

Protecting the Ballot

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INTRODUCTION

As midterm elections approach, the battle over election security and voter access reaches a critical point. In 2018, North Carolina voters approved a constitutional amendment requiring photo identification to vote in person (North Carolina Require Voter Identification Amendment, 2026). This requirement was blocked until April 28, 2023, when the state Supreme Court reversed a previous ruling, leading the State Board of Elections to approve temporary implementation rules (Gannon, 2023). The rules were later expanded to require photocopies of photo ID for mail-in absentee ballots (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-166.16). On November 3, 2026, NC voters will decide on a new amendment that would mandate photo identification for all forms of voting.

The purpose behind North Carolina General Statute § 163-166.16 was to ensure that a voter presenting to vote matches official registration records, focusing on identity verification rather than confirming details like residential address (2018).



When a voter arrives at a polling location, a precinct officer checks their photo ID to confirm their identity. As outlined in the "Voter ID Requirements" infographic, there are multiple acceptable forms of identification for both in-person and mail-in voting.

For voters who do not produce acceptable photo identification, state law requires the issuance of a provisional ballot (§ 163-166.16, 2018). A

According to Democracy NC, provisional ballots allow voters whose eligibility is questioned to cast a vote, with final eligibility determined later by the local County Board of Elections (2024).

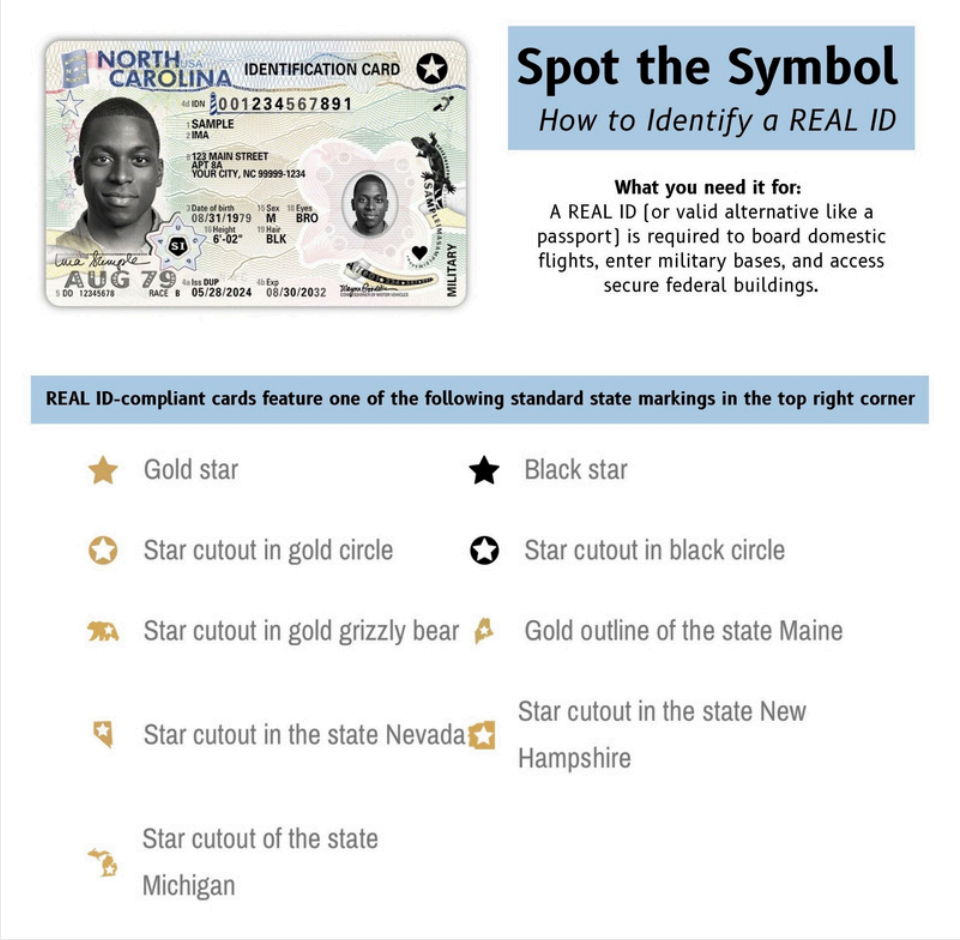
Currently, state law provides three primary exceptions to the photo identification requirement: a religious objection, a reasonable impediment, or a natural disaster (§ 163-166.16, 2018). Most exceptions follow the same procedure which is filling out an affidavit confirming the voter's identity and exception, which allows them to cast a provisional ballot. For a religious objection, the voter must belong to a religion that opposes being photographed. Reasonable impediments factors are disability, illness, missing documents, lack of transportation, work or family duties, or pending/lost IDs. Natural Disasters must be declared by the state governor or President within 100 days of Election Day. Ultimately, the County Board Review of Exceptions examines these affidavits and holds the authority to invalidate a vote if an affidavit is found to be false (2018). This policy memo examines voter photo ID legislation and offers recommendations to balance ballot security with voter access.



A REAL ID VERSUS STANDARD ID

The major difference between a REAL ID and a standard ID lies in where each card permits access. Beginning May 7, 2025, a REAL ID is required to board domestic flights, enter select federal facilities, or access military bases (Federal Protective Service, 2025). In comparison, standard IDs have more varied applications, depending on whether the card is a traditional driver's license or a student ID.

A REAL ID distinguishes itself from standard forms of identification by featuring a specific compliance symbol in the top right corner (REAL ID | Transportation Security Administration, 2025).



These approved symbols vary by issuing state, as illustrated in the infographic labeled "Spot the Symbol: How to Identify REAL ID."

Throughout North Carolina, many citizens are unsure whether their identification card must be a REAL ID to vote. Currently, there is no requirement to present a REAL ID at the polls. While North Carolina enforces voter ID regulations, voters who do not present an acceptable photo ID can still vote by casting a provisional ballot and completing a Photo ID Exception Form (§ 163-166.16, 2018).

Under North Carolina General Statutes § 163-166.16, exceptions may be granted for reasons such as a reasonable impediment, a religious objection to being photographed, or being the victim of a natural disaster (2018).

ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS OF VOTER ID

Although North Carolina has reduced many of the direct financial barriers associated with obtaining voter identification by offering free voter photo ID cards, several administrative challenges remain. For eligible voters facing transportation difficulties, limited mobility, or scheduling conflicts, accessing these services may still present significant obstacle.

While exceptions can be granted, many voters still face administrative barriers while obtaining their voter IDs. Nearly 29 million U.S. adults nationally lack a valid Driver's License, with over 1 million without a non-expired government Photo ID in their possession (Study With Voting Rights Organization Shows Young People, People of Color Less Likely to Have Valid Photo Identification, 2023). Those without a Driver's License say that they are unable to acquire one due to bureaucratic and economic constraints (RESEARCH: Is It Hard to Get an ID? Yes, It Can Be., n.d.). In fact, these individuals are more likely to be senior citizens, people of color, people with disabilities, low-income voters, and students (Voter ID, n.d.).



The process to obtain an eligible voter photo ID can be arduous for some Americans who lack the proper financial resources. Most states accept driver's licenses and standard IDs as a form of identification— both of which require visiting a DMV and purchasing a copy of these identification cards.
Purchasing a driver's license or a standard ID itself may also be difficult for low-income Americans. For example, a North Carolina Class C license particularly costs $52.00 for adults ages 18–66.

For those above 66 years old, a Class C license would cost $32.50. Although these prices vary among states, the cost remains within the range of $15 to $89 without additional fees (Driver’s License Costs by State, 2018, n.d.). Individuals must also present proof of documentation, which can vary from a social security card, a U.S. passport, or a birth certificate (Proving Age & Identity, n.d.). 1 in 10 adult American citizens do not have easy access to citizenship documents, meaning that the process to obtain such documentation can be quite costly.



For example, a North Carolina resident must pay $24 to gain another copy of their birth certificate (NC Vital Records: Fees and Payment, 2026). Supplementary fees are added for additional services or if they are ordering through a third-party platform. In addition, a U.S. passport can cost up to $165 for a first-time purchase, including a $130 application fee and $35 execution fee (US Passport: How Much It Costs and How Long It Takes, 2026).

The limited availability of ID services also presents another barrier to obtaining a voter photo ID. Government offices and agencies, such as the DMV, have limited opening hours. North Carolina's DMV (NCDMV) offices only operate during regular business hours (8 AM–5 PM), which leaves no availability in the evenings and weekends. As such, Americans with working hours from 9–5 are left with no time to visit the DMV.

Additionally, DMV agencies have been known for their long wait times. According to the Movement Advancement Project, the DMV's wait times have historically been an obstacle for individuals looking to obtain proper photo identification (The ID Divide: How Barriers to ID Impact Different Communities and Affect Us All, n.d.). Individuals may have to wait up to three hours in a DMV (Stradling, 2025). The NCDMV specifically addresses this barrier on their website, offering different ways for customers to streamline their DMV visit, such as pre-made appointments and an online status tracking system (NCDMV Launches Estimated Wait Times and Capacity Information on Website for Driver License Offices, 2026).

The Movement Advancement Project also lists transportation as a key barrier to obtaining photo identification. Americans who don't possess a driver's license must use public transportation or find a different means of transportation to an ID agency. For those who use public transportation, they may have to spend more time in transit, further extending their wait time for an ID.

In particular, the administrative barriers derived from obtaining an acceptable form of photo identification affects many American communities. LGBTQIA+ communities, immigrants, formerly incarcerated individuals, and low-income citizens are more likely to face the repercussions of acquiring voter IDs.

VALIDITY & ENFORCEMENT

When researching the validity of IDs for voting purposes, the question arises as to what type of non-driver ID is most common. While there is no definite answer, as the type of ID shown at the polls isn't recorded, research sheds light on the approval process for student IDs.



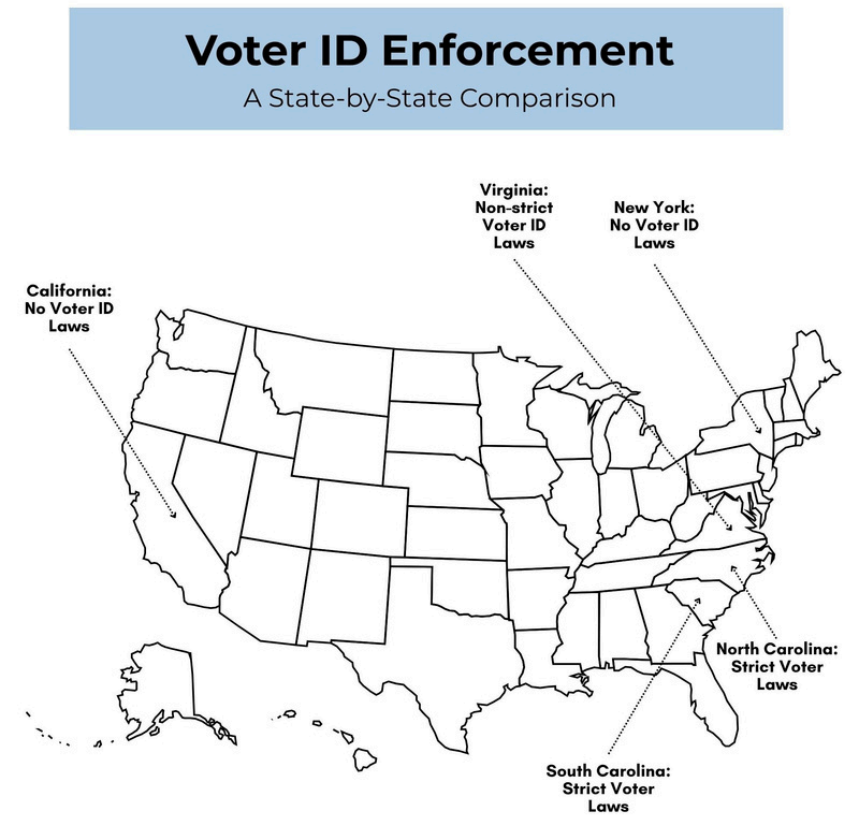
According to Campus Vote Project, student IDs are not automatically accepted, as educational institutions must submit an application to the State Board of Elections every few years (SBOE, 2024). To be approved, student IDs must include a clear photo and must not be expired (Castillo, 2024; State Board Approves Student and Public Employee ID Cards for Use in Upcoming Elections, 2023).

In comparison, standard state identification forms such as North Carolina driver's licenses, NCDMV non-operator IDs, and U.S. passports are automatically valid statewide by default without needing individual approval from the State Board of Elections. However, these standard forms of identification must meet specific expiration criteria: they must be current and unexpired or expired for one year or less (North Carolina State Board of Elections, n.d.).

When arriving at the polls, voters present their photo identification to precinct poll workers, who manage the verification process locally. However, policy enforcement for federal identification and travel standards falls under the jurisdiction of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (Identification, 2018; Federal Protective Service, 2025).

COMPARING NEIGHBORING AND DISTANT STATES

A close examination of North Carolina's neighboring and distant states were necessary to better understand it’s voter photo identification policies. These states included Virginia, South Carolina, California, and New York.



VIRGINIA

Virginia takes a different approach toward voters' photo identification. Unlike other states, registered voters in Virginia are not required to show a form of photo ID specifically. (Understanding Acceptable ID Rules When Checking in Voters, n.d.).

Although they can still show other forms of photo IDs such as a VA DMV-issued Photo ID, VA DMV-issued Driver's License, a valid U.S. Passport, and a student ID from an in-state college or university, they can choose to present another form of identification. In fact, voters can choose to present current utility bills, bank statements, or paychecks to prove their identity. However, voters may still cast a ballot if they do not present a viable form of identification. Instead, they can sign an ID Confirmation Statement to vote normally. If they are unable to sign an ID Confirmation Statement, voters must vote a provisional ballot.

SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina mirrors many of North Carolina's voting ID policies. Voters registered in South Carolina are required to show an eligible Photo ID, such as a current South Carolina Driver's License, Department of Motor Vehicles card, or a state-issued Concealed Weapons Permit (SC VOTING INFORMATION, n.d.). If they are unable to obtain a Photo ID, voters may visit their county voter registration office or DMV to acquire a free Voter ID card. If they cannot bring a viable Photo ID to the voting sites, they may cast a provisional ballot, which only counts if they present a Photo ID to their elections office prior to the certification of the election. Similar to North Carolina, South Carolina allows individuals without a Photo ID to complete a reasonable impediment exception form. The state's reasonable impediment exceptions form factors in work schedules, lack of federal self-identifying documents, financial barriers or other unforeseen obstacles.

CALIFORNIA

Unlike in NC, voters in California are not required to present photo ID when voting in person or by mail (Voter ID in California, n.d.). Identification is only necessary if a first-time voter registered by mail and did not provide an identification number (What to Bring to Your Polling Place, 2020). On the registration form, voters can complete this requirement by providing either a California driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number.

NEW YORK

A similar approach is taken when examining New York, where registered voters are also not required to present photo identification at polling sites (Voter ID in New York, 2021). Identification is only required if a first-time voter registered by mail without supplying an approved ID number. In those cases, voters can provide a driver's license number, a non-driver's ID number, the last four digits of their Social Security number, or an alternative ID document to meet the requirement (Voter ID, n.d.). If a first-time voter does not provide ID at the polls, they are permitted to cast an affidavit ballot.

ANALYSIS

These comparisons demonstrate that other states have adopted different administrative approaches to voter identification, including alternative verification procedures and reasonable-impediment exceptions. An examination of these differences provides North Carolina policymakers with more context for evaluating how existing ID requirements can be administered while also reducing voter accessibility barriers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

MOBILE OUTREACH INITIATIVES

Although the North Carolina State Board of Elections already allows voter IDs to be issued at off-site locations (Voter Photo Identification Cards, 2023), local county board of elections offices are encouraged to expand these services through regularly scheduled mobile outreach initiatives. The primary intention of such programs is to ensure that the communities who face transportation or mobility issues gain access to the necessary resources to obtain an acceptable form of voter ID. As such, county boards of elections should prioritize visits to public libraries, senior centers, community centers, and higher education institutions. To support further implementation, the North Carolina State Board of Elections should provide additional equipment and resources should the need arise. Counties with limited staffing or operational capacity will be prioritized in such situations.

FLEXIBLE OPERATION HOURS

Additionally, county election offices should offer flexible operating hours, including evening and weekend availability. By extending their operating hours, county election offices could reduce scheduling conflicts and create more opportunities to obtain a voter ID. To ensure feasibility, the election offices should prioritize the weeks leading up to an election in order to accommodate working citizens and students who may be unable to visit election offices during standard business hours. Once voter ID services grow in demand, there will be an open on-site location for individuals to obtain photo IDs after standard hours of operation. To account for staffing and practical administrative needs, county offices will continue to operate within standard business hours during non-election periods.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

It is also vitally important to implement an educational campaign about North Carolina's voter identification policies. Although the State Board offers extensive information about various voter resources, they could more clearly distinguish the differences between an eligible voter ID and a REAL ID. Since a REAL ID is not needed to cast a vote, voter education efforts should explicitly clarify this distinction while emphasizing the various forms of eligible identification accepted at polling locations. In order to minimize further confusion among voters, public messaging should also explain the different purposes and legal requirements associated with REAL ID and voter photo IDs.

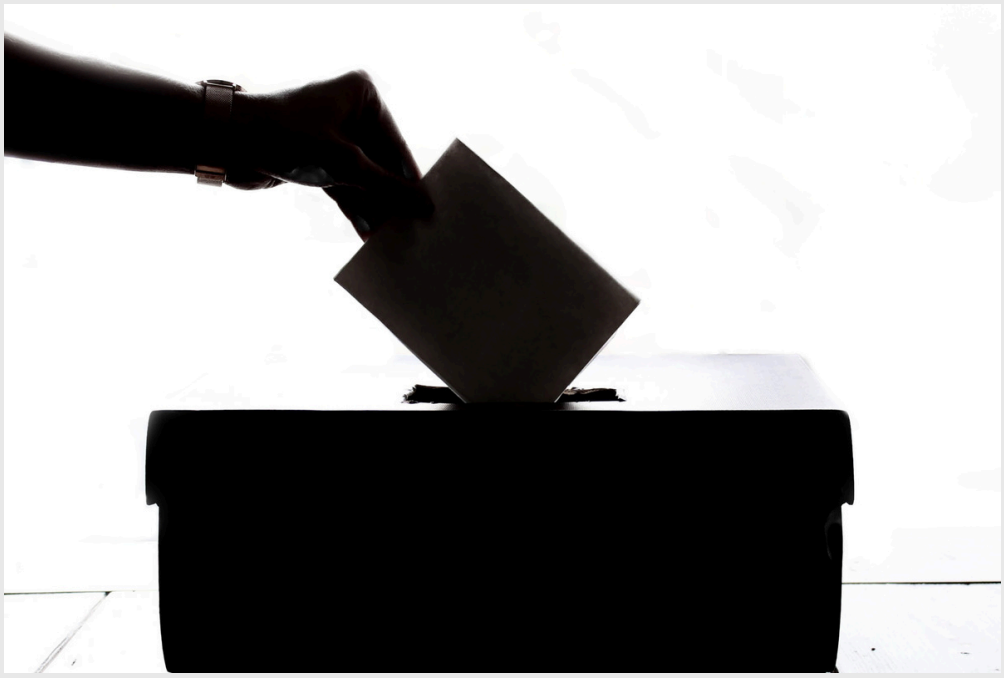
To improve public understanding of voter identification requirements, educational outreach efforts should directly prioritize engagement with eligible voters. As an initial step, informational notices detailing the distinction between REAL ID requirements and acceptable forms of voter ID should be mailed directly to registered voters. A partnership between the North Carolina State Board of Elections and the North Carolina DMV could prove to be beneficial to this initiative. This collaboration could produce a series of informational posters and infographics— all of which would be displayed in each NCDMV location, thus providing residents with a clear, accessible explanation of acceptable voter IDs. These materials would identify alternative forms of voter ID while also emphasizing that a REAL ID is not required to vote.

In addition to mailed notices and DMV educational materials, voter education efforts can be further expanded to include college outreach programs, social media campaigns, and public advertisements to reach a wider target audience.

CONCLUSION

Although North Carolina has made efforts to strengthen its election security, its evolving voter identification requirements have introduced additional complexities among eligible voters. Initial research findings suggest that there is confusion surrounding the distinction between REAL ID requirements and acceptable forms of voter ID. Studies further indicate that there are several remaining accessibility issues associated with obtaining a voter photo identification. An examination of voter identification policies in California, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia additionally illustrates the challenges states face in balancing election security with voter accessibility. Consequently, the overall recommendation encompasses the need for expanded access to ID services to accommodate individuals in unique situations, such as strict work schedules and lack of transportation. It has also grown apparent that voter education efforts must be more explicit about the different purposes associated with a REAL ID and a voter ID. By establishing more intentional and explicit education initiatives, eligible voters may soon begin to differentiate between the purposes of a REAL ID and voter ID.

In all, maintaining election security and voter accessibility should not be viewed as mutually exclusive objectives. By prioritizing community outreach and accessible voter identification services, state and local election administrators will be able to create an electoral system that fosters both security and accessibility.



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