), 178-197.

to reduce the barrier and increase convenience for the voter has an effect of marginally raising turnout.

### **3.3 Early Voting Windows Increase Opportunities to Vote**

Early voting has been in place in Texas and Tennessee for over two decades, but the reform only gained widespread adoption in the past decade. As of 2016, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 37 states have some sort of early voting, though, the terminology and specifics differ from state to state.

Early voting was established for the same reasons no-excuse absentee voting was: to increase the convenience to the voter and to improve turnout rates. The early data on early voting indicated that the reform was associated with higher overall turnout in the election—an expansion of the electorate. However, the literature has mostly coalesced around the idea that early voting has little effect at all on overall turnout and, in fact, may be associated with a slight *decrease* in overall turnout.<sup>5</sup>

### **3.4 Who Uses Convenience Options**

Research into who uses various types of convenience voting options has produced mixed results. The concern among some policymakers is that these convenience options are both costly to establish and maintain, are not significantly increasing turnout, and

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<sup>5</sup> Neeley, G. W., & Richardson, L. E. J. (2001). Who is early voting? an individual level examination. *The Social Science Journal*, 38(3), 381-392; Gronke, Paul and Michael McDonald. 2008. "Tracking the Early Electorate?" Available at <http://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Election050108/McDonaldElection.pdf>; Gronke, P., & Toffey, D. K. (2008). The psychological and institutional determinants of early voting. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(3), 503-524; Burden, B. C., Canon, D. T., Mayer, K. R., & Moynihan, D. P. (2014). Election laws, mobilization, and turnout: The unanticipated consequences of election reform. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1), 95-109; Fullmer, Elliott B. "Early Voting: Do More Sites Lead to Higher Turnout?" *Election Law Journal* 14, no. 2 (2014). doi:10.1089/elj.2014.0259.

may indeed only be making voting more convenient for voters most likely to vote even without the reform in place.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it is not clear that all voters are as likely as one another to use early voting options. In earlier studies, it was found that early voters are wealthier<sup>7</sup> and whiter than the overall electorate.<sup>8</sup> In a review of the literature, early voters were also found to be older than Election Day voters.<sup>9</sup> In another study, habitual, long time voters were less likely to use early voting when offered than younger voters even though those habitual voters were more likely to be older than the mean voter.<sup>10</sup> In the Stein and Vonnahme study, early voters were found to be the ones considered habitual.<sup>11</sup> A 2001 analysis from Neeley and Richardson showed no significant effect of socioeconomic status, race, or age.<sup>12</sup>

There could be many reasons for the variations in early findings. For example, in some jurisdictions, early voting sites are plentiful throughout the county allowing voters many locations in which to cast a ballot. In other jurisdictions, the early voting sites are

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<sup>6</sup> Neeley, G. W., & Richardson, L. E. J. (2001). Who is early voting? an individual level examination. *The Social Science Journal*, 38(3), 381-392; Gronke, Paul and Michael McDonald. 2008. "Tracking the Early Electorate?" Available at <http://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Election050108/McDonaldElection.pdf>; Giammo, J. D., & Brox, B. J. (2010). Reducing the costs of participation: Are US states getting a return on early voting? *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(2), 295; Burden, B. C., Canon, D. T., Mayer, K. R., & Moynihan, D. P. (2014). Election laws, mobilization, and turnout: The unanticipated consequences of election reform. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1), 95-109.

<sup>7</sup> Neeley, G. W., & Richardson, L. E. J. (2001). Who is early voting? an individual level examination. *The Social Science Journal*, 38(3), 381-392.

<sup>8</sup> Stein, R. M. (1998). Early voting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 62(1), 57-69.

<sup>9</sup> Gronke, Paul and Michael McDonald. 2008. "Tracking the Early Electorate?" Available at <http://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Election050108/McDonaldElection.pdf>; Gronke, P., & Toffey, D. K. (2008). The psychological and institutional determinants of early voting. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(3), 503-524.

<sup>10</sup> Kropf, M. E. (2012). Does early voting change the socio-economic composition of the electorate? *Poverty and Public Policy*, 4(1)

<sup>11</sup> Stein, R. M., & Vonnahme, G. (2008). Engaging the unengaged voter: Vote centers and voter turnout. *Journal of Politics*, 70(2), 487-497.

<sup>12</sup> Neeley, G. W., & Richardson, L. E. J. (2001). Who is early voting? an individual level examination. *The Social Science Journal*, 38(3), 381-392.

large and situated at the local elections office, which is not always close to public transportation. Voters studied in those jurisdictions may not be as likely to use the early voting option as the voters in jurisdictions that make early voting quite accessible. Additionally, a recent study has shown that the location and number of early voting sites is associated with higher turnout.<sup>13</sup> It may not be sufficient just to offer early voting as a convenience option but also to have multiple sites if a goal is to increase convenience and turnout. A recent study of the interactive effect between the binary option of allowing early voting and the offering of several locations confirms that opening one early voting site might not increase turnout, but that opening several sites was associated with more turnout.<sup>14</sup> Another potential reason that voters may not be using early voting convenience options at rates expected when the reform was incorporated is that the hours that the early voting sites are open are often limited to regular business hours that are no better for poorer, wage-earners than the hours available on the traditional Tuesday Election Day.

There are also political concerns about who votes early and who does not. It is conventional wisdom that early voting tends to benefit Democratic-leaning voters,<sup>15</sup> which is one reason why some states have reduced the availability of early voting when Republicans control the branches of government. In differing studies, minority voters have been shown to be both less likely to use the convenience options of early voting and

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<sup>13</sup> Fullmer, Elliott B. "Early Voting: Do More Sites Lead to Higher Turnout?" *Election Law Journal* 14, no. 2 (2014). doi:10.1089/elj.2014.0259.

<sup>14</sup> Losco, Joseph, Raymond Scheele, and Steven R. Hall. "The Impact of Vote Centers on Early Voting in Indiana." Paper prepared for delivery at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association, April 1, 2010, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>15</sup> Stein, R. M. (1998). Early voting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 62(1), 57-69.

absentee by mail voting,<sup>16</sup> and to be more likely than non-minority voters to choose early voting.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that two traditionally Republican leaning states pioneered the use of early voting and neither has pulled back on its availability in recent years. A look at how race interacts with individual level predilections to vote prior to Election Day is long overdue.

The research literature is not well developed about the reasons for and likelihood of individual voters choosing to cast their ballots during early voting as opposed to other available options. This omission in the literature is largely due to the fact that the data are not always available to researchers. In some cases, the data are not available at all. For example, 42 states and the District of Columbia do not include race on their voter registration rolls and voter history databases. Without that information, researchers can, at best, only make informed assumptions about voters' races.<sup>18</sup> North Carolina provides the right data to perform these analyses to evaluate the impact of early voting window reductions on self-identified minority voters.

#### **4. Data and Methods**

In the analyses that follow, the author explores the effects of self-identified minority status on the usage of early voting using data from the North Carolina voter history database and statewide voter registration database, focusing exclusively on Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

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<sup>16</sup> Gronke, Paul and Michael McDonald. 2008. "Tracking the Early Electorate?" Available at <http://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Election050108/McDonaldElection.pdf>; Philpot, T. S., Shaw, D. R., & McGowen, E. B. (2009). Winning the race. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73(5), 995-1022.

<sup>17</sup> Kropf, M. E. (2012). Does early voting change the socio-economic composition of the electorate? *Poverty and Public Policy*, 4(1).

<sup>18</sup> Kropf, M. E. (2012). Does early voting change the socio-economic composition of the electorate? *Poverty and Public Policy*, 4(1); Haspel, M., & Knotts, H. G. (2005). Location, location, location: Precinct placement and the costs of voting. *Journal of Politics*, 67(2), 560-573.

The data used in the analyses is relatively basic and simple to understand, yet it is extraordinarily difficult and rare to find at the individual voter level. There are many analyses of voting trends by age and race, though, these analyses are typically conducted using survey data collected days, weeks, or months after Election Day. For example, a researcher could conduct a data collection of a randomized subset of the population to evaluate the racial data of voters choosing different methods of voting. There are limitations on the use of survey data, though, as respondents tend to over-report their instances of voting due to its nature as a societal good and their memories may not be accurate about the method of voting selected during the most immediately past election or over time. Gathering data spanning multiple election cycles through surveying individuals is likely to result in inaccurate reporting.

#### **4.1 The Voter Registration Database**

The more effective way of gathering individual level data of voters is through states' voter registration databases and voter history files. But the vast majority of states do not collect the data required to conduct individual level analyses of early voting usage based on age, race, party, and other factors. For instance, only nine states ask voter registrants to indicate their race, and in only three of those states is the information a requirement to register or vote.

These analyses include data from two databases maintained by the North Carolina State Board of Elections. The first database is the public Voter File, which contains data on every registered voter in North Carolina. The variables include all of the various voting districts in which the voter is eligible to cast a ballot, the voter's address and age, registration date, party identification, and many more. Most interestingly and uniquely

for this analysis, North Carolina is one of the handful of states that also collects data on a voter's self-identified race.

#### **4.2 The Voter History File**

As rare are the states that do collect data about self-identified race, states' publicly available voter history files are even more limited in what value they provide to researchers. For example, while the voter history file may include whether a registered voter cast a ballot in a given election or not, it will not usually include information about the method of voting (e.g.-in-person on Election Day, absentee, or early, or some other designation). Without these individual-level variables, the researcher is left only to survey data after the fact to ascertain how different citizens interacted with the voting system.

The second database used in these analyses is North Carolina's Voter History File, which contains data on every election in which a registered voter has participated since registering to vote in North Carolina. The North Carolina voter history file includes also the method of voting the voter chose to use when he cast his ballot: absentee, early, provisional, Election Day, or curbside. North Carolina's making of the voting method and race variables available publicly means that the state's databases are highly valuable for researchers on early voting.

This dataset is superior to the ones used in earlier studies because it includes the raw, state-collected data about registration and turnout without relying on survey data collected after Election Day. The analyses include regressions that estimate the effects of various variables that contribute to an individual voter's likelihood to choose early voting as her method of voting during an election cycle.

One note on the weakness of analyses based on just data related to those citizens who cast a ballot, which is what is publicly available at the individual voter level. The dataset does not contain the names of eligible citizens in Mecklenburg County who are not participating. In some of debates and lawsuits over changes to early voting, the proponents of expansive early voting are asked to prove that reductions in the practice result in lower turnout. While it is now generally accepted that early voting does not raise turnout, the data cannot capture the reasons why those nonvoters are not casting ballots and whether they would be more likely to vote with different policies with respect to early voting.

## **5. Results**

The first analyses of the combined voter registration database and voter history file are summary statistics of the Mecklenburg County, North Carolina electorate for each federal election from 2008 until 2014.

Table 1 shows a side-by-side comparison of the electorate during the past two presidential elections and the past two midterm elections. It is important to note from this side-by-side comparison of the past four federal elections that early voting is far more popular as a percentage of the total vote during presidential elections than during midterm elections. For each of these four election cycles, voters had the option to vote in-person on Election Day, absentee, or early. Yet during the highest turnout election cycle—the presidential—more of the electorate gravitated to the convenience option of early voting.

**Table 1. Summary Statistics of the Mecklenburg County (NC) Electorate, 2008-2014**

	Presidential		Midterm	
	2008	2012	2010	2014
Election Day Voting (%)	42.12	37.51	68.11	61.70
Early Voting (%)	50.83	55.59	28.89	33.74
Median Voter Age	43	44	50	51
Median Years Registered	6	8	12	12
Male (%)	42.92	42.93	44.69	43.45
Minority (%)	39.38	41.45	35.53	38.20
Registered Democrat (%)	48.40	47.64	45.89	46.57
Registered Republican (%)	28.78	27.53	34.14	29.80
Registered Independent	22.74	24.53	19.84	23.26
<i>n</i>	413,258	450,470	227,292	265,741

*Source:* North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed February 20, 2016

This finding is not surprising considering those less frequent voters motivated to cast ballots during the high publicity contests during two cycles in which North Carolina was a swing state at the presidential level. There had been warnings about the possibility of lines at Election Day polling places in 2008 and 2012, and presidential campaigns in both cycles made concerted efforts to get their voters to the polls during the early voting window so that they could focus their voter turnout resources elsewhere on Election Day.

Another finding in the summary statistics is that the median voter age in the electorate and the length of time the median voter has been registered is younger and shorter during presidential elections than during midterm elections. This finding is also not surprising as many young people register to vote shortly before a high profile presidential election than the lower profile midterms two years after.

One note on the registration date variable from which the author derived median years registered of the electorate. The public use voter file provided by North Carolina

includes one variable for registration data. The author subsequently learned that in the state's non-public statewide voter registration database to which there is no access except for official government purposes, there are two variables for voter registration: a variable for initial registration date and a separate variable for the date of the last change to one's voter registration. As such, the calculations above and below with respect to the length of time a voter has been registered to vote in the state of North Carolina are actually based on the last change to one's voter registration status. The practical effect of this slight difference in the public and nonpublic data is that, if anything, the available public data may slightly understate the length of time a voter has been registered to vote in North Carolina if the voter has moved within the state at any time since initial registration. It would be useful to study the early voting usage of voters who have moved within the state after initial registration to determine whether these more mobile voters tend to lean towards convenience voting options and away from the traditional neighborhood polling place.

Tables 2-5 show more specific information about the electorate during the 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 elections. First, in each election, the voters casting ballots during early voting skewed older than the Election Day electorate. This finding is contrary to the majority of the literature that tells us younger people are more likely to choose to vote during early voting than the overall population. The other two expected demographic profiles of early voters, however, did hold. Democrat registered voters made up a larger percentage of the early voting electorate than the overall electorate in each of the four cycles for which there are consistent data. Minority voters also outperformed the total population in early voting, especially during presidential elections.

**Table 2. Summary Statistics of the Mecklenburg County (NC) Electorate by Election Day and Early Voting, 2008**

	Overall	Election Day	Early
Median Voter Age	43	40	44
Median Years Registered	6	6	6
Male (%)	42.92	45.68	40.76
Minority (%)	39.38	31.22	49.35
Registered Democrat (%)	48.40	40.71	57.33
Registered Republican (%)	28.78	33.45	22.00
Registered Independent	22.74	25.84	20.61
<i>n</i>	413,258	174,046	210,039

*Source:* North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed February 20, 2016

**Table 3. Summary Statistics of the Mecklenburg County (NC) Electorate by Election Day and Early Voting, 2012**

	Overall	Election Day	Early
Median Voter Age	44	41	46
Median Years Registered	8	8	8
Male (%)	42.93	45.26	41.47
Minority (%)	41.45	33.55	49.62
Registered Democrat (%)	47.64	40.79	54.50
Registered Republican (%)	27.53	29.77	23.62
Registered Independent	24.53	29.44	21.63
<i>n</i>	450,470	168,964	250,413

*Source:* North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed February 20, 2016

Tables 2 and 3 show the breakdown of the electorate during presidential cycles, when voter turnout is at its highest. In both election years, minority voters constituted about 10 percentage points more of the early voting electorate than they did of the electorate as a

whole. They also represented roughly eight percentage points less of the electorate on Election Day than their proportion in the entire electorate.

Tables 4 and 5 show the summary statistics during the federal midterm elections in 2010 and 2014. In both midterm elections, the percentage of the electorate choosing early voting as its voting method was about 22 percentage points lower than during the presidential cycle immediately preceding it.

**Table 4. Summary Statistics of the Mecklenburg County (NC) Electorate by Election Day and Early Voting, 2010**

	Overall	Election Day	Early
Median Voter Age	50	47	55
Median Years Registered	12	11	14
Male (%)	44.69	44.82	44.77
Minority (%)	35.53	35.33	37.13
Registered Democrat (%)	45.89	46.27	45.90
Registered Republican (%)	34.14	32.94	36.01
Registered Independent	19.84	20.79	17.97
<i>n</i>	227,292	154,817	65,664

*Source:* North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed February 20, 2016

Far fewer voters in Mecklenburg are using early voting during these cycles. In both midterm cycles, registered Republicans are more likely to early vote than during the presidential cycles, capped off with a spike in Republican registered voters' early voting usage during the 2010 election in which Republicans nationwide rode a wave of support back into the majority in the House of Representatives. For motivated Republican voters in that cycle, the availability of early voting proved to be a more common choice for casting their ballots.

**Table 5. Summary Statistics of the Mecklenburg County (NC) Electorate by Election Day and Early Voting, 2014**

	Overall	Election Day	Early
Median Voter Age	51	48	55
Median Years Registered	12	11	14
Male (%)	43.45	43.81	43.34
Minority (%)	38.20	35.43	44.32
Registered Democrat (%)	46.57	43.71	52.80
Registered Republican (%)	29.80	31.39	25.69
Registered Independent	23.26	24.90	21.33
<i>n</i>	265,741	163,949	89,681

*Source:* North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed February 20, 2016

Between the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections, North Carolina passed sweeping election law changes that reduced the early voting window and eliminated the option for new registrants to register and early vote on the same day in an action sometimes referred to as same day registration. If early voting is a convenience voting option, same day registration during early voting is convenience on top of convenience. In one transaction a voter could add himself to the voter registration database and cast a ballot rather than taking two distinct actions happening days, or more likely months, apart.

**Table 6. Early Voting Turnout (%) by Years Registered, 2010 and 2014**

Years Registered	2010	2014
0	37.61	29.56
2	22.38	29.92
4	27.04	32.68
6	24.18	30.45
8	27.97	33.33

*Source:* North Carolina State Board of Elections, accessed February 20, 2016

Table 6 shows the breakdown of early voting turnout by number of years registered. In 2010, voters were able to register and vote during early voting. In a year when roughly 29 percent of the electorate voted early, new registrants—indicated in the database with a “0” for years registered, cast early ballots at a rate nearly 9 percentage points higher than average. Conversely, in 2014, when the early voting rate across the entire electorate was almost 34%, voters who registered during the election year cast early ballots at the lowest rate of voters in their first eight years of registration. Policymakers had eliminated the double incentive and convenience of simultaneous voter registration and early voting, which resulted in a marked decrease in the use of the convenience method by new voters.

In the regressions shown on the following page, the outcome variable “early voting” is regressed on key variables associated with early voting. It is clear from the summary statistics that some of the commonly accepted perceptions of early voting do not hold for Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. In fact, the Mecklenburg early voters are older than the whole electorate, though, they do tend to be more heavily minority and Democrat-registered voters, as expected. Table 7 shows the coefficients of several independent variables during the 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 election cycles.

**Table 7. Who is Voting Early in Mecklenburg? OLS Regression of Key Variables.**

	Presidential		Midterm	
	2012	2008	2014	2010
Minority <sup>a</sup>	0.16880* (0.00180)	0.16897* (0.00186)	0.08366* (0.00228)	0.06897* (0.00238)
Age in 2014 <sup>b</sup>	--	--	0.00544* (0.00007)	--
Age in 2012 <sup>b</sup>	0.00314* (0.00005)	--	--	--
Age in 2010 <sup>b</sup>	--	--	--	0.00538* (0.00008)
Age in 2008 <sup>b</sup>	--	0.00334* (0.00006)	--	--
Registered Democrat	0.06991* (0.00198)	0.07206* (0.00210)	.03310* (.00248)	-0.00820* (0.00266)
Registered Republican	0.00751* (0.00211)	-0.04781* (0.00219)	-0.02121* (0.00247)	0.03950* (0.00265)
Male	-0.01407* (0.00147)	-0.02317* (0.00153)	0.00881* (0.00183)	0.00205 (0.00190)
Years Registered 2014 <sup>c</sup>	--	--	-0.001002* (0.00009)	--
Years Registered 2012 <sup>c</sup>	-0.00019* (0.00007)	--	--	--
Years Registered 2010 <sup>c</sup>	--	--	--	-0.00094* (0.00009)
Years Registered 2008 <sup>c</sup>	--	-0.00123* (0.00008)	--	--
Constant	0.31574 (0.00268)	0.29589 (0.00283)	0.03257 (0.00349)	-0.00149 (0.00383)
Number of Cases	450,290	412,656	265,727	227,170
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0493	0.0611	0.0379	0.0303

*Notes:* The outcome variable in all regressions is "early voting."

a. The minority variable is calculated by aggregating all of the non-White values in the North Carolina State Board of Elections voter database.

b. The North Carolina State Board of Elections voter database lists each voter's birth age today. The age of each voter is adjusted to the voter's age at the time of the respective election.

c. The North Carolina State Board of Elections voter database lists the data of each individual's registration. The years since that date at the time of each election is used for the respective regressions.

\* p < .05.

For all election cycles included in the analysis, self-identified minority status is the strongest predictor of whether a voter will choose to cast an early ballot. During both midterm cycles, being a self-identified minority voter is associated with a significant increase in the likelihood that a voter will choose to vote early. In 2010, a minority voter is 6.9% more likely than a White voter to choose early voting holding other variables constant. In 2014, that bias increased to 8.4% more likely that a minority voter would cast an early ballot than a White voter. During the presidential cycles, being a self-identified minority voter is an even stronger predictor of early voting. In both 2008 and 2012, a minority voter is 16.9% more likely than a White voter to choose early voting holding all other variables constant. The coefficients on minority status were all significant.

The other generally reliable predictor of early voting participation is a voter's status as a registered Democrat. In 2008, 2012, and 2014 Democrat-registration status was positively correlated with early voting participation. During the presidential cycles, Democrat-registered voters were roughly 7% more likely to choose to cast an early ballot than non-Democrat registered voters holding other variables constant. In 2014, those voters were about 3% more likely to choose to cast an early ballot. Only during the Republican wave election in 2010 were Democrat-registered voters less likely than Republican-registered voters to choose to cast an early ballot.

Interestingly, the age of a voter and the number of years a voter is registered are not large factors in the decision to cast an early ballot. While voters become slightly more likely to cast an early ballot with increasing age, they become slightly less likely to cast an early ballot the longer they are registered in the state of North Carolina.

## **6. Conclusion**

Early voting has, in many states, become an expected and routine part of the voting process. It is not an alternative voting method that increases overall turnout relative to election processes without early voting. However, for a certain subset of voters, namely self-identified minority voters, it is a voting method that they rely on more heavily than non-minority voters. The reasons for the bias in favor of early voting for self-identified minority voters are many and largely unimportant to the policymaking process. Whether these voters rely on early voting in order to better accommodate work schedules or whether past experience at their neighborhood polling places on Election Day has led them to believe that the lines will be prohibitively long at the polls, what is clear from the data is that in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina minority voters will be disproportionately affected by the reduction or elimination of early voting windows.

The data and analysis show that changes to the early voting window have already negatively affected the proportion of minority voters who choose to use the voting method. In 2010, all voters were able to register to vote or to change their registration during early voting and then subsequently cast an early ballot. When that option was eliminated, the proportion of minority voters using early voting fell, as measured during the 2014 federal midterm election. When looking at the number of first time voters participating in the 2010 and 2014 election cycles, the percentage using early voting after the change in the same day registration process during early voting clearly diminished the convenience of the alternative voting method. Further research analyzing the change from 2012 to 2016 will be necessary after the November 2016 presidential election data are available.

There are and will always be many reasons for policymakers and legislators to change policies, procedures, and laws. It would be naïve to think that some of those considerations are not personal and political. The political system to an extent allows those participating in the electoral process to define the rules of the game. The fact remains that it will be almost impossible to eliminate all incentives for drafting the rules in such a way that they pass legal muster while maximizing the strength of one's political supporters and/or weakening one's detractors.

There are at least two ways of thinking about the government's role in the electoral process: 1) increasing the number of voters and 2) ensuring that all voters have the ability to vote. These two schools of thought are not mutually exclusive nor are they joined as necessary conditions to be used as the basis for good election administration. Once a state or county has taken steps to improve the election administration process, subsequent alterations to the law must be viewed through the same prism. Will the change increase the number of voters and/or ensure that all voters have the ability to vote? If not, policymakers and legislators must act with full knowledge and transparency about the likely impact of their actions.

Early voting was created and implemented by many jurisdictions, including those in North Carolina such as Mecklenburg County, with the thought that by increasing convenience and options to vote, the turnout will be higher. While the underlying assumptions of what the legislation would accomplish have not completely panned out, the practice is now a fundamental component of the election system where it has been used and routinized by voters. Changing the law now will, thus, have disparate impact on

the groups more predisposed to use the practice. In Mecklenburg County, the most affected group is minority voters.

While the impact of early voting reductions is clear for Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, these findings are not generalizable to counties outside of North Carolina. There are many factors unique to each state embedded in election law that impact how voters interact with the election system. They include the length of early voting windows, the existence of no excuse absentee voting, same day registration at the Election Day polls, etc. The results from this analysis could inform other counties in North Carolina that are operating under the same legal framework as Mecklenburg County.

The research and analysis leads to some practical considerations for current and future policymakers and legislators. For those who represent jurisdictions that have already established early voting as a part of the electoral process, are any cost and efficiency savings achieved by reductions in the process worth the likely disparate impact on minority voters in their jurisdictions? And in those jurisdictions considering adding early voting as an alternative voting method, policymakers and legislators should consider the length of the early voting window, whether it encompasses a same day registration component, which days of the week early voting is offered, and when the window closes with respect to Election Day. These considerations publicly debated and agreed to ahead of implementation would limit the need to make changes to the process later after voters become accustomed to the early voting rules and thereby avoiding a disparate impact on minority voters that is inevitable with later policy change.

Early voting is a popular and increasingly relevant part of the voting process. As such, it is likely to continue to expand into new jurisdictions in the short term. In the long term it is likely to be nearly universal in availability across the states. However, the practical implementation of the practice is not one-size-fits-all. Since the research shows that changes to the practice post-implementation, especially when those changes are embodied by reductions in availability, have impacts on the electorate biased against minority voters, policymakers and legislators must fully consider all aspects of the alternative voting method before initial adoption. By doing so, they will add convenience for their constituents and establish a level future playing field for all citizens who wish to participate in the electoral process.

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## **8. Author's Curriculum Vitae**

Matthew Weil is associate director of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Democracy Project. Prior to joining BPC in February 2013, he worked at the Department of the Treasury on domestic finance issues in the office of public affairs. Previously, he served as a research and policy analyst at the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, working on National Voter Registration Act regulations, drafting congressionally-mandated reports such as the biennial Election Administration and Voting Survey, and directing the Election Management Guidelines program. He also served as a staff member on the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project. Weil advised the commissioners of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration in 2013 and 2014 and assisted in writing the commission's report to the President and Vice President.

Weil graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in philosophy, politics, and economics.