
Understanding a Change in Methods of Election in

NORTH CAROLINA

The method of election in Southern states, like North Carolina, may directly impact a community's ability to elect their preferred candidate of choice. Methods of election describe the type of districts that voters use to elect members of a governing body, like at-large, residency, or single-member districts.

Historically, methods of election, in particular at-large elections, were used as a tool to undermine or suppress Black political power. Before advocating changing the method of election, it is important to examine the voting patterns and the geographical landscape in your municipality.¹

There are 3 major methods of election in North Carolina cities/counties: (1) single-member districts, (2) numbered districts, and (3) at-large.² In "single-member" districts, voters elect officials from specific districts in which only the residents of that district can vote for their district's representative. In "numbered districts," elected officials run for a particular district, but are elected by voters throughout the entire county in an "at-large" election. If a county requires elected officials to live in the numbered district that they represent, but otherwise elects them at-large, then the county utilizes a "residential district" method of election. In a pure at-large system, all of a city/county's residents vote for their elected officials (i.e. city council).

It is important to note that many counties utilize a hybrid system, where some elected officials are elected at-large, whereas other elected officials may be elected via single-member or numbered districts.

City/Municipalities

There are three ways to change methods of election within a city/municipality: (1) City Ordinance, (2) Local Legislative Act, (3) Voter Referendum.

- (1) City Ordinance: Under N.C.G.S. § 160A-102, a city council can follow set process, starting with a resolution of intent to consider an ordinance amending the charter, to effect a change in method of election. The process continues as follows:
 - a. Within 45 days of the city council passing a resolution of intent, there must be a public hearing with at least 10 days public notice.
 - b. After public hearing, the city council may adopt the ordinance within 60 days (but not earlier than next regularly scheduled meeting).
 - c. After the ordinance passes, must give public notice of the ordinance within 10 days.

¹ For more information about the differences between at-large and single-member districts visit: <https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/At-Large-Voting-Frequently-Asked-Questions-1.pdf>.

² See N.C.G.S. §§ 153A-58; 160A-101(6).

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- d. The council may, but is not required, to make any ordinance adopted effective only if approved by a vote of the people.
 - e. Voters can also call a referendum on the ordinance with 10% of registered voters or 5000 voters (whichever is less), but the referendum must be filed within 30 days of the ordinance passing.³ Once the referendum is certified, the ordinance must go to a vote before the city's voters.
- (2) Local Legislative Act: Pursuant to local act, the North Carolina General Assembly can also change the form of government in a municipality as well as the method of election, but the local act must accord with both the state and federal constitutions.⁴
- a. Example: In 2015, the North Carolina Legislature passed a local act seeking to change Greensboro's City Council structure from a hybrid system of at-large and single-member districts to purely single-member districts.
- (3) Voter Referendum: Voters can initiate a change to the method of election within the city. The threshold for a referendum is 10% of registered voters or 5,000 registered voters, whichever is less.⁵

Counties

There are two ways to change methods of election within a county: (1) Local Legislative Act, or (2) Board Resolution

- (1) Local Legislative Act: Pursuant to local act, the North Carolina General Assembly can also change the form of government in a municipality as well as the method of election, but the local act must accord with both the state and federal constitutions. See N.C. Const. art. VII, § 1.
- (2) Board of County Commissioners' Resolution: In order to alter the structure of the board, the board may adopt a resolution that must ultimately be passed by a majority of county voters via a special referendum election.⁶ N.C.G.S. § 153A-60. The resolution must (1) describe the proposed alterations, (2) detail the manner of transition. (3) define the electoral districts, and (4) call for a special referendum that is put to the voters of the county. N.C.G.S. §§153A-60, 153A-61.

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³ See N.C.G.S. 160A-103.

⁴ See N.C. Const. art. VII, § 1.

⁵ See N.C.G.S. § 160A-104.

⁶ The procedures for these special elections is set forth in N.C.G.S. § 163-287.

