

May 2026

Paying election directors a livable wage supports our democracy

Why county election director salaries are important

County election directors play a critical role in running efficient, secure elections and protecting voters. Their responsibilities include:

- Procuring and maintaining election equipment
- Training, supervising, and directing the work of election staff
- Creating emergency plans
- Preparing department budgets and monitoring spending and financial records
- Supervising voter registration and maintenance of up-to-date voter lists
- Building working relationships with local policymakers and state officials
- Distributing information about elections to the media, candidates, political parties, and the general public
- Responding to election-related complaints
- Ensuring elections are conducted in compliance with election laws

These and other director responsibilities require directors with strong managerial skills, along with comprehensive knowledge of election laws and regulations. To attract and retain experienced professionals capable of managing these complex demands and administering high-quality elections, counties must offer adequate and competitive salaries for these roles.

State guidelines for election director salaries

State law contains some provisions for county election director salaries but doesn't require that they're paid competitive or living wages. The law says that election director pay has to be comparable in similar counties, with similar populations and number of registered voters. However, the law provides no guidance on what this means in practice.

State law also requires that directors be paid the equivalent of at least \$12/hour, but this minimum has not been updated since 1999 to reflect inflation or rising costs of living. At full-time hours, this translates to an annual salary of less than \$25,000, which is far below a living wage in any NC county.

A 2014 court case (*Gilbert v. Guilford County*) provided some additional guidance about county election director pay. It held that a county board of commissioners (who are ultimately responsible for setting salaries) should consider what share of the population is registered to vote, how transient the population is, several factors that influence how complex county elections are, and how experienced and dedicated the elections director is. But other than individual election directors suing counties that they believe are violating these guidelines, there's no way to enforce them.

Why low salaries are a problem

Election director pay affects whether counties can recruit and retain skilled directors to run consistent, reliable elections and adequately prepare for future elections. Research has found that lower pay relative to a county's population is associated with shorter tenure, while counties offering higher pay tend to retain directors longer. Turnover among election officials nationwide and in North Carolina has increased significantly since 2000, and even more steeply since 2020.

High turnover means loss of institutional knowledge. Over time, directors develop the expertise needed to train election workers and plan the staffing, resources, and processes required to comply with election laws and meet time-sensitive ballot verification deadlines. Retention also matters because experienced directors build relationships with local decision-makers that help secure needed funding for election administration.

Pay levels may also shape election outcomes more broadly. Research suggests that higher director salaries per voter are associated with higher voter turnout in NC counties.

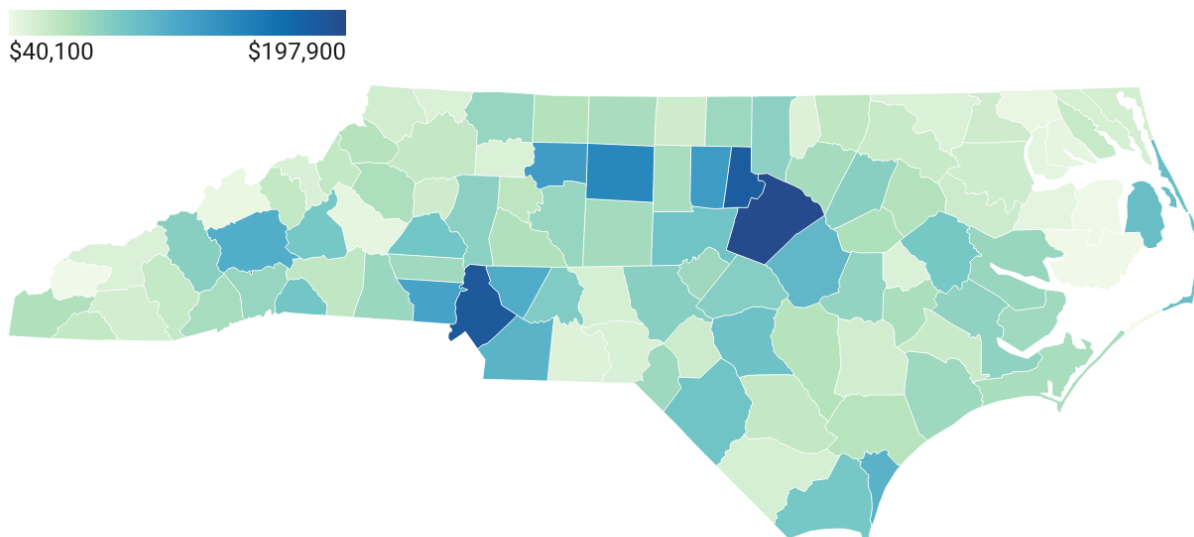
- Rule changes from the state that counties must implement, often without providing funding support
- Increased harassment and threats directed at election staff
- Increased public scrutiny into elections and requests for public information
- More complex voting technology and cybersecurity risks, which require additional safeguards and steps to keep election systems secure

Current salaries vary widely and are below a living income in many counties

Regardless of county size, every county's election director faces growing responsibilities and demands in their role. Yet, salaries vary widely across NC and often fall below a living income in many counties.

Election director salaries vary widely from county to county

2024 annual salaries of county election directors in North Carolina

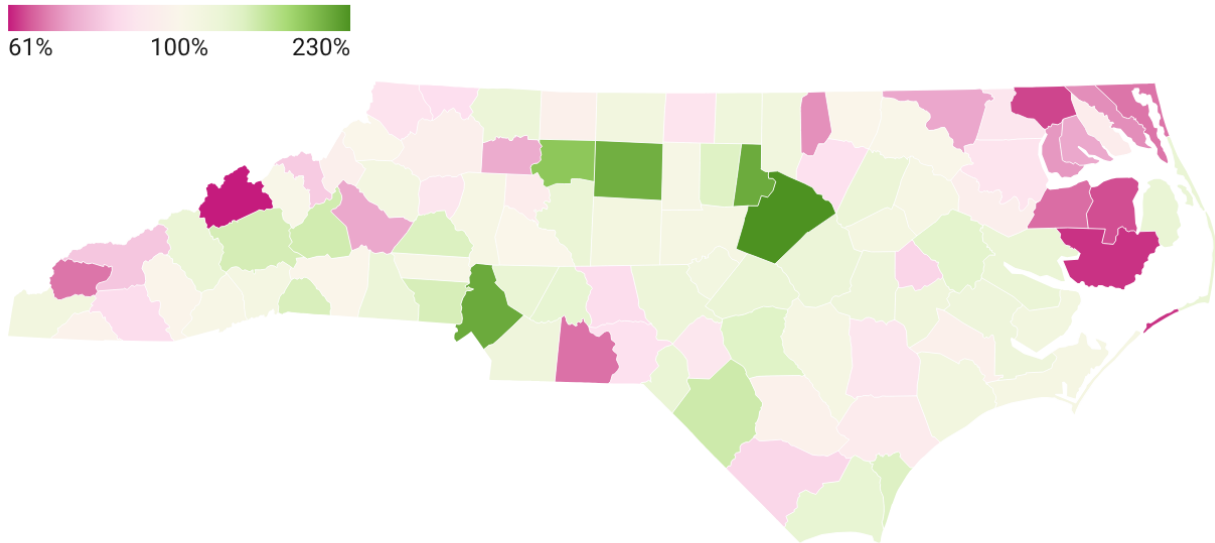


Map: NC Budget & Tax Center • Source: News & Observer • Created with Datawrapper

Based on 2024 salary data, annual election director pay ranges from just over \$40,000 in Hyde and Graham counties to about \$198,000 in Wake County.

In many counties, election directors are paid below a Living Income Standard.

2024 county election director salaries as a share of the 2025 Living Income Standard for one adult with one child



Map: NC Budget & Tax Center • Source: News & Observer • Created with Datawrapper

In 44 counties, the director salary fell below a Living Income Standard for one adult raising a child. Survey findings reinforce the concern that counties are not paying election directors enough to meet basic living costs: More than half of NC election directors report that a pay raise would most likely encourage them to stay in their role.

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