

Lauren Rosenthal:

From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I'm Lauren Rosenthal.

Hannah McKnight:

When I was younger, like younger, too young to vote, I always thought, "Oh, why don't 18-year-olds vote? What are they doing? What's going on? I don't understand."

Lauren Rosenthal:

This is Hannah McKnight. As a Duke student, she got involved in a project that took a close look at young people and voting. Her team got their hands on a data dump of voter information from the North Carolina Board of Elections, and they called up young people who had voted, but who had trouble with their ballots. What Hannah McKnight found profoundly changed her mind about why more young people don't vote.

Hannah McKnight:

The reality that we found made more sense than the idea that young people just don't care and don't want to vote. You don't see that someone tried to, and it didn't work, and they tried again, and then it didn't work again, and then they tried again, and that third time it happened to work, but they were lucky.

Lauren Rosenthal:

The research that Hannah was part of upends a popular narrative that young people are lazy, apathetic, don't care about voting. Hannah says, for some people that couldn't be further from the truth.

(Theme Music)

In this episode of Ways & Means, as we head into the 2024 elections, why lots of North Carolina College students' votes didn't count in the last election or the time before that or the time before that. Why their votes weren't counted and how to prevent it from happening again.

Duke Sanford School of Public Policy, Professor Gunther Peck clearly remembers when he started to get concerned about something called provisional ballots. It was 2016. Donald Trump was running against Hillary Clinton to become president.

Trump campaign commercial:

Our movement is about replacing a failed and corrupt political establishment....

Clinton campaign commercial:

This is not an ordinary time, and this is not an ordinary election....

Gunther Peck:

I was driving voters to vote, and I was taking voters from the downtown bus station or around the city who needed a ride to be able to vote, and so the Central precinct was open.

Lauren Rosenthal:

The central precinct is the polling place at North Carolina Central University, a historically Black college in Durham, North Carolina,

Gunther Peck:

And I noticed pretty quickly that day that there were very, very long lines. So, the wait just got longer and longer. By the end of the day, it was four and a half hours --- hundreds of young people, first time voters had to leave and didn't vote.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Gunther heard on the news that the lines were caused in part by provisional ballots, and it made him wonder, "What's up?" Like - why were so many of this kind of ballot, provisional ballots, being cast on election day?

Gunther Peck:

I was like, "How? This makes no sense," and I started doing some research on my own. I was just curious why were so many ballots being, and it turned out that there were a lot of provisional ballots being cast at Central and an alarming number of them were being thrown out.

Lauren Rosenthal:

That's right. Certain kinds of ballots called provisional ballots were being thrown out and at high rates. In fact, in the 2016 election, three quarters of all provisional ballots cast by young voters at NCCU were rejected. Gunther wanted to find out why.

Gunther Peck:

I was determined to like - find out - what's causing this problem and what can we do, what can we learn, by studying it really at a granular level.

Lauren Rosenthal:

He assembled a student team.

Kathryn Thomas:

Hi, my name is Kathryn Thomas. I'm a senior here at Duke in the Sanford School of Public Policy.

Ameya Rao:

Hi. My name is Ameya Rao. I am a senior studying public policy.

Hannah McKnight:

My name is Hannah McKnight and I'm a Duke student who participated in this project on provisional balloting and youth voters.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Hannah, Ameya and Kathryn were part of a six-person student research team that began to dig into the data. They're all passionate about democracy. Ameya remembers getting excited about voting in high school.

Ameya Rao:

So, along with a couple other friends, we organized a voter registration drive at my high school and registered about 100 students two days before the registration deadline to vote, which was really exciting and really got me energized and excited to continue doing Get Out the Vote and Voting Rights advocacy work.

Lauren Rosenthal:

That was in 2020. Kathryn can also trace her interest to that same election actually to the very same primary.

Kathryn Thomas:

I'll always remember I walked out of the polling place, the church right by my house that I drive past every day on the way to school, walked out, had my "I voted" sticker, took a selfie with my mom, was really excited, just cast my first vote in a presidential primary.

Lauren Rosenthal:

In 2020, Kathryn and Ameya's classmate Hannah had started a nonprofit to give people rides to the polls in Durham, North Carolina.

Hannah McKnight:

I hadn't met Kathryn or Ameya yet at the time of the 2020 election because I was a little bit older than them, and I was living off campus because of COVID. But I think that's sort of where our paths became intertwined.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Now before we get into what the team uncovered, let's talk for a minute about provisional ballots themselves. They are what caused those long lines at North Carolina Central, and they are the heart of the project. I'm going to let Kathryn take this.

Kathryn Thomas:

Yeah, so a provisional ballot is when you go to vote, and you try to cast your ballot. You show up to the polling place, you say, "Hi, my name is Kathryn. I'm here to vote." And for one reason or another, your name is not on the voter rolls.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Your name is not on the voter rolls or there is another problem, maybe an issue with your voter ID. In most states in the US if you show up on election day and there's a problem, you get a provisional ballot. Here's Ameya:

Ameya Rao:

It was created to be a failsafe is the way that some academics have described it, is that if you go to vote and there's something wrong, maybe they can't find your voter registration because when you go to vote, they ask you for your name, your address, and maybe they can't find you in the book, so - but you know you're registered to vote so you're like, "I still want to cast my ballot." You'll get a provisional ballot.

Lauren Rosenthal:

So that is a provisional ballot. They are legal -- a way to deal with someone who comes in on election day and says they're registered, but there's some kind of problem. To take a close look at provisionals, the team approached the North Carolina Board of Elections and asked for voting data for recent elections going back to 2008. Pretty quickly the researchers noticed something curious with provisional ballots.

Ameya Rao:

A lot of people's voter registration or provisional ballots were rejected because of this provision in their voter registration called an undeliverable address. And so, we saw that, and we were like, "What does that mean? What is an undeliverable address?" Essentially when you register to vote, it asks some basic information, your name, your address. And you put down your address, and that's kind of a box that's marked in red. It's required an address, but there's another box to the side that says mailing address.

Lauren Rosenthal:

That box is only for people whose residential address can't receive mail. Now, think about if you're a student. There are two spots on the registration form that ask for addresses and students have a bunch of addresses to pick from. Like - consider a student who lives in a dorm, they have a dorm address and they have a mailbox address for receiving packages. They also have a third address -- technically - the address of the university itself. It's confusing, right? Well, it turns out that if you don't use the right address in the right place on your paperwork, your registration might not end up being accepted at all.

Now, Duke has poured a lot of energy and resources into educating students about which address to use. The university actually created its own voter ID, which the state has signed off on, meaning students can bring it with them to the polls. But even so, it remains a little murky.

If a Duke student wants to vote in North Carolina when asked for their residential address on the registration form, they should write either 1 Duke University West Campus or 1 Duke University East Campus on line one, depending on which side of the campus they live on and follow that up with Durham, North Carolina 27708.

But this is where the trouble for many young voters can begin. First, it's not very intuitive for all students to write 1 Duke University West Campus as their home address. They might have no idea these addresses even exist. And because this home address isn't a place students can receive mail, students have to make sure to fill in the next question on the form, the mailing address. And that step is super important because after you register to vote, the Board of Elections actually sends mail to the address you put down -- to check it. Undeliverable, undeliverable, undeliverable. The team kept seeing that again and again in the data they got from the state.

Ameya Rao:

So, this is an issue that we discovered during this project, and we were like, "What's going on? Why would you need - why do you need a mailing address in order to be registered to vote?"

Lauren Rosenthal:

Now, you might be thinking, what about people without a home at all, like people who live on the street or in encampments. There's actually a spot on the form that says "no physical address?" where you can show them on a map where you normally sleep or you can write the nearest crossroad of streets where you live. But even unhoused, people have to provide the state with some kind of mailing address and according to Ameya, that is a significant hurdle.

Ameya Rao:

There is no phrasing in the Constitution or in North Carolina legal code that says you must own a mailing address in order to successfully cast a ballot. It's not a prerequisite to having the right to vote. And people should really care that there are barriers to voting that shouldn't exist and that aren't supported by any sort of constitutionality.

Lauren Rosenthal:

As part of the study, student team member Hannah McKnight started cold calling young people whose provisional ballots had been rejected in Durham County in the 2020 election.

Hannah McKnight:

It was very – like the first five seconds of those phone calls was crucial in getting past that initial urge to hang up on a stranger who's called out of nowhere and wants to talk about the election or wants to talk about voting.

Lauren Rosenthal:

She and her teammates spoke to 32 young people and managed to get in-depth interviews with 10 of them. Many of these young voters said they had no idea they were casting a provisional ballot. Around half said they were told about it by poll workers, but none of them knew their ballots didn't count. Now, all of the voters' names have been changed for the student's privacy, but we have kept their colleges the same. So, we're going to hear now about someone we're calling Michaela. She was a student at North Carolina Central University.

Hannah McKnight:

She voted or tried to vote for the first time when she was 18 and because of an issue with her registration had to cast a provisional ballot that wasn't counted.

Lauren Rosenthal:

The issue was that an election worker misspelled Michaela's last name when putting in her voter registration. So, when she went to vote, Michaela's name wasn't on the rolls, she had to vote provisionally. Now when you vote provisionally by law, a bunch of stuff is supposed to happen, and it starts like this.

First you fill out an application and you give that along with your ballot, which is in a special sealed envelope, to the poll worker on the spot.

After the election, the county Board of Election staff is supposed to review the information you provided to figure out if you're eligible to vote. So, after the election, officials should have searched for Michaela by name and if that didn't work, they could have tried looking for her by birthdate and that would've turned up a name pretty close to hers. With some extra detective work, bam, they'd figure out that there was a typo and Michaela's issue would've been sorted out. If the process had worked, not only would Michaela's vote have counted, but her registration status would've been fixed too, and she'd have been all set for the next election.

But that's not what happened. She tried to vote again two years later, and again, her name didn't come up, so again, she cast a provisional ballot.

Hannah McKnight:

And that provisional ballot also had an issue and also prevented her from voting and so that she didn't get to vote for the first time until she was 22 years old.

Lauren Rosenthal:

22 years old. Four years after the first time she tried to vote, Michaela was finally able to cast a ballot and have it count. It wasn't for lack of trying.

Hannah McKnight:

That's right - it was her third election or third time voting, and each time it hadn't been her fault. It was like an issue with bureaucratic errors, clerical errors, them misspelling her name, which wasn't her fault at all. It was completely out of her control.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Also, each time she was given a provisional ballot, Michaela should have been given a PIN number. The PIN number along with her birthdate should have allowed her to check the status of her ballot, but either she wasn't told about this option to check herself or she didn't understand it. Researchers can't really be sure what happened. They just know the end result.

Hannah also interviewed a young man, we'll call Ben, a student at nearby Elon University. Ben clearly remembers registering to vote at age 16 using the State's pre-registration program. It's designed to get young people ready to cast a ballot when they do turn 18. He remembers the registration process because it wasn't smooth. He told Hannah, "I actually had to register multiple times because it wouldn't go through. I don't know why."

He thought his registration had finally gone through, but when he showed up to vote a couple years later in 2020 -- super proud as the only eligible voter in a family of undocumented immigrants -- he ran into trouble again. The poll worker couldn't find Ben's registration. He was still allowed to cast a ballot, but it was a provisional ballot. Until Hannah called him for this study, Ben had no idea that he had cast a provisional ballot, and he definitely didn't know his ballot ended up getting rejected. Here's Hannah.

Hannah McKnight:

So, when I talked to him after the interview ended, I offered to help him make sure that his registration was counted and to figure out exactly what was wrong with the registration. And he was super excited about that, and he was like, "Oh, yeah, they're not going to get me again. The next one's going to be good for sure."

Lauren Rosenthal:

Most of the North Carolina students the researchers talked to expressed, and I'm quoting here, "An acute frustration with the voter registration process." The researchers also found that there isn't a formal procedure in North Carolina for voters to challenge a poll worker or an election administrator to say that you think they made a mistake.

The researchers argue that provisional ballots just aren't working. They call them an empty promise to do right by young citizens.

TV news reporter:

They came in masks, they social distanced and all stood in some very long lines at early voting sites in Raleigh. (Election worker: The polls are open.) In Durham. (Chanting: Get up, get out the vote!) And down into Fayetteville....

Lauren Rosenthal:

You can imagine how a crisis like COVID-19 could make voting even more challenging, and that is exactly what happened. Heather and Andrew were college seniors in the fall of 2020. Heather at North Carolina Central University and Andrew at Duke. Both were registered to vote, and both had to move off campus on short notice when dorms closed down during the early months of the pandemic.

Heather moved from Durham to Raleigh. She was concerned she might have problems voting, so she did the right thing. She tried to vote early, which would've left more time to resolve any issues. But she still had trouble. Because she moved so quickly to a new county, she couldn't provide enough of the required documents to prove her residency. So she returned to Durham to vote using her old address. But when she mentioned her new living situation, she was given a provisional ballot, which was ultimately rejected.

Andrew stayed in Durham and sublet a room, but he lacked any proof of that new address. He told Hannah, "My name wasn't on the lease documents. It wasn't documented on paper that I lived in the building."

Andrew remembers trying to update his voter registration address. He came repeatedly to the Duke campus polling site during early voting to talk to the poll workers, but the situation was tricky. He told Hannah, "When I tried to go vote, I actually couldn't vote because they said I didn't actually have a registered address in the state of North Carolina. I mean, I had proof of my Venmo payments. I had proof – documentation -- that I was a Duke student and I still couldn't get a vote through the system."

The researchers found that more than 10,000 young voters between the ages of 18 and 29 in North Carolina cast provisional ballots in the 2020 election. Of those more than 10,000 provisional ballots, county elections boards accepted just 2,154 of them. That means for every one provisional ballot they accepted, they rejected more than three. Here's researcher Ameya Rao.

Ameya Rao:

I was – I was just – I was really - I guess I was really frustrated and upset that there are just so many people who are so excited to vote and it's really disheartening to know that people can try so hard, so many times, and still have their ballot rejected. And I was really horrified at the thought that these people probably also thought that they successfully cast a ballot and they had no idea that they were disenfranchised. And I was pretty shocked and pretty upset with finding more than one instance of this in our voter registration file.

Lauren Rosenthal:

The issue is especially acute for young voters of color.

Ameya Rao:

So, in reality, younger people, younger people of color and young people in Durham County are significantly more likely to get given in provisional ballot and have their provisional ballot rejected.

Lauren Rosenthal:

We've mentioned North Carolina Central University a few times in this episode. That's a historically Black college here in North Carolina. Tiffany Crawford is a master of public administration student at NCCU.

Tiffany Crawford:

Campuses are their own community. They have their own zip code in a lot of cases, so they have their own post office, and they function as a little town to where if you stay on a campus, then the address you use for campus should allow you to already be eligible to vote, and it shouldn't have to be some off-the-wall address. You should be able to use your school address and that be enough to count you as voting.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Tiffany is passionate about voting. As part of her church bible study, she helps young people get registered.

Tiffany Crawford:

There are people in our group that are young, that are just coming out of college or they're in college, and we also have a college group specifically -- and I help them register to vote, tell them the importance of voting, and answer any questions they may have.

Lauren Rosenthal:

So, Tiffany is plugged into North Carolina Central and voting. She's voted before at the large polling place on her campus - the one where Professor Gunther Peck saw those really long lines. We asked her to guess how many provisional ballots that were cast on NCCU's campus in 2020 got rejected.



Tiffany Crawford:

Oh wow. Maybe one out of five, one out of six, maybe?

Lauren Rosenthal:

Even that sounds pretty high, but the reality was worse. The research team found that in 2020, nearly every provisional ballot cast by young voters at NCCU's precinct on election day got rejected. Of the 67 votes cast, only one was fully counted, two were partially counted and 64 were rejected.

Tiffany Crawford:

Really? That is crazy.

Gunther Peck:

That is not a system that's working the way it should.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Duke Professor Gunther Peck again.

Gunther Peck:

I think the reason it's particularly egregious -- every single NC Central student we talked to who'd cast a provisional ballot, not one of them knew that they had cast a provisional ballot and it wasn't their fault. Because they hadn't been informed by the worker. And unless they were really attentive -- I mean how many Duke students go and check their voter history?

Lauren Rosenthal:

This isn't just an isolated issue with voters at North Carolina Central University, it's statewide. In general, young voters were 14 times more likely to cast a provisional ballot than a voter older than 65. When you drill down to age and race, the differences really add up. The researchers found that since 2008, a young Black voter in North Carolina was more than 23 times more likely to cast a provisional ballot than a white adult voter. In Durham County where NCCU is located, the gap gets even wider. A young Black voter there was more than 25 times more likely than an older white person to cast a provisional ballot in the last four elections.

Gunther Peck:

We describe that as a great example of systemic racism. It's not intentional, but the impacts are differential, and so that - that's what you have to look at - it's just the impact. Who is suffering from the way a law or a policy is working? And in this case, young Black voters are the least likely to have their votes counted if they cast a provisional ballot.

Lauren Rosenthal:

The researchers say that young voters at NCCU have problems that are really typical and common among student voters. Like most college students, NCCU students move frequently, changing their addresses. However, they also point to something else: an information void. Duke, a private university, funds significant education initiatives to help its students learn about voting. It's not as easy to find information about how to vote at NCCU, especially, the researchers note, since the Republican-led

North Carolina State Legislature removed funding for a nonpartisan civic engagement center at NCCU. The researchers say that has quote, "Hampered the ability of both faculty and concerned students to inform the larger NCCU student body about voter registration challenges on election day."

This issue with provisional ballots is not just confined to North Carolina. According to a federal study, looking back at election administration in 2020, more than 1.3 million provisional ballots were cast and 21.3% were outright rejected. In some cases, the ballots only got partially counted, meaning not everything on the ballot went through because the voter didn't cast their vote in the right precinct. It's just another way things can get complicated in this modern election system.

Gunther Peck says that to him, one solution to make more votes count is an easy one. Automatic voter registration.

Gunther Peck:

To me, the -- if you pay taxes, you should have an automatic opportunity to vote. You shouldn't have to go anywhere. You shouldn't have to have a car. You should just be able to -- if you pay taxes, you should be able to vote. That is what created this country. No taxation without representation. Make that policy.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Another approach is to allow voters to register on election day. Idaho allows that. It means there's no need for provisional ballots at all.

In their report, the researchers give several other short-term solutions too. They argue that in North Carolina, the most efficient and reliable solution is something that sounds kind of easy. College administrators already share lists of eligible students with local county Boards of Elections. Election officials should be able to use those lists as proof of residency.

The researchers also recommend educating parents. Parents sometimes don't want their college-age kids to register to vote where they go to school because they're concerned about financial effects, like somehow messing up their kids' tuition or taxes. But that's not actually the case, according to the researchers.

To make things easier on everyone, they have one last recommendation that universities should hire full-time staff members and train students to provide accurate information about the voting process to the university community.

In short, colleges and universities should use their own considerable powers to make change. It can have a big impact. The youth vote is powerful.

Anchor Katie Couric:

This is a CBS News special report. I am Katie Couric at CBS News Election Headquarters in New York, and we have breaking news, momentous news really. CBS projects that Senator Barack Obama of Illinois will be the next President of the United States.

CBS reporter outside: It is very, very loud here, Katie, the crowd just erupted. You can still hear them yelling when Barack Obama was announced as the president. You in New York have been talking about the youth vote, this place is full of young people. (fades)

Lauren Rosenthal:

In 2008, Barack Obama carried North Carolina by fewer than 14,000 votes. And Gunther Peck says Obama eked out that victory for one reason only: the youth vote.

Gunther Peck:

He won every single cohort of young people. It was a youth wave, the biggest by far in the country. And then-candidate Obama won one age group in North Carolina: 18 to 29s. He lost everyone else, and he flipped the whole state.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Now, after listening to all this, you might think that the student researchers on this project would be disillusioned. The team spent two years digging into data, talking with young people whose votes hadn't counted. But Hannah McKnight, the researcher who conducted many of the interviews for the project, is far from disillusioned. She sees it as a challenge.

Hannah McKnight:

I think this more than anything, reinforced the perspective I have that democracy is an ever evolving, ever changing, ever challenging project, that as we grow up, we become a part of and we -- becomes more our responsibility to work on it and be a part of hopefully making it better and making it more functional and making it include more people. And we're not nearly there yet, but that's no reason to give up. It's more reason to work on it. More reason to keep trying.

Lauren Rosenthal:

Kathryn Thomas agrees.

Kathryn Thomas:

I believe in the strength of North Carolinians to fight for their institutions and fight for the sanctity of their democracy. I don't think it'll be fixed by tomorrow. I don't think it'll be fixed by this November, but I think with time and with continued care and passion from folks within all aspects of the institution, whether it's legislative, executive, the courts, advocacy work, these problems can be addressed and fixed, and the policy process is never quick. So I think - I think I still have faith that the systems can work. They just need people pushing them in the right direction.

Lauren Rosenthal:

We recorded interviews for this podcast the week of the 2024 primaries in North Carolina. As we are putting this episode together, months later, some news. One of our student researchers, Ameya Rao, had to use a provisional ballot to vote in the primary because North Carolina's new voter ID law changed the proof of residency requirements for students who attend private institutions. Ameya had a North Carolina driver's license, but it didn't show her current college address and her student ID was rejected

as insufficient, despite the information shared by the Board of Elections and her university. She just discovered, you guessed it, her provisional ballot was rejected.

(Theme Music)

The research we've been talking about today has been published in the Rutgers University Law Review. We'll have a link on our website, [waysandmeansshow.org](http://waysandmeansshow.org). Thanks to all of the Duke students for their work on the project. Ameya Rao, Kathryn Thomas, Delaney Eisen, Miles King, Hannah McKnight, and Luhan Yao, along with Sanford School of Public Policy Professor Gunther Peck.

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson and Allison Jones. Thanks to Kirsten Khire and Duke students, AnNika Aristimuno, Joy Liu and Quincy Foster for help with this episode. Also, special thanks to Chris Paul at North Carolina Central University. Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans. And I'm Lauren Rosenthal. Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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