

Can you wear political attire to vote at the polls in NC? What election officials say

BY EVAN MOORE
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Early voting has finally arrived in North Carolina, with millions of voters expected to cast their ballots before the Election Day on Tuesday, Nov. 5. As political hopefuls battle it out, some voters may be inclined to show support by wearing buttons, hats, shirts or other garb with the name of a candidate while at the

polls. But is that practice really allowed? We asked an election official to explain.

CAN YOU WEAR POLITICAL ATTIRE TO THE POLLS IN NC?
Yes, voters are allowed to vote at their polling place while wearing political clothing and accessories, as long as they **do not linger, do not speak to anyone and vote in a timely manner**, according to Kristin Mavromatis,

the public information manager at the Mecklenburg County Board of Elections. “Anyone’s allowed to wear whatever they want to vote,” Mavromatis previously told The Charlotte Observer. “But, if you wear it, you have to walk in, vote, and leave.” North Carolina law says “no person or group shall hinder access, harass others, distribute campaign literature, place politics ad or solicit

votes,” but this rule doesn’t stop voters from wearing clothing that simply states a candidate’s name, The News & Observer previously reported. Voters run into trouble when their political garb attempts to convince others at the polls to vote for their candidate, with phrases like “Vote for.” That’s when the items you wear could become **electioneering**.

WHAT IS ELECTIONEERING?
State law refers to electioneering as any broadcast, cable or satellite communication, mailing or phone call that **mentions a clearly identified candidate** for elected office and is transmitted to the masses. Poll workers, who are prohibited from wearing political paraphernalia, **may ask voters to cover up their shirts and remove caps while they vote**. It is fair game to wear what you want outside voting facilities, Mavromatis told the Observer. Though attire with a political party or candidates’ names is legal at the polls, wearing shirts, hats or buttons that contain a **call to action (such as “vote for”)** for your candidate and even **verbally encouraging**

others to vote for a specific person are all examples of electioneering at the polls, too. When asked about electioneering enforcement, Mavromatis told the Observer that deciding to wear political items is a “First Amendment right” for voters but could be problematic depending on the circumstance. For example, a voter wearing a shirt with Vice President and Democratic Party presidential nominee Kamala Harris’ name on it wouldn’t run into any issues. But if the same voter wore a shirt that said “Vote for Kamala Harris” at the voting site, poll workers could **ask them to cover their shirt**.

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CATAWBA RIVERKEEPER

Debris is shown in the Catawba River near Old Fort.

Helene’s hidden debris lurks in Charlotte-area waterways. Volunteer cleanup to begin.

BY JOE MARUSAK
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Hazards from Tropical Storm Helene both visible and hidden lurk in and on Lake Norman, Lake Wylie and Mountain Island Lake, and volunteers are launching a cleanup of those and other Charlotte-area waterways. Helene ripped apart boats, docks and trees and cast them adrift with other debris, according to the Catawba Riverkeeper environmental non-profit.

Nearly four million people depend on those and other waterways in the Catawba-Wateree River Basin for drinking, electricity and recreation, according to the organization, which is spearheading the upcoming effort.

The cleanups are critical to “restoring the health and safety of these waterways,” according to a Catawba Riverkeeper statement on Friday. Cleanups also are planned on the Catawba and South Fork rivers, organizers said.

From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26, Lake Norman Wildlife Conservationsists, a chapter of N.C. Wildlife Federation, will host a cleanup on Lake Norman.

From 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, Nov. 2, Catawba Riverkeeper will host nearly a dozen cleanup sites on Lake Wylie and Mountain

Island Lake. “Hurricane Helene cleanup efforts such as these will only be possible with the support of community volunteers,” according to the statement. Volunteers can sign up for the cleanups on the Catawba Riverkeeper website.

On Mountain Island Lake, the effort will complement Mecklenburg County’s ongoing use of heavy equipment to remove debris near the lake — more than 100 tons as of Wednesday, Oct. 16, according to a county Facebook post.

VOLUNTEER BOATERS ESPECIALLY NEEDED
Boaters who can take volunteers out to cleanup sites on the water are especially needed, Kaity D’Angelo, Catawba Riverkeeper volunteer and community science manager, told The Charlotte Observer. Sites on the water will be up to three miles from the various boat launch areas, she said.

The Catawba-Wateree River Basin extends 225 miles, from near Old Fort in the North Carolina mountains through 26 counties and 11 lakes to Columbia, South Carolina. “Floods, mudslides, strong winds and downed trees (from Helene) have devastated communities throughout the river basin and have inundated lakes, rivers and streams with

natural and human-made debris,” according to the Catawba Riverkeeper statement. Catawba Riverkeeper will organize cleanups on the northern and southern ends of the basin “once water levels lower and it is safe to go out on the water,” leaders said.

ARE CHARLOTTE-AREA WATERWAYS SAFE AFTER HELENE?

It’s still uncertain whether Lake Wylie and Lake Norman, North Carolina’s largest manmade lake, can be deemed safe for leisure boaters in the wake of Helene, D’Angelo said. “That’s a loaded question,” she said, meaning some areas may be safe and others dangerous.

The deeper main channel is likely safer than shallower coves where debris may have collected, she said. A boat with a depth finder is likelier to spot hidden dangers than one without.

A boater could suddenly encounter a sandbar formed by Helene or a cluster of downed trees, D’Angelo said. The extent of such hazards is still unknown, she said.

Catawba Riverkeeper has been assessing the lakes and rivers since the storm and will continue doing so, D’Angelo said.

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Sick of being followed too close? Here’s how NC law recommends you react to tailgaters

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For many drivers, tailgaters are one of the biggest nuisances on the road. The practice of tailgating, or **following another motor vehicle too closely**, can also be dangerous.

Following too closely was a contributing factor in 4,581 crashes in North Carolina during 2023, according to data from NCDMV. Drivers often respond to tailgaters by brake checking them, but doing so could cause an accident and land you in legal trouble.

So, how should you deal with someone following you too closely on the road? Here’s what state law says about tailgating and brake checking on North Carolina roadways.

IS TAILGATING ILLEGAL IN NC?
Yes. State law makes it illegal to follow other

motor vehicles too closely. Penalties for tailgating can include a **\$35 fine, two points on your driving record and increased auto insurance costs**, according to Browning & Long, a law firm based in Charlotte.

IS IT LEGAL TO BRAKE CHECK TAILGATERS IN NC?

No. Brake checking, or intentionally slamming on your brakes in order to scare the driver behind you and make them slow down, falls under the category of aggressive and reckless driving in North Carolina, according to Wilder Pantazis Law Group, a firm based in Charlotte. Reckless driving is considered a **class 2 misdemeanor**, according to state law, punishable by up to 60 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

Seriously injuring someone or killing someone during a brake checking accident can result in

felony charges and up to 204 months in prison and permanent revocation of your driver’s license, Browning & Long says.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE IS TAILGATING YOU?
If someone is tailgating you, you **shouldn’t encourage the behavior or escalate the situation**.

Instead, you should **move to another lane and signal for the driver to pass you**, according to the N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles Driver Handbook.

“Stay in the middle of the lane and leave space on both sides of your vehicle,” the handbook says. “Allow ample room between your vehicle, parked vehicles and oncoming traffic.”

Here are some other tips on how to handle tailgaters, according to Tatum & Atkinson, an NC-based firm:

- **Maintain a consistent speed** to reduce frustration for you and the tailgater
- **Create space and change lanes** to let the tailgater pass
- **Use your turn signals** to allow the tailgater to anticipate your moves
- **Report aggressive driving** to law enforcement

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CMPD arrests man having mental health crisis after standoff in southwest Charlotte

BY JEFF A. CHAMER
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Police arrested a man after a SWAT team standoff in southwest Charlotte on Monday.

Someone called 911 around 8:30 a.m. to report a man behaving erratically at an apartment near the intersection of Woodlawn Road and Scaleybark Road, said Deputy Chief Zeru Chickoree of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department.

“Officers had been out with him and were familiar that he had warrants on file,” Chickoree said. “Given the fact that he might have been armed,

we take every precaution that’s necessary to preserve life, so we activated our SWAT team on duty.”

He was having a mental health crisis, the deputy chief said. Chickoree didn’t know the details of what prompted the initial 911 call, but said that it “warranted a police response.”

For several hours, residents in nearby apartment complexes watched. Some people who had to evacuate the complex where the standoff was taking place watched as well.

Police used gas to help drive the man from the apartment, Chickoree said. Police planned to search

the man’s apartment to see if he had a gun, Chickoree said. Police did not release the man’s name.

“There is a mental health nexus to this, so we are trying again to provide him with the resources that he needs,” Chickoree said.

In July, police were called to a Circle K gas station near SouthPark Mall about a man having a mental health crisis. He wouldn’t come out of the gas station.

CMPD called SWAT to that incident and arrested the man.

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Protesters tell NC Gov. Roy Cooper, Chief Justice: Protect Western NC renters after Helene

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Protesters from across the mountains are demanding that Gov. Roy Cooper and other North Carolina officials put in place an eviction and foreclosure moratorium. The demands came

after Helene destroyed much of the region last month, tore apart infrastructure and left many without homes.

News outlets on the ground first reported a protest Oct. 16, where about 70 people met outside the Buncombe County courthouse in Asheville. A news release said they

want Cooper, state Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul Newby and local leaders to act.

“With the local economy in ruins, many face imminent eviction and foreclosure, putting them at risk of displacement when they can least afford it,” the protesters’ release said.

Asheville Food & Beverage United, the Western North Carolina Tenants Network, BeLoved Asheville and other local groups signed a letter calling for a moratorium.

Asked if the governor wants a moratorium on evictions, a spokesperson for Cooper didn’t directly answer.

“As with our Executive Order requiring increased unemployment compensation payments, we continue to explore ways to work with state and federal partners as well as legislative and local leaders to help the people of western North Carolina recover,” Jordan Monaghan said in an email. “We will constantly review the need for additional executive action as well as legislation by the General Assembly to support families in western North Carolina.”

Newby’s office did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday afternoon. *Ryan Oehrli covers criminal justice in the Charlotte region for The Charlotte Observer. His work is produced with financial support from the nonprofit The Just Trust. The Observer maintains full editorial control of its journalism.*

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