



North Carolina: Tens of Thousands of Deceased and Duplicative Voter Registrations Found After 2020 Election

MARCH 2022 – Time is quickly running out for North Carolina’s voter registration rolls to be checked and cleaned before the midterm elections. All eyes are on an open U.S. Senate race amid the state’s recent record of strong turnout and tight margins. This research brief outlines the vulnerabilities of North Carolina’s voter rolls, with the hope of seeing these issues resolved in the coming months, before federal laws shut the window of opportunity.

2020 Election Findings

Deceased Registrants – 7,933 North Carolinians were still registered to vote long after death in 2020. Since late 2019, PILF has tracked a sample of registrants matched against the Social Security Death Index to determine the length of time that typically elapsed between listing as deceased by the federal resource and the subsequent removal from the voter roll by the State Board of Election. In Spring 2020, roughly 12,940 deceased registrants were found (ranking the state 8th in the nation).¹



The Social Security Death Index revealed that 95 percent of the registrants passed away *before* the year 2020. Just like with duplicates, missing personal identifying information can affect a state’s ability to clean voter rolls with modern data tools.

The pictured gravestones demonstrate how long a deceased registrant can linger in North Carolina. Hoyle Helms, a World War II vet died in 1997 when Clinton was President. Following his death, he remained on the voter rolls for nearly 25 years.

He is not an outlier. Mary Coleman died in 2003 and remained active on the state’s voter rolls for nearly 2 decades.

These examples were not removed by officials until 2021, despite their deaths roughly 20 years ago.

¹ <https://publicinterestlegal.org/reports/critical-condition-american-voter-rolls-filled-with-errors-dead-voters-and-duplicate-registrations/>

Interstate Duplicate Registrations – 42,984 North Carolina voter registrants left the state and established or renewed their out-of-state voter registration before the 2020 Election. In this study, PILF utilized the U.S. Postal Service National Change of Address (NCOA) system and the organization’s national voter database to track those moving from their NC address to another state and determine if they established a subsequent registration before November 2020.

North Carolina election laws envision a wide variety of scenarios for how a citizen can maintain their residence status for voting even if they temporarily leave their primary address. However, if the citizen takes steps to vote in another state, the citizen loses NC residential status.² Within this finding, roughly 10 percent of interstate matched voter registration records indicate a relocation pattern where, for example, an original New York resident relocated to North Carolina and then removed to the original NY address again before the 2020 Election. The data are often unclear on which registration is truly older, yet the citizen in question still maintains two registrations.

Top 5 – No. of Registrants Leaving NC for...	
FL	7,577
VA	6,376
GA	5,172
TX	3,487
PA	2,823

The vast majority of this NCOA study shows that interstate duplicate residents cast ballots outside of North Carolina in 2020, accounting for roughly 87 percent. Only 8 percent of the duplicate registrants cast a ballot in NC. The remainder failed to vote in 2020.

It’s *not illegal* under state or federal law to be registered in two different places, though some states like North Carolina will consider a subsequent registration a disqualifying action. The onus is on election officials to keep track of movers when they are not forthcoming about their actions. North Carolina does not participate in any state sharing agreements or interstate compacts to track NC voters who may either move to or die in other states.

Same-Address Duplicate Registrations – 13,525 North Carolinians managed to become registered twice in North Carolina under variations of their names. North Carolina’s voter registration system, like nearly every other studied by PILF, can be tricked into registering a person multiple times with extremely similar biographical data inputs at the same addresses. These serve as an administrative challenge to be resolved as we see more automation to vote-by-mail. Otherwise, “John Public” and “John Q. Public” could each vote once, while the actual John is voting twice – a specific violation of North Carolina election law.³

PILF researchers identified multiple scenarios⁴ for how duplicates are occurring. Bear in mind, this happens when age and residential addresses perfectly match:

- John Q. Public vs. John Q. Public (no obvious error – **60% of NC finding**)
- John Q. Public vs. John Quincy Public (middle name/middle initial match – **18% of NC finding**)
- John Q. Public vs. Jon Q. Public (spelling error-first name)
- Danny Rojas vs. Danny Rohas (spelling error-last name)
- Mary Ann Smith vs. Mary Smith Thomas (maiden/married confusion – **15% of NC finding**)
- Karen Defazio vs. Karen De Fazio (spacing glitch)
- Jenny Taylor vs. Jenny Taylor-Smith (hyphenated surname)
- D’Angelo Harris vs. DAngelo Harris (punctuation in name)

² N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-57(6).

³ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 163-275(7).

⁴ All names are fictional for demonstration purposes only.

How does this happen? PILF spoke with county election officials about sampled findings to get a broader sense as to how duplicates are generated locally. Essentially, when a person engages voter registration applications via different pathways (e.g., motor vehicle offices vs. third-party voter drives) and omits personal identifying information or PII (like the optional partial Social Security number), there is a decent chance of a faulty copy being created in the process.

Administrative fixes such as these can legally occur up to the final days before the election without a federal safe harbor protection. In North Carolina, officials take all of the correct elements of a duplicate set and “merge” them into a single record. With a side-by-side review, officials can complete the cleanup immediately without the registrant’s involvement. There is essentially no risk of an eligible registrant losing their ability to vote during the process. The process is quick enough that it was even performed in real-time with PILF’s sampling in Cabarrus County. Officials disclosed that a dedicated staffer is specifically tasked with clearing duplicate registrations.

North Carolina’s Expanding Use of Mail Ballots Requires More Attention to Voter Lists

During the 2020 Presidential Election, 15 million mail ballots went unaccounted for nationwide.⁵ Another 1.1 million were returned as USPS-undeliverable. North Carolina broke its records that year, showing 2,860 undeliverables and nearly 86,000 unaccounted for ballots requested by the voters.⁶ An undeliverable ballot typically means the voter data is out of date and available tools are not being leveraged to spot the problem in advance. “Unknown” ballots are officially defined as those transmitted without tracking which never returned for counting. In other words, local authorities do not know what happened to the ballots. Put into the context of the 2020 presidential election, for almost every ballot President Donald Trump won over then candidate Joe Biden, another went to an old address or is missing.

PILF President J. Christian Adams

“North Carolina officials need to use the time they still have to prepare voter rolls for the midterm elections. Time is running out. Silly, obvious errors in the voter roll can create opportunities for voter fraud and chaos in a close election. Correcting deceased and duplicate records now will help to preemptively address those risks.”

⁵ <https://publicinterestlegal.org/featured/nearly-15-million-mail-ballots-went-unaccounted-for-in-2020-election/>

⁶ U.S. Election Assistance Commission; Election Administration and Voting Surveys for 2020.