



HOUSE BILL 1169: Bipartisan Elections Act of 2020.

2019-2020 General Assembly

Committee:		Date:	May 28, 2020
Introduced by:	Reps. Grange, Dahle, D. Hall, Harrison	Prepared by:	Jessica Sammons
Analysis of:	Third Edition		Staff Attorney

OVERVIEW: *House Bill 1169 would do the following:*

- *For the 2020 general election, allow for one witness for the casting of absentee ballots, provide flexibility in the filling of positions for precinct officials, provide for voter assistance by individuals working as part of multipartisan teams, and allow for completed absentee request forms to be e-mailed or faxed to county boards of elections.*
- *Require the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the State Board of Elections (State Board) to develop a program on how to safely allow multipartisan teams to assist registered voters within a congregate living situation during the 2020 elections.*
- *Require applications for absentee ballots to have a bar code allowing the county board of elections and the voter to track a voted ballot following its return to the county board.*
- *Provide an additional two weeks for county boards of elections to approve applications for absentee ballots.*
- *Clarify that voters may call the State Board or a county board of elections and request a blank absentee ballot request form be sent to the voter by mail, e-mail, or fax.*
- *Provide that the State Board or its Executive Director cannot deliver absentee ballots to a voter who did not submit a valid request form or order an election using all mail-in absentee ballots.*
- *Require the State Board to create an online portal for voters to submit online requests for absentee ballots by September 1, 2020.*
- *Create a Class I felony for any member serving on or employed by the State Board or a county board of elections to knowingly send or deliver an unrequested absentee ballot.*
- *Allow for special identification cards for nonoperators issued by the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to be renewed online.*
- *Allow for government-issued public assistance cards to be accepted for photo identification for voting identification.*
- *Appropriate funds to the State Board of Elections to respond to COVID-19.*

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CURRENT LAW & BILL ANALYSIS:

Section 1(a): G.S. 163-231 requires voters voting by absentee ballot to mark the ballot in the presence of two qualified witnesses. The two witnesses must sign and indicate their address on the absentee application and certificate.

For the 2020 general election only, Section 1(a) would allow for mail-in absentee ballots to be marked in the presence of one qualified witness. That witness would be required to sign and print his or name and address on the absentee application and certificate. The State Board may prepare applications for the container-return envelope in accordance with the requirement for only one witness.

Section 1(b): Each county board of elections must appoint one person to act as chief judge and two other persons to act as judges of election for each precinct in that county. In its discretion, each county board is authorized to appoint two or more assistants for each precinct to aid the chief judge and judges. G.S. 163-141(c) requires that, when making appointments for chief judge and judge for each precinct, residents of the precinct must be appointed to at least two of the three positions. G.S. 163-42(b) requires that, in making appointments for precinct assistants, residents of the precinct must be appointed to a majority of the positions.

For the 2020 general election only, Section 1(b) would require only one of the three positions of chief judge and judge of a precinct to be a resident of the precinct, and only one of the precinct assistants to be a resident of the precinct. All other positions may be filled by nonresidents of the precinct who meet all other qualifications.

Section 1(c): For the 2020 general election only, Section 1(c) would allow any individual working as part of a multipartisan team trained and authorized by a county board of elections team to assist any voter in completing a request form for mail-in absentee ballots or in delivering the completed request form to the county board, and may serve as a witness for the casting of absentee ballots.

Section 2(a): G.S. 163-230.2 requires that a completed written request for mail-in absentee ballots must be returned to the county board of elections by only the voter, the voter's near relative or verifiable legal guardian, or a member of a multipartisan team trained and authorized by the county board, or via the United States Postal Service or other designated delivery service.

For any election held in 2020, including June second primary elections, Section 2(a) would allow for completed written request for absentee ballots to be returned to the county board by hand-delivery, mail, e-mail, or fax by the voter, the voter's near relative or verifiable legal guardian, or a member of a multipartisan team.

Section 2(b): Would require DHSS and the State Board to develop a program on how to safely allow multipartisan teams to assist registered voters within a hospital, clinic, nursing home, assisted living, or other congregate living situations in the 2020 elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. DHHS and the State Board must jointly submit a report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on General Government, the Joint Legislative Elections Oversight Committee, and the Governor on the details of this program by August 1, 2020.

Section 2(c): Would add a definition of "multipartisan team" to G.S. 163-226.3, based on current rules adopted by the State Board, consisting of two registered voters in the county of different political parties.

Section 3: Would require the State Board to include on each container-return envelope for mail-in absentee ballots a bar code or other unique identifier allowing the voted ballot to be tracked upon return by the voter by both the county board of elections and the voter, effective for all elections held on or after September 1, 2020.

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Section 4: G.S. 163-230.1(f) requires a county board of elections to hold one or more public meetings each Tuesday at 5:00 p.m. for the purpose of acting on applications for absentee ballots, beginning on the third Tuesday before the election. At these meetings, the county board must determine whether the container-return envelope has been properly executed. If so, the county board must approve the application and allow for the envelope to be opened and the ballot to be counted at the designated time.

Section 4 would change the time period for these public meetings to be held to begin on the fifth Tuesday before the election, giving an additional two weeks for the county board to approve or disapprove the applications for absentee ballots.

Section 5: G.S. 163-230.2 requires the written request forms for mail-in absentee ballots to be available to voters at the State Board, each county board of elections, and online.

Section 5 would clarify that the request form available online and in offices is a blank request form, and would allow for a voter to call either the State Board or a county board and request that the blank request form be sent to the voter by mail, e-mail, or fax.

Section 6: Would provide that the State Board, or its Executive Director, has no authority to deliver mail-in absentee ballots to any eligible voter who did not submit a valid request form or to order an all mail-in absentee ballot election.

Section 7: Would require the State Board to establish, by September 1, 2020, a secure online portal for qualified voters to submit the request for mail-in absentee ballots. This online portal would be required to comply with the following;

- Require the voter or the voter's near relative or verifiable legal guardian to provide all information that is required for a valid written request for absentee ballots.
- Require the voter or the voter's near relative or verifiable legal guardian to submit an electronic signature.
- Be able to track the IP address of anyone who access the online portal.

The State Board would not be required to comply with initial purchase and contract requirements for establishing this online portal. This exemption would expire December 31, 2020.

Section 8: G.S. 163-237 contains various felony criminal offenses regarding absentee ballot law.

- The following violations are Class I felonies:
 - Selling or attempting to sell, or purchasing or agreeing to purchase, a completed written request, a completed application for absentee ballots, or voted absentee ballots.
 - Compensating another, or accepting compensation, based on the number of returned written requests for absentee ballots.
- The following violations are Class G felonies:
 - Attempting to vote by fraudulently signing the name of a qualified voter.
 - Intentionally failing to deliver or intentionally destroying a completed written request, completed application for absentee ballots, or voted absentee ballots.
 - Copying or otherwise retaining a request for absentee ballots, a completed application for absentee ballots, or any identifying information disclosed in a request or application, by any person other than the voter or near relative or verifiable legal guardian of that voter.

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- Stealing, releasing, or possessing the official register of mail-in requests for absentee ballots prior to the opening of the polls on election day, for any purpose other than the conduct of business at the county board.

Section 8 would create a new Class I felony for any member serving on the State Board or on any county board of elections, or an employee of the State Board or any county board, to knowingly send or deliver an absentee ballot to any person who has not validly requested an absentee ballot, effective July 1, 2020.

Section 9: Individuals may obtain a special identification card for nonoperators from the DMV which requires the same documentation of identity and residence as a NC drivers license. A special identification card expires at the same time a drivers license issued to the individual would expire, and can be renewed by the card holder at the DMV. The fee for a special identification card is waived for applicants who are at least 17 years old.

A special identification card issued by the DMV that contains a photograph of the voter and that is valid and unexpired is an acceptable form of photo identification for voting identification. (*See Background.*)

Section 9 would require the DMV to offer online renewal for special identification cards on the DMV's Web site.

Section 10: G.S. 163-166.16 contains a list of acceptable forms of photo identification for voting identification. (*See Background.*)

- Any of the following that contains a photograph of the voter and is valid and unexpired, or has been expired for one year or less:
 - NC drivers license.
 - NC special identification card or other form of non-temporary ID issued by the DMV.
 - U.S. passport.
 - NC voter photo identification card.
 - Tribal enrollment card issued by a state or federal recognized tribe.
 - Student identification card issued by a constituent institution of The University of North Carolina, a community college, or eligible private postsecondary institutions, if approved by the State Board.
 - Employee identification card issued by a state or local government entity, including a charter school, if approved by the State Board.
 - Drivers license or special identification card issued by another state, D.C., or a territory or commonwealth of the US, only if the voter's voter registration was within 90 days of the election.
- Any of the following that contain a photograph of the voter, regardless of whether the card contains an expiration or issuance date:
 - U.S. military identification card.
 - Veterans Identification Card issued by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for use at Veterans Administration medical facilities.
- For voters over the age of 65, any of the identification cards above that bear a date of expiration that was not expired on the day that the voter reached the age of 65.

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Generally, if a voter fails to present appropriate photographic identification prior to voting, that voter would be permitted to vote a provisional ballot, and provide the photographic identification prior to canvass for that ballot to be counted. Three exceptions were established, each allowing the voter to vote a provisional ballot after completing the appropriate affidavit under penalty of perjury: (i) religious objection; (ii) reasonable impediment; and (iii) natural disaster.

Voters voting mail-in absentee ballots are required to submit photo identification, or an affidavit for the lack thereof, with the returned application and voted ballot.

Section 10 would add to the list of acceptable photo identifications for voting an identification card issued by a department, agency, or entity of the federal government or NC for a government program of public assistance, whether or not the identification contains a printed expiration or issuance date.

Section 11.1: Would appropriate federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds and the required State match to the State Board for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. Of the funds appropriated, \$424,000 would be required to be used by the State Board for establishing an online portal for absentee ballot requests, and the rest would be allocated to counties according to the counties' designation as established by the NC Department of Commerce's 2020 County Tier Designations. Funds would be required to be used to address the coronavirus pandemic, including the following:

- Providing for increased postage costs for mail-in absentee ballots sent out by the county boards.
- Ensuring an adequate number of poll workers through advertising or public awareness campaigns or offering incentive compensation or other pay increases.
- Recruiting members and promoting the use of bipartisan assistance teams.

Section 11.2: Would appropriate federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) funds and the required State match to the State Board for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. The State Board would be required to reimburse counties for eligible HAVA expenses, up to \$250,000 and no less than \$10,000 in reimbursements. The State Board would also be able to use a portion of these funds for various updates and improvements. The State Board must report on expenditures to the chairs of the Joint Legislative Elections Oversight Committee and the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on General Government by August 15, 2020, and provide a follow up of additional expenditures by December 1, 2020.

Section 11.3: Would require the following:

- Counties to coordinate with local political parties to enhance or maintain the partisan balance of election day workers.
- The State Board to purchase and distribute personal protective equipment to counties.
- The State Board to provide counties with lists of example eligible expenses under HAVA and the CARES Act.
- The State Board to submit a report to the Joint Legislative Elections Oversight Committee, the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on General Government, and the Fiscal Research Division no later than February 1, 2021, on the use of the funds appropriated in Sections 11.1 through 11.3.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Except as otherwise provided, effective when it becomes law.

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BACKGROUND: On December 31, 2019, in *NAACP v. Cooper*, the federal district court issued a preliminary injunction, restraining the State Board from implementing any voter identification requirements for the March 3 primary election. On February 18, 2020, in *Holmes v. Moore*, a three-judge panel of the North Carolina Court of Appeals issued a preliminary injunction, temporarily blocking North Carolina's voter identification law from taking effect.