

# Here's every step in NC's absentee process, from requesting your ballot to counting votes

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## RALEIGH

Absentee voting has been a feature of North Carolina elections for decades. This year, however, it may be even more important as voters displaced or otherwise affected by Hurricane Helene seek to cast their ballot amid the destruction.

In recent years (and especially in the last few weeks since Helene hit), misinformation has spread about the safety and integrity of absentee voting.

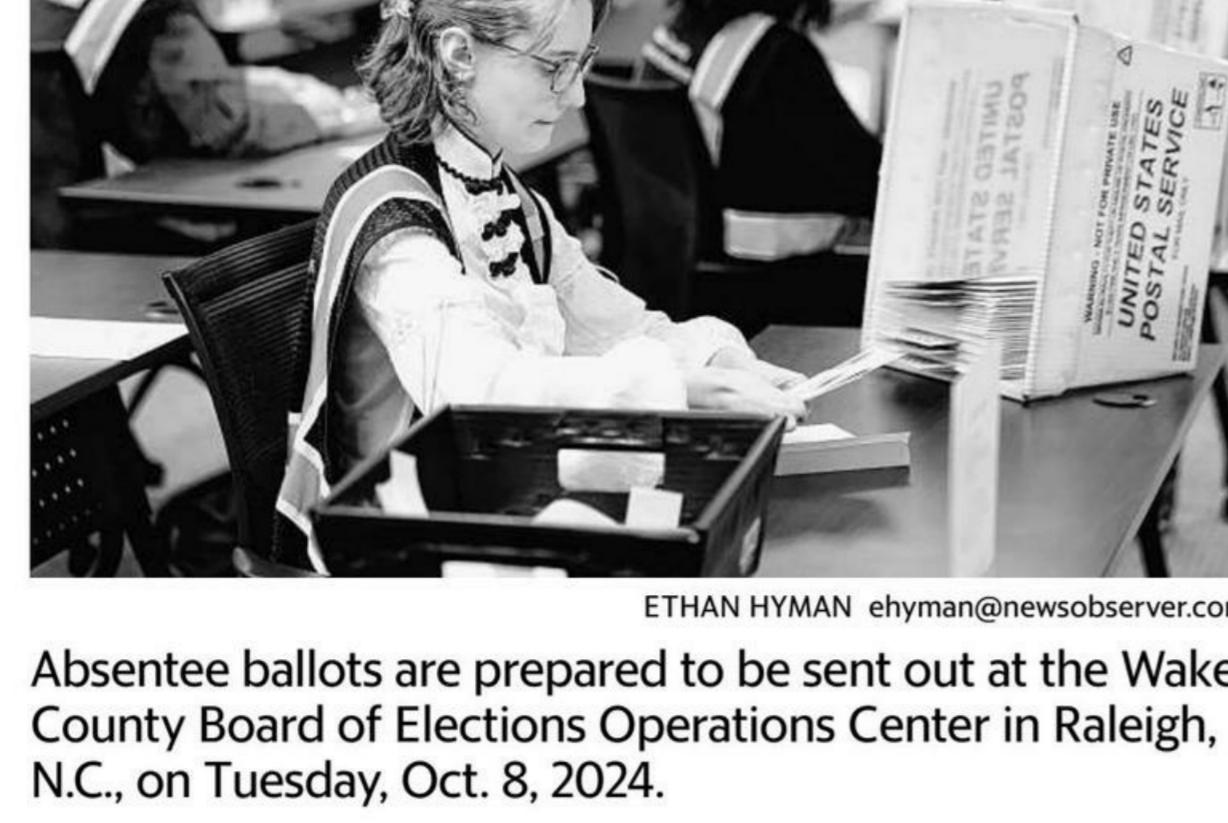
To get a closer look at the process, The News & Observer watched the absentee ballot mailing and receipt process at the Wake County Board of Elections office on Oct. 8.

While processes can vary slightly between counties, state law broadly requires that all absentee ballots be dealt with the same way throughout the state.

Here's every step of the absentee process, from requesting the ballot, to having your vote counted on Election Day.

## 1. VOTER REQUESTS AN ABSENTEE BALLOT

Absentee ballots are only sent to registered

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Absentee ballots are prepared to be sent out at the Wake County Board of Elections Operations Center in Raleigh, N.C., on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2024.

voters in North Carolina who request them.

Some states, like California, automatically send absentee ballots in the mail to all registered voters. Here, however, voters must request an absentee ballot through the state's online request form or by filling out an official paper request form.

Voters requesting an absentee ballot must sign their request and include their date of birth and either a driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number.

Election workers will check and validate a voter's registration before mailing them an absentee ballot.

A voter's near relative

or legal guardian may also submit the request on the voter's behalf.

## 2. POLL WORKERS PACK AND MAIL ENVELOPE

Poll workers pack envelopes to send to voters containing their ballot and instructions on how to fill it out.

Using a voter's address, poll workers determine which of the over 2,300 ballot styles they will use to vote.

Each packet includes a container envelope which voters will use to include their ballot and a photocopy of their ID. If voters don't have an ID, they can fill out an ID exception form, which is also included in the packet.

The completed packets are then mailed to voters across the state.

## 3. VOTER FILLS OUT ABSENTEE BALLOT

Once they receive their absentee ballot in the mail, a voter marks their preferences just as they would if they were voting in-person.

However, state law requires absentee voters to have two witnesses or a notary present when they fill out their ballot. Those witnesses will also need to sign the envelope.

As mentioned earlier, voters will also need to include a photocopy of an acceptable form of voter ID in their ballot envelope or fill out an ID exception form.

## 4. VOTER DELIVERS ABSENTEE BALLOT TO COUNTY ELECTIONS BOARD

Voters using an absentee ballot can either deliver it by mail or in-person at their county board of elections office.

All absentee ballots must be received by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day, Nov. 5. State election officials recommend sending absentee ballots at least a week before the deadline to ensure the postal service delivers them in time.

Voters from the 25 counties in the federally declared disaster area from Hurricane Helene can deliver their absentee ballots to any county board of election office in the state — not just the one in their home county.

All voters who vote absentee can track their ballot using an online service called BallotTrax.

## 5. ELECTION WORKERS CONDUCT INITIAL AUDIT OF ABSENTEE BALLOTS

Once ballots are received, election workers check for any immediate deficiencies in the envelope. If there are any rips, signs of tampering or loose or unsealed ballots in the envelope, staff can present the packet to the county board for inspection.

Correctly returned envelopes are then checked for ID documentation. If none is provided, staff will reach out to the voter to request more information.

Staff also check that voters have signed their container envelope and included two witnesses or a notary. If any of that information is missing or filled out in the wrong section, it would be presented to the board.

If the voter's signature is the only thing missing, staff can send a cure certification letter to the voter and present that ballot to the board once they receive the completed letter.

## 6. BIPARTISAN COUNTY BOARD MEMBERS CHECK AND APPROVE ABSENTEE BALLOTS

After the staff audit, bipartisan county board of election members check and approve absentee ballots at weekly public meetings.

County boards of elections are currently structured to have three Democrats and two Republicans.

Individual board members check once again that each ballot includes an ID, signature and witness.

All voters who vote absentee can track their ballot using an online service called BallotTrax.

For example, any voter

who completed an ID exception form will have their ballot considered by the full board. Those ballots can only be rejected if the board unanimously decides that the voter provided false information on the form.

## 7. ELECTION WORKERS OPEN ENVELOPES AND PREPARE BALLOTS FOR PROCESSING

The approved ballots are taken to election workers, who unseal the container envelopes and straighten the ballots so they can be

entered into the counting machine.

## 8. BIPARTISAN BOARD MEMBERS DELIVER BALLOTS TO COUNTING MACHINE

Board members from each party then deliver the ballots to a high-speed counter, where they are scanned.

However, votes are not actually tabulated until Election Day.

## 9. BALLOTS ARE SEALED IN BOXES

The voted ballots are sealed in boxes, with seals signed by each board member. Those boxes are then stored in a ballot cage, which is under 24-hour video surveillance and requires employee badge access and an alarm code.

## 10. REPORTS ARE TABULATED AND REPORTED ON ELECTION DAY

The county board will meet at 5 p.m. on Election Day, where it will tabulate the absentee votes. Those results will then be uploaded at 7:30 p.m. on the State Board of Elections' website.

## 'Over the top' ad features a fake Mark Robinson. What to know about AI in political ads

BY CAITLYN YAEDE,  
CORRESPONDENT

An advertisement featuring artificially generated video and audio of the Republican nominee for North Carolina governor could be a sign of what's to come in political attacks.

We spoke to experts about the use of artificial intelligence in campaigns and how voters can tell when they're seeing AI.

The ad begins with a disclaimer that artificial intelligence was used, but the statements are parodies of comments made by Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson. An AI-generated Robinson, with extra fingers on each hand, appears sharing conspiracy theories in front of a crowd wielding guns and flags.

The minute-long video launched on Sept. 24 and is expected to reach millions across cable networks and social media.

It was launched by Americans for Prosatropy, the Super PAC behind parody campaigns like "Mark Rottenson for N.C." The committee's founder, Todd Stiebel, said his goal was to be humorous while crossing political boundaries. The ad was also intended to respond to pushback on his parody content.

"The ad not only mocks Mark Robinson but also mocks the entire kind of criticism that was waged against us about people claiming that our stuff was deceptive when it was over the top — not deceptive," he said.

The video was generated by a graphic designer

with no previous experience using AI software, according to Stiebel. "We wanted to lean into the absurdity of how AI screws things up, like the number of fingers and the wacky things that it does," he said.

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN POLITICAL MESSAGING

Josephine Lukito, an assistant professor of journalism and media at the University of Texas at Austin, said it's not uncommon to see AI used against political candidates and parties internationally.

"But increasingly, and especially in the United States, we're seeing it by third parties and other groups for either financial reasons or to make fun of political candidates," she said. "We've definitely seen a marked rise in the use of artificial intelligence for political conversations broadly."

Zelly Martin is a senior research fellow at the Center for Media Engagement at UT-Austin investigating how generative AI is used in the upcoming elections. (The Center for Media Engagement helps fund The News & Observer's election fact-checking articles, like this one.)

Martin said the ad against Robinson is not the only prominent example of AI in politics — she noted examples of presidential candidate Donald Trump sharing artificially generated images of opponent Kamala Harris and Taylor Swift.

## HOW TO DETECT ARTIFICIALLY GENERATED CONTENT

Artificial intelligence is constantly evolving and can vary in quality. Experts in the field provided guidance on how to better detect artificially generated content.

Shomir Wilson, an associate professor at Pennsylvania State University, studies a branch of AI called natural language processing and says few tools can accurately detect AI-generated text.

Popular software like GPTZero, he said, only gives a probability that content is artificial.

When it comes to detecting artificially generated audio, Lukito says you might notice AI's monotone tone and unnatural pauses.

Incorrect or unclear details can be evidence of AI-generated photos or videos. Martin said you can take notice of vague backgrounds with no identifiable markers. The edges of people and images, patterns, text and human hands can be inconsistent.

"What I would say is the most important thing to remember is that the same tips and tricks we used for previous media literacy and identifying disinformation can still be used here," Martin said.

She advised caution when watching or reading content that invokes strong emotions.

"If I see something that makes me feel really angry or very validated or really sad or extremely emotional in any way, I always check that piece of content against another news source," Martin said.

Wilson added that it is increasingly important to use critical thinking as AI-generated content gets more difficult to detect.

Despite facing online criticism of the advertisement, Stiebel defends his use of artificial intelligence against Mark Robinson. "AI is just the latest tool for people to utilize for marketing," he said.

"Any new technology has the potential to be used for good or ill."

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Property owner David Smyrl and his friend Derrick Greene use a tractor to navigate the devastated Green River Cove on Monday, October 7, 2024, near Saluda, N.C. Flooding from Hurricane Helene destroyed numerous homes and the road in the popular white water recreational area.

the first bill that the second bill is likely to be funded from the Savings Reserve, too. He noted that the state also has about \$700 million in a disaster response fund.

He said that in determining how much to fund, they want to make sure the state can get a match from FEMA so the state pays 10% to the federal government's 90% in relief.

## WHAT THEY'RE WAITING FOR

Leaders didn't want to wait until an already scheduled November session to pass more relief.

"Whatever information we have, we have, and we'll act on it," Moore said.

"It's a new territory here," he said.

Berger said that between now and the Oct. 24 session, "we're going to be collecting suggestions from folks. There are some things that are out there that will not be reimbursed by FEMA. I think we're going to start getting some information about those sorts of things, and what we will need to do in terms of the state funding and state response."

Berger said after 2018's Hurricane Florence, lawmakers came in and quickly appropriated money, then came back a month later with the "main appropriation." He said he didn't think the legislature would be ready for that in October.

Berger said lawmakers will need more advance notice, so it would be more likely for a larger bill to pass during the session that begins Nov. 19.

"I've encouraged the members of the Senate, and I would encourage — we're reaching out to the executive branch as well — to get us your list, so that we have time to scrub the list, to make sure that it's something that we can build support for," Berger said.

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## APPLY TO THE NC GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR RELIEF

People in Western North Carolina can share

their needs directly with the General Assembly. The legislative website has a form you can fill out at ncleg.gov/form/helenerelief that asks for what kinds of needs are being requested, what county you live in and which lawmaker represents you.

## BILLIONS IN THE STATE'S RAINY DAY FUND

The rainy day fund, or Savings Reserve Fund, had \$4.75 billion in it before the Disaster Recovery Act became law on Thursday.

Lawmakers are already planning for the next round of relief. Senate leader Phil Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore announced Wednesday that the legislature would be back again soon — Oct. 24 — to pass another bill.

What will that look like?

They are still figuring it out. Here's what we know about where things stand and how you can contact the General Assembly about needs for Helene-devastated areas.

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