
Coates' Canons Blog: Who We Vote For in North Carolina

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When we cast our votes in North Carolina, we elect candidates to lots of offices. With what is sometimes referred to as the “long ballot,” we vote more than 5,000 fellow citizens into office.

Who are they? For the most part, they can be almost anyone. The state's Constitution sets out a very short set of qualifications for election to office. There is one basic rule: In order to be eligible to hold an elective office in North Carolina, you must be eligible to vote for that office. That means you must be a resident of the relevant jurisdiction (the state for statewide offices, the district for district offices, the county for county offices, and the city for municipal offices) and you must not be a felon serving a current punishment. And then there's a second rule: you must be 21 years old. That's it. Those are the qualifications for almost all offices and our state's Supreme Court has made it clear that the legislature cannot add additional ones.

At the statewide level, we elect members of the Council of State and judges on our appellate courts.

Can you name the offices that make up the Council of State? First, there's the Governor. For Governor, the State Constitution adds special eligibility requirements. The Governor must be at least 30 years old and must have lived in the state for at least two years. The Governor is the first of our 5,000 elected officials. Then there's the Lt. Governor. The same special qualifications apply to that office. Number two. The other eight offices on the Council of State are Secretary of State, Auditor, Treasurer, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Attorney General, Commissioner of Agriculture, Commissioner of Labor, and Commissioner of Insurance. That's 10. For these offices there are no special eligibility criteria like minimum age, except that the Attorney General must be a lawyer licensed to practice in North Carolina.

There are seven Justices on the North Carolina Supreme Court and 15 Judges on the Court of Appeals. Now we are at 32 of the 5,000. Like the Attorney General, they must be licensed lawyers. That requirement holds for all judges at all levels, not surprisingly, but it became true only with a constitutional amendment adopted by vote of the people in 1980. Before that, we had some judges who were not lawyers.

Below the statewide level are offices elected from districts. A district may be made up of several counties, or parts of several counties, or one whole county, or maybe just part of one county. Or maybe even parts of individual counties but not all of any of them. It just depends.

The district-elected office with the most elected officials is district court judge. Around the state, we elect 270. That's 302. The judges of the district court are elected from 45 districts.

Superior court judge is another judicial district-elected office. We elect 97 superior court judges from 70 electoral districts. 399.

District attorneys are elected from districts. There are 44 DAs elected from single-member prosecutorial districts. 443. Like all judges, DAs must be licensed attorneys.

All seats in the North Carolina General Assembly are elected from single-member districts. The North Carolina House of Representatives has 120 members. That's 563. The North Carolina Senate has 50 members, also elected from single-member districts. 613. The House and Senate districts are the districts drawn after the 2010 census that have been challenged in lawsuits currently being heard in the courts.

Now, offices elected at the county level. There are 100 elected sheriffs (713), clerks of court (813), and registers of deeds

(913). In addition, each county has a board of county commissioners. By statute, the minimum number of commissioners is three, but the number varies from county to county. The total number of elected county commissioners statewide is 580. Up to 1493.

The next county-level office is the board of education. All 100 counties have elected school boards. The statute provides that each board is to be made up of five members, but in fact numerous local acts of the General Assembly provide for a range of membership. As with the board of commissioners, in some counties the school board members are all elected at large and in other counties at least some of the members are elected from districts. There are 15 so-called "city" school administrative units with their own governing boards of education ("so-called" because the boundaries of "city" school units are never the same as the boundaries of the municipality they are associated with and the municipality has nothing to do with the governance of the "city" school unit). Of these 15 city school units, three have boards that are made up of appointed members (Asheville, Lexington, and Thomasville) and the other 12 have members elected by the voters living in the boundaries of the city school unit. These 100 elected county school boards and 12 city boards together have 757 seats. That's 2,250.

At the municipal level, each town and city in North Carolina is governed by an elected city council (sometimes called the board of aldermen or board of commissioners) and a mayor. There are 553 incorporated, active municipalities in the state, more or less ("more or less" because over time some small towns cease operation, stop holding elections, and so on, while the General Assembly creates new towns by local act in just about every one of its sessions). The statute provides for a presumptive city council membership of three—plus a mayor—but in reality the vast majority of cities have larger councils than that. In most cities, the mayor is separately elected by the voters, but in a few cities the mayor is elected from within the city council membership by the council itself. Statewide, the number of elected city council members and mayors together is 3,225 (that's pretty close; the exact number may differ by a few). That's 5,475.

There is another group of 300 elected officials. The voters of each county elect three members of their soil and water conservation district board of supervisors. That office is usually the last entry on the "long ballot." 5,775

At one time, the election of coroners was common in North Carolina. Almost everywhere, the elected office of coroner has been replaced with the non-elected office of medical examiner. In eight counties of the state, though, coroners continue to be elected. 5,783.

We North Carolinians elect 5,783 of our fellow citizens to these state, district, county, and city offices. We empower them to take actions on our behalf, and we charge them with that responsibility. If we don't like what they are doing, the most practical response is to vote for someone else at the next election.

Oh, there is one more level of election—federal offices. At the federal level, we vote, of course, for President and Vice-President. For an explanation of how the presidential primary process works, [click here](#), and for the electoral college, [click here](#). We also elect two United State Senators statewide and 13 members of the United States House of Representatives, elected from 13 Congressional districts.

Have I overlooked any office? Is there one more on the ballot at your precinct? I'd love to hear from you.

Links

- www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/statutes/statutelookup.pl?statute=153A-58
- www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/statutes/statutelookup.pl?statute=115c-35
- www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/statutes/statutelookup.pl?statute=160a-66
- canons.sog.unc.edu/?p=6281
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