

ELON UNIVERSITY POLL

For immediate release
September 10, 2026

Media contacts

Eric Townsend, Assistant Vice President for Strategic Communications and Media Relations
etownsend4@elon.edu, 336-278-7413

Dan Anderson, Special Assistant to the President
andersd@elon.edu, 336-260-6870

- [Topline and methodology for this poll](#)
- [Charts for this poll](#)

Elon University Poll: Cooper maintains double-digit lead in North Carolina U.S. Senate race

Former North Carolina Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper has an 11% lead over Republican Michael Whatley among likely voters in the race for the open U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Republican U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis.

With the start of the early voting period now five weeks away, the latest survey by the Elon University Poll finds that former Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper has an 11% lead over Republican Michael Whatley in the state's U.S. Senate race. Among **likely voters** (those who said it is "absolutely certain" or "very likely" they will vote), Cooper was favored by 49%, with Whatley favored by 38%. Eight percent were undecided and candidates Shannon Bray (Libertarian) and Michael Dublin (Green) were favored by two percent each.

Among all those who said they were **registered to vote**, Cooper is favored by 49% and Whatley is favored by 36%, with 14% saying they were undecided or planned to vote for someone else and 2% saying they do not plan to vote.

The survey of 800 North Carolina adults was conducted August 21-31, 2026, and has a margin of error for likely voters of 5.6%. Seventy-two percent of poll respondents said they are registered to vote in the state, with 63% of those registered voters saying it is absolutely certain they will vote in November and another 20% saying it is very likely they will vote.

In this survey, 71% of registered voters said they had heard "a great deal" or "some" about Cooper, who was North Carolina governor from 2017 to 2025 and previously served 16 years as the state's attorney general. In comparison, 47% said they had heard "a great deal" or "some" about Whatley, the former chair of the Republican National Committee and the North Carolina Republican Party. Fifteen percent said they

had heard nothing at all about Whatley compared with only 4% who had heard nothing at all about Cooper.

Regardless of who they personally plan to vote for, 54% of registered voters predicted that Cooper will win the race, compared with 29% who predicted that Whatley will win.

“Despite an increase in advertising, we measured relatively little movement over the last month in voter intentions about the U.S. Senate race in North Carolina, with Democratic candidate Roy Cooper maintaining a strong lead over Republican Michael Whatley,” said Jason Husser, director of the Elon University Poll and professor of political science and public policy. “The race continues to appear competitive among the group of voters who are highly familiar with Whatley. However, the size of that group remains relatively small and slowly growing. Now that we have passed Labor Day, campaigning will approach full velocity, offering some final opportunity for Whatley to increase familiarity and narrow Cooper’s lead in the race.”

Questions about the voting process

About half (51%) of registered voters said they plan to cast their votes in person during the **early voting** period that runs October 15-31. Thirty-five percent plan to vote **in person** at the polls on November 3 and only about 8% plan to cast their **votes by mail**. Under state law, county election boards began distributing absentee ballots to those who had requested them on September 4.

A [New York Times survey](#) found that 40 other states had higher vote-by-mail numbers than North Carolina in 2022, when only 5 percent of ballots in the state were cast by mail. Nationwide, about one in three Americans cast their votes by mail in the 2024 general election. In August, President Trump issued an executive order that would give the U.S. Postal Service control over the issuance of mail-in ballots in this year’s election. Following court decisions blocking that action, the Trump administration asked the U.S. Supreme Court to rule on the case, threatening to create serious questions about the voting process just weeks before the election.

“We find a substantial majority of registered voters in North Carolina to be satisfied with the status quo on length of early voting,” Husser said. “Though Democrats reported somewhat higher rates than Republicans of planning to vote early in the upcoming election, only a small minority of voters in either political party told us early voting is too long.”

In August, Governor Josh Stein vetoed a bill passed by the North Carolina General Assembly to **reduce the number of early voting** days for primary elections in the state. In this survey, 56% of poll respondents said the length of the early voting period in statewide elections is about right, with 11% saying early voting is too short, 11% saying early voting is too long and 22% unsure.

Issues on voters’ minds

Among registered voters, 51% said they were extremely or very excited to cast their ballots and 83% said this year's election was extremely or somewhat important for real-world outcomes in their lives.

Pocketbook issues were at the top of registered voters' minds as they make their voting decisions. Eighty-six percent said **inflation and the cost of living** are "very important" issues, with 73% saying the **general economy** and **healthcare** are "very important." Other "very important" issues included **taxes** (66%), **Social Security** (64%), **personal character of candidates** (60%), **immigration** (54%), the **war in Iran** (50%) and the **environment** (43%).

Grading the **health of the nation's economy**, 49% of registered voters gave grades of "D" and "F", with 30% assigning a "C" grade and only 22% giving "A" or "B" grades.

Related to the **war with Iran**, 52% of registered voters opposed the U.S. military involvement compared with 31% who supported it. About 40% said a year from now America will be less safe as a result of U.S. military actions in Iran, with 30% saying America will be more safe.

"Voters are placing very high emphasis on the economy, especially the cost of living, and voters are overwhelming thinking the economy is not good," Husser said. "This is driving a great deal of attitudes towards both President Trump and Congressional candidates of his party. While much of the national political focus over the next two months will be on the performance of individual candidates and their campaigns, many political outcomes will be influenced at least as much by the ongoing performance of the economy."

Approval ratings

This survey gathered new data on approval ratings for President Donald Trump and N.C. Governor Josh Stein.

Among all poll respondents, 54% disapproved of the job Trump is doing as president and 31% approved. While Trump's disapproval numbers in North Carolina have stayed roughly the same during 2026, his approval rating in this survey was the lowest recorded by the Elon University Poll since Trump took office in January 2025.

Governor Stein had a 40% approval rating, a drop of 6% from the Elon University Poll conducted at the end of July. Stein's disapproval numbers stayed steady at 25%.

Poll Methodology

Access the poll topline and methodology at: www.elon.edu/elonpoll. The survey was developed by the Elon University Poll and fielded by the international marketing and polling firm YouGov as an online, web-based survey, self-administered through online

panels. Between August 21 and August 31, 2026, YouGov interviewed 1,121 North Carolina adults aged 18 and older. These respondents were then matched down to a sample of 800 to produce the final dataset.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and home ownership. The margin of error for likely voters in this survey is $\pm 5.6\%$, for registered voters in this survey (adjusted for weights) the margin of error is $\pm 5.05\%$, and the margin of error for all adults in this survey is $\pm 5.09\%$.

About the Elon University Poll

Established in 2000, the Elon University Poll conducts national and North Carolina surveys on issues of importance to voters and residents. Information from these polls is shared with media, citizens and public officials to facilitate informed public policymaking through the better understanding of citizens' opinions and attitudes. The poll is fully funded by Elon University and operates as the neutral, non-biased information resource.

The Elon University Poll is a charter member of the [Transparency Initiative](#), a program created by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) in 2014 to educate polling firms on ways to better share how they collect and interpret their information. The Elon Poll's voluntary participation in this initiative signifies a willingness to clearly state in its reports how questions were asked, in what order, who funded the poll and who conducted it, and a definition of the population under study, among other details.