Georgia 2020:
Election Administration in the Coronavirus Pandemic

March 10, 2021

Abstract:

Georgia's state and local election officials administered a successful election in November 2020, with record turnout despite the coronavirus pandemic. The state already had experience with no-excuse absentee voting and an extended window of early in-person voting, although like many states, it experienced a record level of mail-balloting in 2020. Georgia also launched several adaptations, including drop boxes, ballot pre-processing, advanced ballot tracking, and a new absentee ballot request portal. After November 3, Georgia officials also oversaw a statewide hand audit, a machine-based recount, and prepared for the January 5 senate runoff races.

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This memo draws on prior memos published by Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections:
- "[Georgia: 2020 Election Policies & Practices,](#)" Bree Baccaglini (November 6, 2020).
- "Supply Chain Performance in the 2020 Election," Alexandra Popke, Erin Pang, Neil Wary (March 10, 2021)
- "[Post-Election Litigation in Battleground States: A Summary,](#)" Zahavah Levine and Jacob Kovacs-Goodman (Last Updated: March 1, 2021)
- "Recounts and Challenges in Battleground States," Haley Schwab, Bree Baccaglini, Matthew Simkovits, Mikaela Pyatt, Amanda Zerbe, Axel Hufford, Evie Freeman, Christopher Middleton, Christopher Wan, Ali Bloomgarden, and Garrett Jensen (November 13, 2020).

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I.   Introduction

Despite the challenges of administering a general election with record-breaking turnout amidst the coronavirus pandemic, Georgia's state and local elections officials rose to the challenge in November 2020. Existing features of Georgia's election law—particularly no-excuse absentee voting and extended in-person early voting opportunities—proved critical in an election cycle where voters wanted to minimize transmission risks and gravitated in droves to traditional Election Day alternatives. In addition to leaning on existing laws, Georgia officials adopted measures that put them on even better footing. They approved dropboxes, permitted pre-processing of absentee ballots, introduced advanced ballot tracking, and launched an absentee ballot request portal. Compared to the June primary, they reduced Election Day lines, improved poll worker recruitment, and enhanced training on the new voting equipment. Although there were long lines on the first few days of early voting and some polling place closures, the improvements made during the primary season made the voting in the general election largely a success.

Unlike the case in most states, however, November 3 closed only one chapter of the 2020 presidential election in Georgia. In the weeks after Election Day, Georgia's election officials had to oversee a hand audit of five million ballots (the first statewide audit ever performed in Georgia) and a full machine-based recount. Despite the challenges and the enormity of the undertaking, county officials met their deadlines and, in so doing, affirmed the outcome of the Georgia presidential election three separate times. This accomplishment is all the more impressive given that officials and workers carried out their work in an environment of rancorous and even dangerous misinformation aimed at undermining confidence in the election results.

II.   Lay of the Land

In the presidential contest, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden won Georgia by 11,779 votes (or 0.23%) of 4,997,716 votes cast in the presidential race. Democrat Biden received 2,473,633 votes (49.50%), Republican President Donald Trump received 2,461,854 votes (49.26%), and Libertarian candidate Jo Jorgenson received 62,229 votes (1.25%).[1] In the state's two U.S. Senate

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[1] As described in Section IV, the presidential race in Georgia was subject to both an audit (which entailed a full hand tally) and a machine recount during the post-election period. The results recited here reflect the outcome of the recount, which were the figures ultimately certified by state officials and differ slightly from the results reported after the initial count.

races, no candidate garnered more than 50% of the vote, forcing a run-off between the top two vote-getters from each contest. In that run-off on January 5, 2021, incumbent Republican Kelly Loeffler faced Democratic challenger Rafael Warnock, and incumbent Republican David Perdue faced Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff. The final presidential general election results are detailed here, and the senate runoff election results are detailed here.

Though the general election turnout in Georgia in 2016 broke records with 4.1 million people participating, the turnout in the 2020 election was even higher by almost 900,000 votes: Nearly 5 million Georgians—or 67.7% of the voting-eligible population—cast ballots in the presidential election in 2020 in Georgia. (See Figure 1). The breakdown between early votes and Election Day votes is shown in Table 1, and the breakdown between modes of early voting is shown in Table 2.

Figure 1. *Comparison of 2016 and 2020 turnout rates (as a percentage of voter-eligible population).*
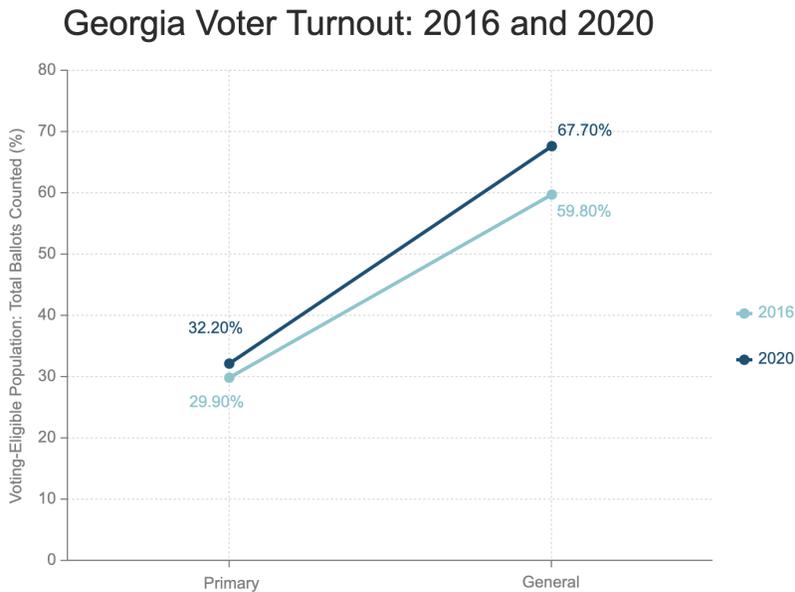
Source: U.S. Elections Project

Table 1. *2020 General Election Voting in Presidential Race in Georgia: Early and Election Day.*

Total Votes Cast	Early Votes Cast (In person & by mail)	Election Day Votes Cast	Provisional Votes
4,997,716	3,994,868 (79.9%)	992,707 (19.9%)	10,141 (0.2%)

Source: GA SoS website

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Table 2. *Modes of Early Voting (absentee ballots versus in-person voting) in 2020 General Election.*

Total Early Votes	Total Registered Voters as of October 6, 2020	Early Voter Turnout Rate (of registered voters)	In-Person Early Votes	Mail Ballots Returned and Accepted
3,994,868	7,587,625	52.6%	2,679,574	1,315,294

Source: GA SoS website, GA SoS Voter Registration

III.   Background

A number of existing state election laws, nimble adjustments, and emergency rules by Georgia's election officials proved critical in facilitating a smooth general election despite the raging pandemic. By remaining flexible and maximizing opportunities for Georgians to cast their ballots safely and securely—whether by mail, dropbox, early voting center, or Election Day polling place—Georgia's election officials made the November election an administrative success.

A. Existing State Laws

Of the state election laws on the books before the pandemic, the two most important provisions this cycle were likely O.C.G.A. § 21-2-380, which permits no-excuse absentee voting, and O.C.G.A. § 21-2-385, which provides for "advance" voting (a term that encompasses both absentee balloting and in-person early voting).[2] While other states had to adjust absentee ballot eligibility rules or launch early voting options at the 11th hour in response to the pandemic, Georgia's election officials and voters alike already had some familiarity with mail voting and early voting under existing law. In order to expand awareness of these alternatives to Election Day voting, the secretary of state, local county officials, and voting rights groups ramped up voter education efforts, but they were spared from having to launch and educate the public about entirely new voting options on the eve of the election.

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[2] Relatedly, the absence of other restrictive provisions for absentee balloting in Georgia law—such as a witness or notary requirement—ensured that Georgians concerned with the transmission risks of in-person voting faced minimal barriers to casting a mail ballot.

B. Adjustments from the June 2020 Presidential Preference Primary

The June presidential primary was [widely reported](#)—including by Georgia's own [House of Representatives Governmental Affairs Committee](#)—to be [beset by problems](#). However, Georgia's election officials used their experience from that contest to prepare for and improve the infrastructure for the November election.

One area of concern in June related to absentee ballot request and delivery. Some voters ([especially in Fulton County](#)) reported that they requested absentee ballots through appropriate channels but never received a ballot.[3] Election officials had been overwhelmed by an "[avalanche](#)" of absentee ballot requests and hamstrung by personnel shortages caused by the coronavirus pandemic. At least some of that avalanche could be attributed to Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger's decision to send out absentee ballot request forms to all 6.9 million Georgia voters in March. His proactive effort indubitably lowered barriers for some voters to request absentee ballots, and many voting rights groups praised the action. But it also cost the state [millions of dollars](#) and may have contributed to [long lines](#), since many voters who had requested ballots showed up to vote in person anyway, requiring poll officials to take time at the polls to cancel their absentee ballots. (Raffensperger's action also raised the ire of fellow Republicans: Republican state lawmakers [introduced](#) an amendment to an existing bill, Senate Bill 463, to prohibit the Georgia secretary of state and county election officials from sending out unsolicited absentee ballot applications. Though the amendment was adopted, [the bill](#) itself was later [withdrawn](#) and recommitted to the Governmental Affairs Committee.)

For the November 2020 elections, Secretary Raffensperger opted to simplify and improve the ballot request process for voters interested in mail voting. On August 28, he launched an online absentee ballot request portal—a move that was authorized by a State Election Board (SEB) [rule](#) passed earlier that month. In Secretary Raffensperger's [press release](#) unveiling the portal, he explained that it would "save voters effort and postage and will increase confidence that the request has been received by county elections officials. It also makes it easier and faster for county election officials to process absentee ballot requests by minimizing the possibility of data entry errors." Given that some county election officials were overwhelmed with absentee ballot requests ahead of the June primary and, [in some instances](#), failed to process the requests in time for the election, the secretary's voting systems implementation manager, Gabriel Sterling, [expressed optimism](#) that the online portal would provide a more seamless experience for voters and officials alike.

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[3] Fulton County's mishandling of absentee ballots became subject to a State Election Board (SEB) investigation. In August, the SEB [concluded](#) that Fulton officials may have violated multiple provisions of Georgia election law, and it referred the matter to the attorney general's office.

Another issue in the June primary was inadequate poll worker recruitment and training. This issue was common to jurisdictions across the country amidst the pandemic. Converting existing poll worker training programs to a virtual format represented a hurdle for many jurisdictions, and it was especially problematic in Georgia. The state, in June, had rolled out brand new voting equipment and few of the poll workers who were available to staff the state's voting places had any experience handling the new machines. (The Georgia legislature had authorized, and the secretary of state certified, a $106 million election infrastructure overhaul from its prior Direct Recording Electronic voting machines in 2019. The upgrade involved extensive litigation over the prior ballot machines and resulted in a court order prohibiting use of the old equipment in the 2020 elections. The state contracted with Dominion Voting Systems to upgrade and roll out its voting technology, including electronic poll books ("PollPads" from KnowInk), Ballot Marking Devices, and optical ballot scanners. So, voters and voting staff across Georgia had to adapt to all new equipment. The combination of new equipment and insufficient numbers and training of poll workers led to long lines and voter frustration.

Ahead of the November election, Secretary Raffensperger and election officials across Georgia invested heavily in poll worker recruitment and training in order to avoid a repeat of the problems encountered in the June primary. Secretary Raffensperger's office launched an online form to collect the names and information of potential poll workers and sent nearly 50,000 names to Georgia's 159 counties for follow-up by local election officials. The secretary also ran a poll observer website with recruitment messages and extensive poll worker training materials, and the office partnered with organizations such as the Georgia Municipal Association and various chambers of commerce to attract new and younger volunteers. Other organizations, such as Power the Polls in partnership with the ACLU of Georgia, ProGeorgia, and Fair Fight, also helped with recruitment: Power the Polls had 35,507 Georgians sign up to be potential poll workers through their site.

Though Georgia, like many other states, was bracing for a reduced staff on Election Day, these recruitment efforts helped counties meet their personnel needs and execute a smooth in-person Election Day voting experience. Some counties made sure to have reserves of poll workers in the event of unexpected absences, and others experimented with hazard pay to boost recruitment. Ahead of the election, many counties returned to in-person training to ensure that poll workers had hands-on experience handling and troubleshooting the new Dominion voting equipment.

C. Relevant Policy Changes

The Georgia State Elections Board and the secretary of state did not rely solely on existing laws to carry the state through a pandemic-era election. The SEB passed two rules in February 2020 ahead of the June presidential primary (which were later made applicable to the November general election) that proved vital to the election's success.

The first rule permitted county election officials to process absentee ballots starting at 8 a.m. the third Monday before Election Day (October 19) instead of waiting for Election Day itself. Though officials were prohibited from making a tally of absentee ballots ahead of Election Day, this new rule permitted them to get a head start on everything short of tabulation—such as signature verification, absentee ballot error curing, ballot scanning, and adjudication of ballot marking errors—nearly three weeks before Election Day. Almost all of Georgia's 159 counties expressed intent to start processing, scanning, and/or adjudicating early, and Georgia's 10 most populous counties began (or expressed intent to begin) processing ballots on October 19 and October 20—the first two days of the approved pre-Election Day processing window. Given the tidal wave of absentee ballots that were submitted in Georgia, the ability to pre-process ballots enabled more timely reporting of the results. Though Georgia's results may not have seemed timely, that is largely a feature of the razor-thin margin of victory in both the presidential and two U.S. Senate races, and less indicative of vote tallying delays. While it is typical for state election officials to take days to finalize a presidential count, it is also typically apparent who the winner is within hours of polls closing. In the November general election in Georgia, the presidential race was separated by fewer than 12,000 votes and the senatorial races bobbed in and out of runoff territory; the race was sufficiently close that counting all of the nearly five million ballots was necessary before the state could be called. Had pre-processing of the absentee ballots not occurred, Georgia election officials would have needed even longer to count all the ballots. That delay could have further jeopardized the perceived legitimacy of the election and potentially compromised officials' ability to comply with the November 13 county certification deadline.

The second SEB emergency rule greenlighted the use of ballot dropboxes in the 2020 races. The rule permitted counties to establish one or more dropboxes on municipal property starting 49 days before Election Day until 7 p.m. on Election Day. It did not require counties to provide them, but those which did had to abide by the rule's requirements for anti-tampering measures and ballot retrieval. For example, county officials had to ensure that all dropbox locations had adequate lighting and were under constant video surveillance, and they had to send a team of two qualified people to collect ballots from the dropbox locations at least once every 72 hours until the second Monday before Election Day. At that point, they had to retrieve ballots once

every 24 hours. Given the increase in mail balloting and concerns over systemic United States Postal Service (USPS) delivery delays, ballot dropboxes proved to be an attractive feature for counties looking to facilitate greater mail voting and reduce the risk of ballot rejection for late receipt.[4] Accordingly, the majority of Georgia counties opted to provide at least one dropbox under the emergency SEB rules, and more populous counties opted to set up multiple dropboxes. In the weeks ahead of the election, 36 dropbox locations were available in Fulton County, 26 in DeKalb County, 23 in Gwinnett County, and 16 in Cobb County.

The secretary of state also took independent steps to increase voter confidence in mail voting. In late September, Secretary Raffensperger introduced a new partnership with BallotTrax, an independent ballot tracking service, to provide more detailed ballot tracking services to all Georgians. Citing the need to innovate and adapt to "unprecedented times," the secretary expressed hope that the service would provide Georgia voters with "greater clarity and increased confidence that their votes are accepted."

IV.   Mail Voting

Georgia voters cast 1,307,403 mail votes in the 2020 general election. As demonstrated by Table 3, this means mail voting increased by more than 5 times between 2016 and 2020, with more than 6 times the total absentee ballots cast in 2020 compared to 2016.

Table 3. *Mail voting rates in 2016 and 2020.*

	Total Absentee Ballots Returned (#)	Absentee ballots as percentage of total votes cast (%)
2016	213,033	5%
2020	1,307,403	26%

These high mail ballot return rates were no doubt facilitated in part by existing Georgia election law, which provides for no-excuse absentee voting and does not require the voter to obtain a witness signature or include a copy of a photo ID along with the mail ballot. Instead, county

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[4] Unlike a ballot placed in a blue USPS box, a ballot in an official drop box is deemed received by county election officials once it is deposited. So long as voters deposited their ballots into official drop boxes by the close of polls on Election Day, their ballots were guaranteed to be counted. Ballots deposited into USPS boxes, on the other hand, were counted only if they reached county elections officials by the close of polls on Election Day, and they were rejected for late receipt if they were received after that deadline, pursuant to Georgia law.

registrars verify voter signatures at two points in the absentee ballot process: once when the absentee ballot request form is received, and once when the absentee ballot itself is received in an official signed envelope. At the second stage, if the signature "appear[s] to be valid and other identifying information appears to be correct," the clerk will certify the ballot envelope according to O.C.G.A. § 21-2-386 by signing or initialing beneath the voter's oath and will list the elector on the list of absentee voters prepared for the voter's precinct. According to a March 2020 settlement in *Georgia Democratic Party v. Raffensberger* that amended the ballot verification procedure, if a majority of three registrars determine that "the signature does not match any of the voter's signatures on file in eNet[5] or on the absentee ballot application," the registrars mark the ballot rejected and note the reason for rejection. Prior to the settlement, there was no uniform statewide procedure for ballot rejection, and there was a wide disparity in rejection rates by county. Due to changes in the law enacted through House Bill 316 in 2019, the registrar or absentee ballot clerk is also required to "promptly notify" the voter of such rejection so that the voter can take steps to cure the issue. The settlement also required enforcement of Rule §183-1-14-.13, which required registrars to contact voters via mail, phone, and email within three business days of rejection or within the next business day if the rejection occurs within two Fridays of election day.

Overall, 7,604 (0.6% of all mail ballots) absentee ballots were rejected in the 2020 Georgia November election. The rejection rate for ballots rejected for signature issues was 0.15%, down from 0.28% in the 2020 June Primary. Secretary Raffensberger attributed the reduction in signature rejections to "both parties attempting to help voters cure their absentee ballots pursuant to the process set forth in Georgia statute." However, the November 2020 signature rejection rate was on par with the November 2018 rejection rate, even though no signature cure procedures were in place in 2018. Only in 2019 did House Bill 316 modify the existing signature verification procedures and introduce for the first time a notification and cure process for absentee ballots with signature defects. In the 2020 Georgia November election, 2,777 ballots were successfully cured.

Just 0.2% of absentee ballots were rejected for lateness in the November 2020 election, down from 0.8% in 2016. Despite the six-fold increase in mail ballots, the number rejected for lateness was 2,368—a slim increase from the 1,836 rejected for lateness in 2016. But during the June primary, late receipt accounted for 8,596 out of 11,889 rejected ballots; changes in the deadlines for ballot receipt close to the primary—which whipsawed due to litigation—may have misled some voters to believe they had more time to mail their ballots.

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[5] ElectionNet, or "eNet," is the computer system that Georgia uses to check in voters.

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In late August, Democratic plaintiffs in _New Ga. Project v. Raffensperger_ secured a preliminary injunction extending Georgia's Election Day ballot receipt deadline by three business days—from November 3 to November 6. Though the U.S. District Court rejected the state's motion for a stay pending appeal in September, a three-judge panel on the 11th Circuit granted the stay on October 2. Since the 11th Circuit did not hear and rule on the state's appeal by November 3, Georgia rejected all absentee ballots received after 7 p.m. on November 3, regardless of when the ballot return envelope was postmarked. Voters who heard about the initial deadline extension but not about the 11th Circuit's stay of the extension may have mistakenly believed they had longer than they did to return their ballot. And USPS delays may have increased transit times even for voters who mailed their ballot in a timely fashion.

It is not clear to what degree the litigation influx negatively impacted voters, and the majority of the absentee ballot system ran smoothly. As described in section III, Georgia's election scheme was fairly mail-ballot friendly prior to the pandemic, and officials made a number of policy changes in order to promote greater use of of mail voting: the introduction of an absentee ballot request portal, ballot dropboxes, and enhanced ballot tracking through BallotTrax. All of these policies also affected election administrators. Successfully promoting the use of absentee balloting as a safe and secure alternative to in-person voting relieved pressure on in-person voting locations. There were also adjustments made to improve the workload of election administrators, including the introduction of absentee ballot pre-processing. That change also had an impact in shoring up public confidence in the election's legitimacy. These changes seemed to have achieved their desired effect: The use of mail voting shattered historical records while largely avoiding mishaps during the election. The sheer volume of absentee ballots, however—along with snafus such as technical glitches in Gwinnett and a burst water pipe in Fulton—meant that the count was not complete by Election Night despite pre-processing efforts. While some counting was expected to spill into the Wednesday or Thursday after the election, Secretary Raffensperger expressed frustration with the delays.

Federal funding helped election officials in Georgia establish the infrastructure necessary for executing the election. Georgia received around $11 million in CARES Act funding earmarked for pandemic-related election assistance. In a narrative grant report submitted by the Georgia comptroller on November 24, it appears that Georgia spent nearly all of that money—around $8.5 million—on "voting process" materials and infrastructure, such as "printing and mailing ballots, ballot tracking software, high-speed scanners and letter opening equipment, mail drop boxes, and hardware and software associated with signature comparison of returned ballots." Georgia also received election assistance funding from the Center for Tech and Civil Life (CTCL). Dougherty County, for example, received $300,000 to cover the cost of installing three additional drop boxes. Though CTCL does not publicize the amount or purpose of the grants,

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the organization's grant tracker indicates that Dougherty County was one of 43 Georgia counties that received grant assistance this past cycle.

V. In-Person Voting

While the number of people who voted in person on Election Day decreased in the 2020 general election, compared to 2016, the number who vote in-person early markedly increased, as shown in Table 4. Many voters in Georgia and elsewhere gravitated to absentee voting and less crowded in-person voting opportunities during the early voting period. Of the 3,680,090 people who voted in-person in Georgia in 2020, 73.2% of them voted before Election Day, 26.8% on Election Day. In 2016, only 55.9% of in-person voters voted early and 44.1% voted on Election Day.

Table 4. *In-Person Voting in the 2020 General Election: Early v. Election Day*

	In-person early votes (% of total in-person votes)	In-person Election Day votes (% of total in-person votes)	Total in-person votes # (% of total votes cast)
2016	2,200,467 (55.9%)	1,733,661 (44.1%)	3,934,128 (94.9%)
2020	2,694,763 (73.2%)	985,327 (26.8%)	3,680,090 (73.62%)

In-person voting, despite some hiccups, was largely a success. Georgia's existing early voting laws gave voters a great deal of flexibility in making a voting plan. This year, Georgia counties were required to offer early voting at county vote centers Monday-Friday between October 12 and October 30, 2020, and on Saturday, October 24. Many counties chose to offer extended business-day hours and additional days of weekend early voting, and some counties (such as Fulton, Cobb, Gwinnett, and Macon-Bibb) increased the number of available voting locations from the June primary. While some early voting locations were simply county elections offices, many counties across Georgia offered voting in less traditional locations, such as parks, fairgrounds, and the State Farm Arena, in order to minimize the risk of coronavirus transmission. These efforts made it easier than in past years for voters to cast a ballot at their convenience anywhere in their county of residence.

In-person voting in 2020 presented novel health concerns and election administration considerations. Though Georgia never adopted a statewide mandate to wear a mask in public, Governor Brian Kemp renewed an Executive Order prior to the election, allowing counties to enforce a mask mandate on government property if certain coronavirus infection thresholds

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were exceeded in the jurisdiction. However, the Executive Order specifically prohibited enforcement at polling places. While voters were highly encouraged to wear masks, they legally could not be turned away or cited if they didn't wear one, even in a jurisdiction that voluntarily adopted a local mask mandate. Some counties—for example, Fulton, Henry, Douglas, Clayton, and Rockdale—urged poll workers to wear masks and others such as Cherokee and Paulding required them. However, there was no enforcement mechanism in the state to ensure compliance.

The secretary of state worked to secure the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for poll workers ahead of the November election. A press release from Secretary Raffensperger reported that he worked with the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency to fulfill requests from 153 counties for "180,000 masks, 46,700 face shields, 4,700 packages of gloves, and 10,100 boxes of disinfecting wipes for their poll workers and election officials." Further, the CARES grant report indicated that the state spent around $550,000 on supplies such as masks and cleaning materials. These efforts to promote poll worker safety may have contributed to the success of poll worker recruitment efforts. As described in Section III, the concerted campaign to secure election personnel was effective in mitigating serious Election Day staffing issues.
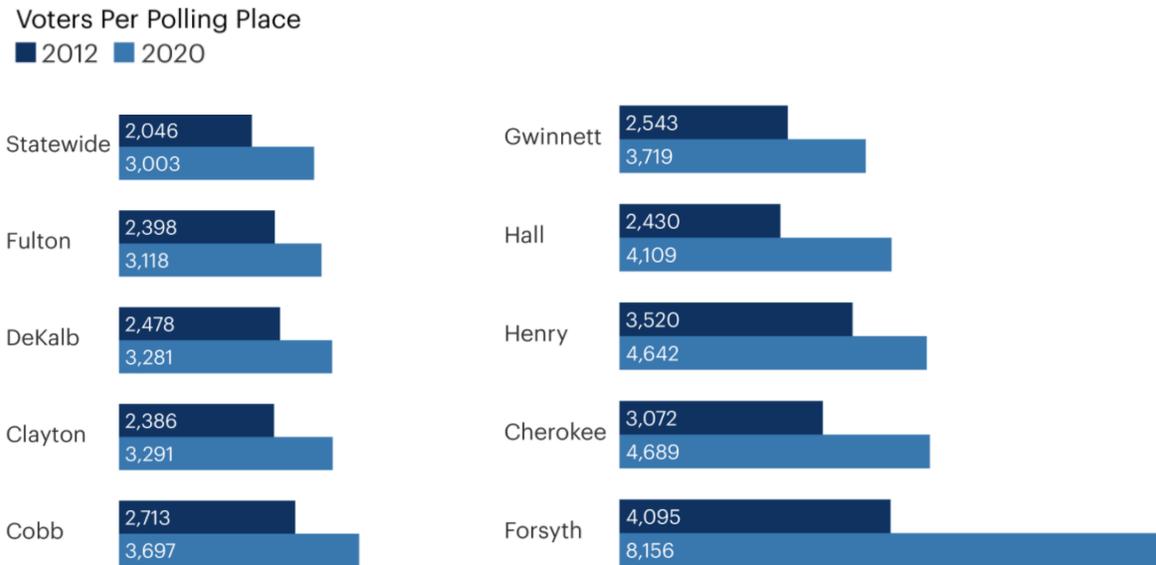
In general, adequate staffing, improved training, and a long early voting period kept lines short across the state. However, the first days of the early voting period were rocky in some places, with record-shattering turnout overwhelming the electronic check-in systems. On the first day of early voting, 128,590 Georgians came out to vote early—a more than 40 percent increase from the previous record for the first day of in-person voting in 2016. That first day turnout strained the bandwidth of the new electronic "poll pad" check-in tablets. While not all Georgia voters were affected by this issue (voters in Polk County, for instance, were able to vote "swiftly"), more populous counties, such as Gwinnett and Fulton, experienced snaking lines of voters waiting for hours due to insufficient bandwidth. The delays, however, did not persist long: Within days, wait times began leveling out as the state worked with the vendor to resolve the bandwidth issues. The remainder of the early voting period proceeded uneventfully, except for the arrival of Hurricane Zeta, which impacted voting hours and wait times across the state when it made landfall in Georgia on the second-to-last day of early voting.

High turnout during the early voting period relieved pressure on Election Day polling facilities and kept lines short across the state. In fact, Secretary Raffensperger reported that, on average, Georgia voters waited a mere three minutes to vote on Election Day. This is particularly notable given the novelty of the new election technology and widespread concerns about an Election Day meltdown scenario. The short average wait times in November also marked a vast

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improvement in administration since the 2020 primaries, where wait times hit 2 or 3 hours in many areas within an hour of polls opening.

Yet the impacts of polling place closures may not have been felt equally across the state. Since the 2013 Shelby County decision, Georgia's voter rolls have grown by two million voters, but the state has seen a 10% reduction in its number of polling places, with closures concentrated in Black and minority communities.[6] The reduction has caused an increase in voters assigned to each polling place statewide, but as Figure 2 shows, the nine counties that make up metro Atlanta (and have the most diverse populations in the state)—Fulton, Gwinnett, Forsyth, DeKalb, Cobb, Hall, Cherokee, Henry and Clayton—have experienced polling place consolidation at a higher rate than elsewhere in the state. While these counties have nearly half of the state's active voters, they had only 38% of the polling places leading up to the November election. And in an analysis of the 2020 Georgia primary, researches found of polling places that stayed open late to accommodate waiting voters, "the average wait time after 7 p.m. across Georgia was 51 minutes in polling places that were 90% or more nonwhite, but only six minutes in polling places that were 90% white."[7]

Figure 2. *Number of Voters per Polling Place in 2012 and 2020.*

Voters Per Polling Place
■ 2012 ■ 2020

County	2012	2020
Statewide	2,046	3,003
Fulton	2,398	3,118
DeKalb	2,478	3,281
Clayton	2,386	3,291
Cobb	2,713	3,697
Gwinnett	2,543	3,719
Hall	2,430	4,109
Henry	3,520	4,642
Cherokee	3,072	4,689
Forsyth	4,095	8,156

Source: ProPublica/Georgia Public Radio

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[6] In Georgia, local boards of elections, rather than the secretary of state, select polling locations.

[7] To prevent a repeat of the June primary problems in November, some counties tried to add back polling places before November 3rd. Fulton County, for example, approved 91 new polling places weeks before Election Day—a move that carried risks as well, since last-minute polling place relocation has been shown to depress turnout.

There were also concerns of repeating technical errors from the primary in the November general election. After the bungled voting machine rollout in the June primaries, some plaintiffs were so concerned about the prospect of technical malfunctions in the November election that they brought suit to force polling places to maintain back-up paper records in case the new electronic pollbooks (called "PollPads") failed. While state procedure already required paper backup lists at every polling place in Georgia prior to the suit, those lists did not indicate whether a person had voted already through mail or early voting. On September 28, U.S. District Court Judge Amy Totenberg granted plaintiffs' motion for a preliminary injunction (later amended in a subsequent amended order) and directed Georgia's secretary of state to provide county superintendents a physical list of voters updated at the close of the in-person early voting period to distribute to each polling place. The court-ordered back-up paper pollbooks would be used to "determine voter eligibility and precinct assignment in the case of equipment malfunction or other emergency." Judge Totenberg's amended order also directed the secretary of state to maintain a sufficient number of emergency paper ballots "so that voting may continue uninterrupted if emergency circumstances render the electronic ballot markers or printers unusable." Judge Totenberg declined to mandate that the secretary maintain a certain number of paper ballots at each precinct location. However, the District Court denied the state's request to stay the injunction pending appeal. An 11th Circuit panel, however, granted the stay on October 24 and, thus, Georgia was not required to generate the paper pollbooks listing in-person early voting records..

Fortunately, plaintiffs' fears of widespread technical malfunction did not materialize on Election Day, though there were isolated issues. Spalding County saw a countywide shutdown of its voting machines after incorrect information was loaded into the voting machines, creating long lines and prompting extended voting hours. (After the election, the secretary of state called on the Spalding election supervisor to step down, as voters were improperly given provisional ballots instead of emergency paper ballots during the machine outages.) Similarly, in Cherokee, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton, Gwinnett, and Houston counties, voting hours were extended in at least one polling place. In Morgan County, four of seven polling sites experienced technical difficulties, though all were resolved by afternoon. At a polling site at Morris Brandon Elementary School in Atlanta, voters initially had to cast paper ballots instead of voting on machines due to technical difficulties, though the machines were fixed later in the day.

VI.   Post Election Day

In the days and weeks after November 3, Georgia's election became the subject of intense national interest and scrutiny. With a razor-thin margin separating the two presidential

candidates, Georgia election officials took several days to announce a final vote count after giving intermediate updates, reporting that Democrat Biden had won the state's popular vote. (the race was not called by AP until November 12). However, that was only the beginning of the post-November 3 story in Georgia, which ultimately involved an audit, a recount, a dozen lawsuits, and dangerous partisanship and misinformation.

A. Audit

In 2019, the Georgia legislature updated the state's election laws in a variety of ways. One change adopted required, in even-number years, a manual statewide risk limiting audit (RLA) before certification of election results. In general, RLAs are used to confirm, with strong statistical likelihood, that the votes cast for a certain contest were tabulated correctly (i.e. that the same results would have been reached had the ballots been counted by hand). The RLA limits the risk that the wrong winner gets certified. Unlike traditional post-election audits, where the number of ballots to be examined is fixed in state law, the number of ballots subject to an RLA depends on the closeness of a given race. Where the margin is wide, fewer ballots must be inspected to reach statistical confidence about the results; where the margin is narrow, significantly more sample ballots must be examined.

On November 11 at 1 p.m. EST, Secretary of State Raffensperger announced that the presidential contest would be the subject of the pre-certification Risk Limiting Audit. At the time, Biden was leading by 11,779 votes. However, instead of selecting a random sample of ballots for each county to review, the secretary announced that the close margin of votes between the two major party presidential candidates (about 0.3%) would trigger a full hand re-tally of the approximately five million ballots cast across all 159 counties. The announcement followed public pressure on the secretary from Trump's campaign and other Georgia Republicans to conduct a full recount. Voting Works, a nonpartisan election technology company contracted to develop Georgia's audit technology, said that, while only around 1.5 million ballots needed to be audited in order to provide statistical confidence about the winner, in a presidential contest this close it is actually "less work to sample every cast ballot, simply because attempting to audit a large subset incurs the work of retrieving and replacing specific ballots, while reviewing all ballots does not."

The secretary's office directed counties to begin the audit process no later than 9 a.m., November 13 (the deadline for county certification) and complete it by 11:59 p.m. on November 18—two days prior to the state certification deadline. Given that the audit involved all ballots, the audit teams were responsible for hand-counting all presidential votes instead of comparing electronic and paper results for randomly selected ballots. The audit process involved

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"inventory sheets to track which batch of ballots were counted when, audit board sheets that identify vote totals for each batch and the people that audited them and even a sign-in sheet for partisan monitors [who] closely watch the process." VotingWorks made copies of this paperwork (and even a humorous video demonstrating the tasks required in a full hand tally) publicly available online. Some facilities also live-streamed the audit process. The press was allowed to track the process.

Though it was widely expected that counties would need to work around the clock to meet the November 18 deadline, many counties—even Fulton, the state's most populous county—finished early. On November 19, Secretary Raffensperger announced the completion of the audit—the largest hand tally in United States history—and shared the audit results and audit report.[8] According to the report, the audit "confirmed the original result of the election, namely that Joe Biden won the presidential contest in the State of Georgia." The audit data showed that the vast majority of Georgia's 159 counties experienced negligible vote changes: 52 counties reported no changes in their vote totals, and another 73 reported vote total changes of fewer than 10 votes. That said, seven more populous counties had vote count differentials greater than 100 votes, and Dekalb, Floyd, Fulton, and Gwinnett had discrepancies greater than 500 votes. Most notable was Floyd County, which turned up 2,600 previously untallied votes—an oversight for which a local election administrator was later fired. In the course of the audit, President Trump netted 496 votes, bringing Biden's lead to 12,248 votes out of nearly five million cast. Governor Kemp certified the results of the audit on November 20, but in his remarks he explicitly referenced that the law required him to do so and encouraged Secretary Raffensperger to investigate all potential instances of electoral fraud.

B. Recount

Even though the results of the audit (which doubled as a full hand tally) corroborated the original tally, the Trump campaign was entitled under Georgia law to request a machine recount by November 22 (two days after the certification deadline) if the post-audit margin remained below 0.5%. The margin hovered around 0.3% after the audit, and the Trump campaign formally requested a taxpayer-funded recount on November 21. The secretary of state instructed counties to complete the machine recount by December 2, which they did. The final results of the recount, available here, indicate that Biden officially won the state of Georgia by 11,779 votes—reflecting 99.965% accuracy in the original Election Day count.

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[8] On November 18, Secretary Raffensperger also announced the successful completion of the forensic audit of voting machines and shared that a certified testing laboratory "found no evidence of the machines being tampered."

On December 7, the secretary of state recertified the results of the presidential election, as did Governor Kemp—the last step towards committing Georgia's electoral votes to Biden. That same day, Governor Kemp issued a statement along with Lt. Governor Geoff Duncan, responding to Republican lawmaker's request that the Georgia General Assembly convene a special session to select a slate of electors who would, instead, vote for Trump. Kemp's statement unequivocally denied the request, stating that "[i]n the 1960s, the General Assembly decided that Georgia's presidential electors will be determined by the winner of the state's popular vote. Any attempt by the legislature to retroactively change that process for the November 3rd election would be unconstitutional."

In this statement, Governor Kemp and Lt. Governor Duncan also advised Republican lawmakers that "the judicial system remains the only viable - and quickest - option in disputing the results of the November 3rd election in Georgia." While it may have been the only option, the courts, ultimately, were not a successful forum for litigants hoping to invalidate the will of Georgia voters. A summary of the seven lawsuits filed in Georgia during the post-Election period—none of which had any impact on certification or results—is included in the Appendix.

C. Post-Election Environment

The post-election period in Georgia was rife with rampant misinformation, hyper partisanship, and unrelenting attacks, including by the President, on the legitimacy of Georgia's election administration. On December 9, once Biden's victory had become apparent, Republican senate candidates Loeffler and Perdue called on Secretary Raffensperger, a Republican and Trump supporter, to resign. Without citing evidence or specific shortcomings, the statement called Georgia's election management "an embarrassment" and criticized the secretary for failing "to deliver honest and transparent elections." Secretary Raffensperger responded in a strong statement, defending the legitimacy of the elections and refusing to step down. However, pressure continued to mount on him from Republicans loyal to President Trump. According to Raffensperger, U.S. Senator Lindsay Graham (R-SC) contacted him to "ask whether Raffensperger had the power to toss all mail ballots in counties found to have higher rates of nonmatching signatures." (Senator Graham disputes this account). On November 13, President Trump himself claimed, in a post on Twitter, that Secretary Raffensperger would not "let people checking the ballots see the signatures for fraud" and called the process "unfair and close to meaningless." President Trump repeatedly lambasted Governor Kemp as well.

The promotion of baseless fraud claims by the president and his supporters triggered an avalanche of media coverage saturated with unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud and other election-related misinformation. The fraud conspiracies in Georgia were far ranging and quickly

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refuted by the media: that dead people voted ([false](#)), that more people voted than even live in Georgia ([false](#)), that ballots were tossed into a Spalding dumpster ([false](#)), that an election worker ripped up a Trump ballot ([false](#)), that a voting machine technician in Gwinnett manipulated votes ([false](#)), that suitcases of ballots were counted without observers in Fulton County ([false](#)), that an election worker fabricated votes ([false](#)), that there was no signature verification process ([false](#)), and countless more.

Even though many of these fraud theories were easily debunked, the effects of politically motivated misinformation and disinformation being weaponized to denigrate the election's integrity were profoundly dangerous. Secretary Raffensperger and his wife, state election official [Gabriel Sterling](#) and his wife, and [election workers](#) across the state received numerous death threats and were subjected to intimidation. The election worker captured on video ripping up instructions that a viral video claimed was a Trump ballot said he had to go into [hiding](#), dye his hair, and shave his beard after he was doxxed and received death threats. On December 1, Sterling held a [press conference](#) to denounce the threats, declaring that "it has all gone too far" and "has to stop." He addressed President Trump directly, observing that Trump "had not condemned these actions or this language" and imploring him to "stop inspiring people to commit potential acts of violence," because "someone's gonna get hurt, someone's gonna get shot, someone's gonna get killed."

After losing the presidential race, Trump, his campaign, and his allies filed more than 70 lawsuits challenging the validity of the election. More lawsuits were filed in Georgia than in any other state. These suits included allegations of fraudulent or unqualified voters voting in Georgia, challenges to administrators using private funding, and complaints that Dominion Voting machines rigged the election in favor of Biden. None of the suits filed in Georgia ultimately reversed or revised the election results, and a signature audit ordered by the Georgia secretary of state found no evidence of issues. A detailed analysis of post-election litigation in Georgia can be found [here](#).

The intensity of the political climate in Georgia may have become particularly vitriolic after the election because of the stakes of the senate runoffs. Both of Georgia's seats in the U.S. Senate were set to be decided January 5 in a run-off, and the outcome of those races would also decide, for the nation, which party had control of the U.S. Senate in the new Congressional session. Republicans needed to keep their base of supporters engaged after November's defeat. However, the strategy of denigrating the Georgia presidential voting may have backfired: Vilification of the electoral process may have [hurt](#) Republican incumbent prospects in the January 5 senate runoff, as some hardline Trump supporters claimed that Republican candidates had not done enough to secure a Trump victory in Georgia.

VII.   Conclusion

This year's general election offered many and varied challenges to Georgia's election officials. They had to grapple with a dangerous pandemic, new voting machines, an overwhelming interest in absentee balloting, and a record-shattering surge in voter turnout. In the post-election period, they faced the daunting challenge of a never-before-run Risk Limiting Audit in Georgia, plus a recount and relentless personal and political attacks on the integrity of Georgia's election administration. Despite it all, they welcomed close to five million voters into the electoral process—an increase of around 800,000 voters from just four years ago—and facilitated an overall smooth and safe election. While there were issues that could be improved, Secretary of State Raffensperger called Georgia's administration of the November 2020 election "a resounding success" in light of these accomplishments.

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