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Lessons from the States: Building Trust in Georgia Elections

State Election Series 2 of 3

By Chris McIsaac and Scot Turner

Georgia is widely recognized as a leader in election administration and incorporates best practices across many aspects of its election system. Still, the state has opportunities to improve and learn from other jurisdictions.

Executive Summary

The American election system is highly decentralized and relies on state and local governments to set policy and administer elections. This structure results in significant variation in how different jurisdictions run elections, creating opportunities for states to learn from each other's successes, challenges, and best practices. To explore these differences and promote cross-state learning, we developed a policy study series focused on the unique blend of election policies in three swing states that have played pivotal roles in recent federal elections: Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania.[1]

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1. Chris McIsaac and Bill Gates, "Lessons from the States: Building Trust in Arizona Elections," *R Street Policy Study* No. 326, June 2025. https://www.rstreet.org/research/lessons-from-the-states-building-trust-in-arizona-elections.

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This second paper in the series focuses on Georgia and five aspects of the state's voting system that are especially instructive:

1. **Maintaining accurate voter registration lists.** Georgia's citizenship requirement and its participation in the Electronic Registration Information Center help ensure the accuracy of voter rolls.
2. **Voter identification (ID).** Georgia has a strict photo ID requirement to vote, which is supported by the state's policy of issuing free voting IDs to eligible voters.
3. **Voting machines.** Georgia's heavy reliance on electronic voting machines conflicts with the growing interest among some policymakers to expand the use of paper ballots.
4. **Runoff elections.** Georgia election outcomes are frequently determined in runoffs, which are characterized by high costs and low turnout.
5. **Election law training for law enforcement.** Georgia is leading the nation in raising police officers' knowledge about election law with new training requirements.

By exploring these policies, this paper seeks to provide policy insights that can help build trust in elections in Georgia and beyond.

Introduction

No two states approach election administration in the same way, due to the uniquely high degree of decentralization in the electoral system. Because local governments hold primary responsibility for election policy and administration in their respective jurisdictions, the differences that arise across the nation provide opportunities for states to learn from each other about the strengths and weaknesses of various election policies.

Georgia is widely recognized as a leader in election administration and incorporates best practices across many aspects of its election system.[2] Still, the state has opportunities to improve and learn from other jurisdictions. Five elements of Georgia's system rise to the forefront as especially suitable for lessons and learning. First, Georgia maintains accurate voter rolls using the multi-state Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) and citizenship databases.[3] Second, after nearly two decades of implementation, Georgia has one of the nation's strictest voter identification (ID) laws.[4] Third, machine-based voting methods at the polls have led to growing interest in paper ballots.[5] Fourth, runoff elections in Georgia are typically characterized by low

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2. Theo Menon et al., "The State of State Election Policy in 2024," Bipartisan Policy Center, Sept. 26, 2024.https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/the-state-of-state-election-policy-in-2024; "Election Integrity Scorecard: All State Scores," The Heritage Foundation, last accessed May 4, 2025. https://www.heritage.org/electionscorecard/pages/all-state-scores.html.
3. "Georgia's Historic Voter List Maintenance Serves as a National Model for Election Integrity," Georgia Secretary of State, Feb. 6, 2024. https://sos.ga.gov/news/georgias-historic-voter-list-maintenance-serves-national-model-election-integrity.
4. "Georgia Voter Identification Requirements," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed May 29, 2025. https://sos.ga.gov/page/georgia-voter-identification-requirements.
5. Stanley Dunlap, "Georgia Senate GOP muscles through election overhaul to allow hand-marked paper ballots," Georgia Recorder, April 2, 2025. https://georgiarecorder.com/2025/04/02/georgia-senate-gop-muscles-through-election-overhaul-to-allow-hand-marked-paper-ballots.

voter turnout and high administrative costs.[6] Last, Georgia is the first state in the nation to implement election training for law enforcement officers.[7]

This paper explores these topics at length to highlight the components of Georgia's system that can serve as a model for other states seeking to build trust in the election process. It also outlines areas where Georgia can improve based on the experiences and best practices found in other parts of the country.

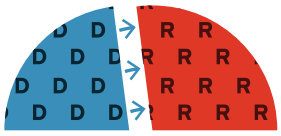
Overview of Georgia's Election System

To establish a foundation for this paper's discussions on the five key aspects of Georgia's voting system mentioned above, we must first establish a baseline understanding of the current structure of the state's voting system. This includes factors like its emergence as a competitive state, election administration practices, voter eligibility requirements, methods for casting and counting votes, and approaches to runoff and primary elections.

Emergence as a Competitive State

Georgia is the eighth largest state in the United States with an estimated population of 11.2 million residents distributed across 159 counties.[8] Approximately 56 percent of the state's population is concentrated in 29 counties that make up the greater Atlanta region, including Fulton County, which is the state's largest at 1.1 million residents.[9]

Politically, Georgia has been a reliably red state for most of the past 20 years, though Democrats have fared well in recent elections. At the state level, Republicans have controlled both the Governor's office and the state legislature since 2004, but their legislative majority has narrowed since 2016.[10] Meanwhile, at the federal level, in 2020, Joe Biden became the first Democrat to carry Georgia since Bill Clinton's win in 1992, and the state is currently represented by two Democrats in the U.S. Senate (Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock) who won their seats in 2021.[11] Republicans also performed well in the last two election cycles: Governor Kemp solidly won re-election in his rematch with Stacey Abrams in 2022, and President Trump carried Georgia in 2024 by a margin of 51 to 49 percent.[12]



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6. John A. Tures, "Georgia runoff elections are exciting, but costly for voters and democracy," The Conversation, Dec. 5, 2022. https://theconversation.com/georgia-runoff-elections-are-exciting-but-costly-for-voters-and-democracy-195786.
7. Carl Smith, "Georgia First in the Nation to Require Police Training in Election Law," Governing, July 11, 2024. https://www.governing.com/politics/georgia-first-in-the-nation-to-require-police-training-in-election-law.
8. "Net International Migration Drives Highest U.S. Population Growth in Decades," United States Census Bureau, Dec. 19, 2024. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/population-estimates-international-migration.html.
9. Office of Management and Budget, "OMB Bulletin No. 23-01," Executive Office of the President, July 21, 2023, p. 44. https://www.bls.gov/bls/omb-bulletin-23-01-revised-delineations-of-metropolitan-statistical-areas.pdf#page=47; "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024 (CO-EST2024-POP-13)," United States Census Bureau, March 2025. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-total.html.
10. Elyse Apel, "Election 2024: Republican majority forecast in Georgia House," The Center Square, Oct. 9, 2024. https://www.thecentersquare.com/georgia/article_122ebab8-81a7-11ef-b52e-07926f1b1c5a.html; "State Partisan Composition," National Conference of State Legislatures, April 30, 2025. https://www.ncsl.org/about-state-legislatures/state-partisan-composition.
11. Steve Peoples et al., "Warnock, Ossoff win in Georgia, handing Dems Senate control," *Associated Press*, Jan. 6, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/georgia-election-results-4b82ba7ee3cc74d33e68daadaee2cbf3.
12. Adam Edelman, "Georgia Republican Gov. Brian Kemp wins re-election, defeating Stacey Abrams in rematch," NBC News, Nov. 8, 2022. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2022-election/georgia-governor-election-2022-brian-kemp-wins-rcna54880; "Georgia President Results: Trump Wins," NBC News, Nov. 5, 2024. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-elections/georgia-president-results.

Roles and Responsibilities

As elections in Georgia become increasingly competitive, the state's election practices are receiving increased scrutiny from lawmakers and regulators.[13] Setting policy and administering elections in Georgia is a joint effort between state and local governments. At the state level, the legislature and the Governor are responsible for approving the laws that govern elections in every county across Georgia. At the local level, counties administer the elections consistent with state law and under the supervision of the Secretary of State and the State Board of Elections.[14] While most states entrust the statewide election oversight responsibilities to either the Chief Election Official or an election board or commission, Georgia is one of only seven states where the responsibilities are shared between the two.[15]

For example, the Secretary of State maintains the statewide voter registration list, canvasses vote totals, and trains local election workers.[16] Meanwhile, the State Election Board issues rules and regulations that promote uniform practices by local election administrators; investigates election fraud and irregularities; and makes recommendations to the general assembly regarding election administration.[17]

In Georgia, counties are responsible for administering the elections and registering voters, though there are differences in how each divides those responsibilities. For example, in Cobb County, the Elections Division is responsible for all aspects of election administration, and the County Board of Elections and Registration provides oversight, but in Chatham County, the Board of Elections is responsible for administering the election, and the Board of Registrars is responsible for voter registration and mailing absentee ballots.[18]

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Voter Eligibility

Like most states, the basic requirements for voting in any Georgia election include being 18 years of age, a U.S. citizen, and a resident of the state.[19] To confirm eligibility, Georgia requires voters to present a photo ID when casting a ballot in person or to provide their ID number when requesting an absentee ballot.[20] Georgia statute also requires voters to provide documentary proof of U.S. citizenship when registering to vote and allows voters who are 17.5 years or older to pre-register if they will be 18 by Election Day.[21]

13. Stanley Dunlap, "Election rule changes stalled before Georgia lawmakers adjourned and ensured for 2026 midterms," Georgia Recorder, April 14, 2025. https://georgiarecorder.com/2025/04/14/election-rule-changes-stalled-before-georgia-lawmakers-adjourned-and-ensured-for-2026-midterms; Kate Brumback, "New rules regarding election certification in Georgia to get test in court," *Associated Press*, Sept. 30, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/georgia-state-election-board-rules-certification-trial-3b478ece3ed6437f0bc8499c77341bec.
14. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-50. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-2/part-2/section-21-2-50; O.C.G.A. § 21-2-31. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-2/part-1/subpart-1/section-21-2-31.
15. "Election Administration at State and Local Levels," National Conference of State Legislatures, Jan. 29, 2025. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/election-administration-at-state-and-local-levels.
16. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-50. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-2/part-2/section-21-2-50.
17. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-31. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-2/part-1/subpart-1/section-21-2-31.
18. "Board of Elections and Registration," Cobb County, GA, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://www.cobbcounty.org/elections/about/board; "Chatham County Board of Elections," Chatham County, GA, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://elections.chathamcountyga.gov; "Chatham County Board of Registrars," Chatham County, GA, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://voter.chathamcountyga.gov.
19. "How to Guide: Registering to Vote," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://sos.ga.gov/how-to-guide/how-guide-registering-vote.
20. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-417. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-11/part-1/section-21-2-417; O.C.G.A. § 21-2-381(a)(1)(c)(i). https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-10/section-21-2-381.
21. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-216. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-6/section-21-2-216.

Casting a Ballot and Counting the Vote

Georgians have a variety of options for how they can vote. This includes absentee voting, whereby ballots can be returned via U.S. Postal Service (USPS) or in a secure drop box.[22] Voters who prefer to cast a ballot in person can do so on Election Day or during the early voting period that begins approximately three weeks before the election.[23]

Georgia has offered flexible voting options for two decades, including in-person early voting since 2003 and no-excuse absentee voting since 2005.[24] In 2024, 76 percent of voters voted early or by mail compared to 24 percent who voted in person on Election Day.[25] To help expedite counting the vote and finalizing results, election workers are permitted to complete some ballot pre-processing tasks—such as driver's license number verifications—immediately upon receipt, whereas others must begin closer to Election Day.[26]

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Runoff and Primary Elections

One of the unique features of Georgia's election system is the requirement that winners receive at least 50 percent of the vote and the resulting use of runoff elections.[27] Georgia is one of only seven states that require runoffs in primary elections and one of only three that use runoffs in the general election when no candidate receives a majority of the vote.[28] When that occurs, the two candidates with the highest vote totals face off in another election held 28 days after the original contest. Traditionally, these elections tend to have lower turnout than the primary or general election.[29]

When it comes to primary elections, Georgia is one of 15 states that hold partisan primary elections open to all registered voters.[30] Under this primary election structure, Georgians do not affiliate with a political party when registering to vote and instead select either a Republican, Democratic, or nonpartisan primary ballot at the polls or when requesting an absentee ballot.[31] For example, in the May 2022 primary elections for Georgia Governor and U.S. Senate, approximately 1.2 million votes were cast in the Republican races and 730,000 were cast in the Democratic contests.[32]

22. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-380. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-10/section-21-2-380; O.C.G.A. § 21-2-382(c)(1). https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-10/section-21-2-382.
23. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-385(d)(1)(A). https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-10/section-21-2-385.
24. "Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the state of Georgia 2003, volume 1," Digital Library of Georgia, last accessed May 21, 2025, pp. 517-558. https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-bl407-b2003-bv-p1#text; "Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the state of Georgia 2005, volume 1" pp. 253-302. https://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/data/dlg/ggpd/pdfs/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-bl407-b2005-bv-p1-bbk-p1.pdf#page=295.
25. "Election Data Hub - Turnout," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://sos.ga.gov/page/election-data-hub-turnout.
26. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-386. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-10/section-21-2-386.
27. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-501. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-12/section-21-2-501.
28. "Runoffs in Primary and General Elections," National Conference of State Legislatures, Jan. 22, 2025. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/primary-runoffs.
29. Rachel Hutchinson and Ben Fitzgerald, "Low Turnout and High Cost in Primary Runoffs, 1994-2024," Fair Vote, Dec. 17, 2024. https://fairvote.org/report/low-turnout-and-high-cost-in-primary-runoffs-1994-2024.
30. "State Primary Election Types," National Conference of State Legislatures, Feb. 6, 2024. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/state-primary-election-types.
31. "Application for Georgia Official Absentee Ballot," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://sos.ga.gov/sites/default/files/forms/Absentee_Ballot_Application_20212.pdf.
32. "May 24, 2022 - General Primary -Nonpartisan General Election," Georgia Secretary of State, May 24, 2022. https://results.sos.ga.gov/results/public/Georgia/elections/2022MayGenPri.

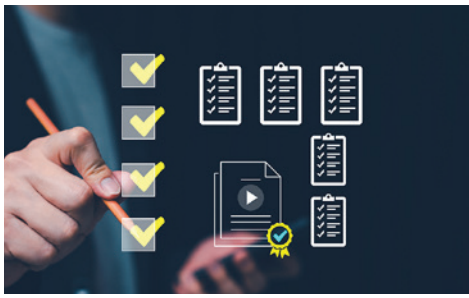
In the next sections, with this overview in mind, we take a closer look at Georgia's unique blend of election policies and identify lessons that can inform policy discussions in the Peach State and beyond.

Maintaining Accurate Voter Registration Lists

Voter registration lists are constantly in flux as voters are added, removed, or updated to reflect changes in their life circumstances. In addition, certain individuals in some states may become ineligible to vote due to inactivity, criminal conviction, or mental incapacity.[33] Voter list maintenance includes the various procedures states follow to ensure that only eligible individuals are registered to vote, and Georgia has an extensive program that provides two useful models that could be adopted in other states.

Background

One of the most effective ways for states to maintain accurate voter registration lists is to share information across jurisdictions. Georgia does this by participating in ERIC, a multi-state registration program that facilitates the exchange of voter registration and motor vehicle division data across states to more easily identify individuals who may have duplicate registrations within a state or across multiple member states.[34]



ERIC—which has identified more than 40 million voter registrations that may be inaccurate or out of date since 2012—remains a proven model for strengthening the reliability and accuracy of voter registration lists.

Established in 2012, ERIC currently has 25 member states.[35] This is down from a peak of 33 states in 2022 before nine Republican states withdrew from the organization, citing concerns around data sharing and privacy.[36] However, ERIC—which has identified more than 40 million voter registrations that may be inaccurate or out of date since 2012—remains a proven model for strengthening the reliability and accuracy of voter registration lists (although it would be further strengthened if more states participated).[37]

Beyond participating in ERIC, Georgia takes additional steps to verify the citizenship status of registered voters. Like Arizona, Georgia law requires that an individual be a U.S. citizen to vote in Georgia elections.[38] However, rather than following Arizona's approach of requiring proof of citizenship at the point of registration, Georgia relies instead on back-end database checks to identify ineligible individuals.[39] This avoids the complexities of Arizona's federal-only voter list while still providing effective protection.[40] For example, an audit conducted in 2022 by Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger found

33. "Voter Registration List Maintenance," National Conference of State Legislatures, Dec. 10, 2024. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voter-registration-list-maintenance.
34. "How Does It Work," Electronic Registration Information Center, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://ericstates.org/how-does-it-work.
35. "Which States Are Members of ERIC?," Electronic Registration Information Center, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://ericstates.org/about.
36. Matt Vasilogambros, "Why Are GOP-Led States Leaving Voter Registration Group ERIC?," Governing, May 23, 2023. https://www.governing.com/politics/why-are-gop-led-states-leaving-voter-registration-group-eric.
37. "Statistics," Electronic Registration Information Center, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://ericstates.org/statistics; Ryan Williamson, "Guest opinion: Instead of leaving ERIC, conservatives should convince others to join," R Street Institute, March 17, 2023. https://www.rstreet.org/commentary/guest-opinion-instead-of-leaving-eric-conservatives-should-convince-others-to-join.
38. GA Code § 21-2-216. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-6/section-21-2-216.
39. Christina A. Cassidy, "GOP pushes ahead with citizenship voting bill. How does Georgia already approach it?," 11 Alive, March 3, 2025. https://www.11alive.com/article/news/politics/elections/citizenship-voting-bill-congress-how-georgia-approaches-it/85-d42d64ac-8082-40ff-960c-e010148cd53f.
40. "Federal Only Voters," Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://www.azcleanelections.gov/federal-only-voters.

that Georgia's backend citizenship checks prevented 1,600 individuals from registering to vote.[41]

Lesson: Information sharing and existing databases can help states maintain secure and accurate voter registration lists without burdening voters

The common thread that connects ERIC's approach to sharing data and Georgia's audit of citizenship status is the government-led process and its reliance on existing sources of information. Rather than placing new burdens on voters to take additional steps to confirm their eligibility to vote, the government coordinates data sharing through ERIC and other existing sources to conduct the audit.

Rather than placing new burdens on voters to take additional steps to confirm their eligibility to vote, the government coordinates data sharing through ERIC and other existing sources to conduct the audit.

For example, Georgia's citizenship check relies on information from the state's Department of Driver Services and also the federal Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) program administered by the Department of Homeland Security.[42] In combination, these two data sources allow Georgia election officials to check citizenship status and avoid registering individuals who are confirmed noncitizens. While relying on SAVE data is not a perfect solution, it has proven to be a valuable tool in Georgia's election security toolbox.[43] In fact, a recent audit of the Georgia voter rolls identified just 20 noncitizens out of a total voter registration list of 8.2 million.[44]

Similarly, participation in ERIC or other data-sharing agreements across states allows election officials to do the heavy lifting of verifying eligibility by comparing various sources of information that different areas of the government already possess. For example, the primary data sources ERIC relies on include state voter registration lists; license and ID information from state motor vehicle divisions; National Change of Address data from the USPS; and the Limited Access Death Master File from the Social Security Administration.[45]

In 2025 alone, Georgia's participation in ERIC contributed to the removal of more than 170,000 ineligible voters from the state's voter rolls as part of a broader update that affected nearly 500,000 records statewide.[46] However, despite its utility, lawmakers introduced legislation in 2025 to withdraw Georgia from ERIC and prohibit participation in similar multi-state list-maintenance organizations.[47] Legislators folded the measure into a broader omnibus bill—House Bill 397—that also revised State Election Board

41. "Citizenship Audit Finds 1,634 Noncitizens Attempted to Register to Vote," Georgia Secretary of State, March 28, 2022. https://sos.ga.gov/news/citizenship-audit-finds-1634-noncitizens-attempted-register-vote.
42. "About SAVE," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Nov. 7, 2024. https://www.uscis.gov/save/about-save/about-save.
43. Brad Raffensperger, "Letter to Secretary Noem," Georgia Secretary of State, Feb. 3, 2025. https://mcusercontent.com/bb95d9c7cf4b94c9f44421f7c/files/14712150-6197-4466-d31c-b2d0beb97e9d/Letter_to_Secretary_Noem.01.pdf.
44. "Georgia citizenship audit finds few noncitizens on voter rolls," *Associated Press*, Oct. 23, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/georgia-noncitizens-voter-rolls-14532ef49b66f9cbf34ff483d2534280.
45. "How Does It Work." https://ericstates.org/how-does-it-work.
46. Christopher King, "Georgia set to purge nearly half-million inactive voters this summer," Fox 5 Atlanta, March 24, 2025. https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/georgia-set-purge-nearly-half-million-inactive-voters-summer.
47. Stanley Dunlap, "Georgia House Republicans advance bill to withdraw state from voter location data group," Georgia Recorder, Feb. 19, 2025. https://georgiarecorder.com/2025/02/19/georgia-house-republicans-advance-bill-to-withdraw-state-from-voter-location-data-group.

oversight and various election administration procedures, but this proposal did not receive final passage during the 2025 legislative session.[48]

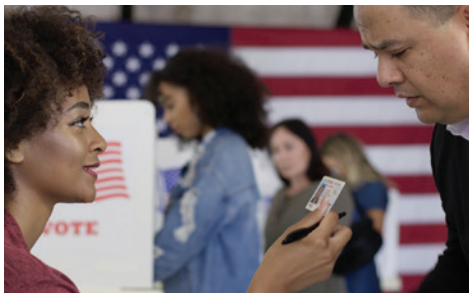
The debate surrounding ERIC reflects broader national trends, with several states reevaluating their participation amid data-sharing and governance concerns.[49] Yet in Georgia, the data-driven benefits of ERIC remain evident, and the state continues to rely on the system to support accurate and secure voter rolls. In combination, with the citizenship checks, these data-driven practices can help states efficiently and effectively ensure that voter registration lists remain accurate with minimal impact on eligible voters.

Voter ID

One of the primary ways that Georgia prevents ineligible voters from participating in elections is by requiring a photo ID at the polls. This policy has been in place for nearly two decades, and Georgia's design and implementation experience provides useful insights for other states considering similar restrictions.

Background

The modern history of voter ID in Georgia dates back to 1997 when lawmakers approved legislation requiring voters to present ID at the polls.[50] The law included a long list of acceptable documents, some of which did not include a photo.[51] Subsequent laws approved in 2005 and 2006 established Georgia's current requirement for voters to present a photo ID to cast a ballot at the polls.[52] Following years of litigation, the Georgia Supreme Court upheld the requirement in 2011, and Georgia is currently one of nine states that require a photo ID to vote.[53]



Requiring a photo ID at the polls is a popular policy, supported by 84 percent of Americans.

Requiring photo ID at the polls is a popular policy, supported by 84 percent of Americans.[54] In 2021, Georgia expanded the application of its voter ID policy to absentee voting when it approved SB 202—an omnibus election law that prompted various lawsuits, boycotts, and protests alleging voter suppression.[55] However, SB 202 remains in place and has been implemented without major disruption, including the simple change regarding absentee

48. House Bill 397, Senate Committee Substitute (LC 47 3701S), 2025, Georgia General Assembly. https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20252026/237907.
49. Wendy Underhill, "More Withdrawals From Voter Data Group Eric Likely," National Conference of State Legislatures, June 20, 2023. https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/more-withdrawals-from-voter-data-group-eric-likely.
50. "Acts and resolutions of the General Assembly of the state of Georgia 1997 [ga1997.1a.p1]," Digital Library of Georgia, last accessed June 16, 2025, pp. 662-668. https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_zlgl_579990726#text.
51. Joseph M. Colwell, "Reasonable Restrictions on the Franchise: Georgia's Voter Identification Act of 2006," *Mercer Law Review* 63:3 (May 2012), pp. 1134-1138. https://digitalcommons.law.mercer.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1685&context=jour_mlr#page=7.
52. Ibid.
53. *Democratic Party of Georgia, Inc. v. Perdue*, Georgia Supreme Court, March 7, 2011. https://cases.justia.com/georgia/supreme-court/s10a1517.pdf?ts=1462331137; "Voter ID Laws," National Conference of State Legislatures, Feb. 2, 2024. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.
54. Megan Brenan, "Americans Endorse Both Early Voting and Voter Verification," Gallup, Oct. 24, 2024. https://news.gallup.com/poll/652523/americans-endorse-early-voting-voter-verification.aspx.
55. "Georgia Voter Suppression Law Challenge (Consolidated Case)," Democracy Docket, Feb. 28 2025. https://www.democracydocket.com/cases/georgia-voter-suppression-law-consolidated-case; Kevin Draper et al., "M.L.B. Pulls All-Star Game From Georgia in Response to Voting Law," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/us/politics/mlb-all-star-game-moved-atlanta-georgia.html; Amanda King, "Protest calls for corporations to end Masters ties in stand against change to Georgia voting rights," *The Augusta Chronicle*, April 11, 2021. https://www.augustachronicle.com/story/news/local/2021/04/10/protest-calls-corporations-end-masters-ties-stand-against-georgia-senate-bill-202/7165796002.

ballots that required voters to verify their identity by writing their ID number on the absentee ballot envelope.[56] This replaced the prior signature verification approach, which required election workers to compare signatures on the ballot to signatures on file in a database to assess whether they were legitimate or a forgery.

Providing free access to an acceptable form of ID for eligible voters significantly reduced the risk of Georgians being denied access to the polls and, in doing so, demonstrated that the law was not an attempt to disenfranchise voters.

Lesson: Free access to voting IDs can increase voters' ability to comply with the law

When Georgia lawmakers amended the voter ID law in 2005 to reduce the number of acceptable forms of ID, it was promptly challenged in federal court.[57] The plaintiffs in the case successfully argued that the cost of obtaining a photo ID functioned as an unlawful barrier between qualified voters and their ballots and, as a result, the courts blocked the law.[58] In response, the legislature amended the statute in 2006 to provide free access to voting IDs for any eligible resident who does not otherwise possess an acceptable form of photo ID.[59] With this hurdle resolved, the voter ID law moved forward, and the Georgia Supreme Court upheld the law in 2011.[60]

Georgia's experience implementing one of the nation's strictest voter ID laws provides lessons on both substance and process. Substantively, Georgia shows that providing free access to an acceptable form of ID for eligible voters significantly reduced the risk of Georgians being denied access to the polls and, in doing so, demonstrated that the law was not an attempt to disenfranchise voters. Regarding process, the decision to quickly correct the 2005 law provided further evidence to the public and the courts that lawmakers had designed the requirement to improve confidence in the system while maintaining access to the polls for eligible voters.

Voting Machines

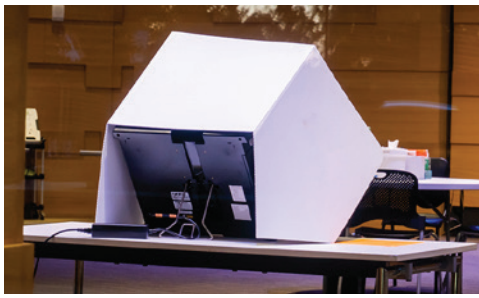
Georgia's swift and equitable resolution to the voter ID issue, however, stands in contrast to the ongoing policy debate around the machines used in the state's elections.

The technology used in American elections has evolved and varies significantly across jurisdictions.[61] In the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election in which George W. Bush defeated Al Gore following an extensive review of error-prone ballots cast in Florida with punch-card voting systems, Congress approved the Help America Vote Act, which included funding for states to update voting equipment.[62] In response, many states began migrating to

56. Kim Jarrett, "Justice Department dismisses lawsuit over Georgia election law," The Center Square, March 31, 2025. https://www.thecentersquare.com/georgia/article_cc2be89a-65db-44f7-b252-abaa6fd85991.html.
57. "Voter Photo Identification," Federal Judicial Center, Oct. 27, 2023. https://www.fjc.gov/sites/default/files/materials/29/EE-GAN-4-05-cv-201-Common-Cause.pdf.
58. Ibid.
59. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-417.1. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-11/part-1/section-21-2-417-1.
60. *Democratic Party of Georgia, Inc. v. Perdue*. https://cases.justia.com/georgia/supreme-court/s10a1517.pdf?ts=1462331137.
61. Morgan Thomas, "Election Technology Through the Years," The Council of State Governments, Nov. 8, 2023. https://www.csg.org/2023/11/08/election-technology-through-the-years.
62. Karen Shanton, "The Help American Vote Act of 2002 (HACA): Overview and Ongoing Role in Election Administration Policy," Congressional Research Service, May 8, 2023, p. 2. https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R46949/R46949.11.pdf#page=5.

electronic voting machines. More recently, though, states have begun to transition away from fully electronic systems and toward machines that scan a hand-marked paper ballot or generate a paper ballot based on the selections voters make on a touch screen.[63]

Georgia approved a statewide requirement to use direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machines in 2001 and has remained fully committed to machine-based voting either using DRE machines or, more recently, ballot-marking devices (BMD).[64] Today, Georgia is one of only five states where all in-person voters are required to mark their ballots using a machine.[65] Amid a growing interest among Republicans to shift even further toward a hand-marked and -counted, paper-based voting system, policymakers may want to consider providing additional flexibility for how voters choose to cast a ballot.[66]



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Background

In the 2000 election, Georgia counties used a variety of different types of voting equipment but still relied heavily on antiquated punch-card and mechanical-lever voting machines.[67] Because these dated technologies were riddled with flaws that affected election results, counties began to upgrade to optical scanner machines that read the markings on paper ballots in the 1990s; however, those updated machines still accounted for less than 40 percent of the votes cast in Georgia's 2000 election season.[68]

In response to concerns over technological accuracy in that election, Georgia lawmakers approved legislation directing the Secretary of State to conduct a pilot project to test and recommend new voting equipment to use in all counties no later than the 2004 primary election.[69] By November 2002, Georgia rolled out the new DRE machines statewide and has continued to use that style of voting machine for nearly two decades.[70]

In 2019 Georgia once again implemented a sweeping change to the type of voting equipment used in elections by shifting from DRE voting machines to BMDs.[71] The change in Georgia was part of a nationwide transition away from fully electronic voting machines over concerns that they were susceptible to

63. "Voting Technology," MIT Election Data & Science Lab, April 21, 2023. https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voting-technology#content-section-136.
64. "Acts and resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia 2001, volume 1," Digital Library of Georgia, last accessed June 16, 2025, pp. 269-294. https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-bl407-b2001-bv-p1#text; "The Verifier — Voting Equipment — November 2024," Verified Voting, last accessed April 7, 2024. https://verifiedvoting.org/verifier/#mode/navigate/map/voteEquip/mapType/ppEquip/year/2024.
65. Ibid.
66. "Resolution Urging a 'Return to Excellence' in American Voting and Elections," Republican National Committee, 2023. https://prod-static.gop.com/media/Resolution-Urging-a-Return-to-Excellence-in-American-Voting-and-Elections.pdf.
67. Cathy Cox, "The 2000 Election: A Wake-Up Call for Reform and Change," Georgia Secretary of State, January 2001, pp. 6-7. https://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/data/dlg/ggpd/pdfs/dlg_ggpd_s-ga-bs700-b-pm1-b2001-be4-belec-p-btext.pdf#page=6.
68. Ibid.; Charles Stewart III, "The Reliability of Electronic Voting Machines in Georgia," CALTECH/MIT Voting Technology Project, October 2004, p. 5. https://vote.caltech.edu/documents/123/vtp_wp20.pdf#page=5.
69. "Acts and resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia 2001, volume 1," pp. 269-294. https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-bl407-b2001-bv-p1#text.
70. Katharine Seelye, "The 2002 Campaign: The States; Georgia About to Plunge Into Touch-Screen Vote," *The New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2002. https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/30/us/the-2002-campaign-the-states-georgia-about-to-plunge-into-touch-screen-vote.html.
71. Johnny Kauffman, "Georgia Governor Signs Law Addressing Some Criticisms of Contested 2018 Election," NPR, April 4, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/04/04/709911541/georgia-governor-signs-law-addressing-some-criticisms-of-contested-2018-election; "Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the state of Georgia 2019, volume 1," pp. 7-40. https://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/data/dlg/ggpd/pdfs/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-bl407-b2019-bv-p1-belec-p-btext.pdf#page=119.

hacking and did not provide a method for effectively auditing the results.[72] The percentage of voters across the country living in jurisdictions that relied exclusively on DRE machines fell from 29 percent in 2016 to 5 percent in 2024.[73]

One of the main benefits of a BMD is that it generates a voter-verifiable paper record. Voters make their selections on an electronic touch screen, and the machine produces a paper ballot reflecting the voter's choices, either in the form of a printed ballot or a QR code. Then the voter can either insert a piece of paper into a scanner that reads the information and tabulates the results on-site or place it into a ballot box for jurisdictions that tabulate at a central location.[74] In addition, BMD devices allow states to provide options for voters who prefer to fill out a ballot by hand instead of using the electronic BMD because, in both cases, the completed ballot will be deposited into the same ballot scanner.

Lesson One: Hand-marking ballots could increase voter confidence, but hand-counts introduce additional complexities and risks

Georgia's 2019 decision to use BMDs that generate a paper record was undoubtedly the right call for improving election security. Generating a paper ballot greatly reduces the risk of a cyberattack or technical glitch disrupting an election.[75] However, recent Georgia history demonstrates a continued desire among some Republicans to move to an entirely manual system of hand-marked and hand-counted ballots. This includes proposed rules from the State Election Board from 2024 that the courts struck down as well as legislation introduced earlier this year that would have codified many of the same rule changes, including a requirement for election workers to hand count the number of ballots cast.[76]

Hand-marked ballots can still be scanned and tabulated using high-speed optical scanners, preserving administrative efficiency and allowing for robust post-election audits.

From an administrative perspective, it is important to distinguish between hand-marked ballots and hand-counted ballots, as the terms are often conflated in public discussions. A hand-marked ballot refers to any ballot filled out manually by a voter, typically using a pen or pencil, rather than by a BMD.[77] Hand-marked ballots are the most common form of voting nationwide, as they include all ballots cast by mail as well as a significant share of those cast in person.[78] Of note, these ballots can still be scanned and tabulated using high-speed optical scanners, preserving administrative efficiency and allowing for robust post-election audits.

72. Andrew Adams, "America Moves Decidedly Toward Paper-Based Elections," Governing, July 10, 2022. https://www.governing.com/next/america-moves-decidedly-toward-paper-based-elections.
73. "The Verifier — Voting Equipment — November 2024." https://verifiedvoting.org/verifier/#mode/navigate/map/voteEquip/mapType/ppEquip/year/2024; "The Verifier — Voting Equipment — November 2016," Verified Voting, last accessed April 7, 2024. https://verifiedvoting.org/verifier/#mode/navigate/map/voteEquip/mapType/ppEquip/year/2016.
74. Ibid.
75. Raj Karan Gambhir and Jack Karsten, "Why paper is considered state-of-the-art voting technology," Brookings Institution, Aug. 14, 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-paper-is-considered-state-of-the-art-voting-technology.
76. Kate Brumback, "Georgia State Election Board approves rule requiring hand count of ballots," *Associated Press*, Sept. 20, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/georgia-state-election-board-rules-da1f271f360b15353abebdf9ff183b3d; Jeff Amy, "Georgia fight over election rules resurfaces in last-minute legislation," *Associated Press*, March 26, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/georgia-election-laws-voter-challenges-hand-count-0f18871d43323f4baf8a5c4c5732c76a.
77. "Glossary of Election Terminology," United States Election Commission, July 16, 2021, p. 47. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/glossary_files/Glossary_of_Election_Terms_EAC.pdf#page=47.
78. "The Verifier — Voting Equipment — November 2026," Verified Voting, last accessed May. 4, 2024. https://verifiedvoting.org/verifier/#mode/navigate/map/voteEquip/mapType/ppEquip/year/2026.

In contrast, hand counting refers to the manual tallying of votes by election workers without the use of tabulators.[79] While hand counts may play a role in small jurisdictions or as part of targeted audits or recounts, they are generally impractical for large-scale elections due to the significant time, labor, and potential for human error involved.[80] For context, fewer than 0.2 percent of U.S. voters live in jurisdictions that conduct full hand counts of ballots.[81] Georgia's current infrastructure already supports scanning hand-marked ballots, particularly through its absentee-by-mail system, meaning a shift toward hand-marking does not require a shift toward hand-counting.

Giving all voters—not just those who choose to vote by mail—the option to hand-mark a paper ballot is a reasonable policy that would provide Georgians with greater freedom to vote in the manner of their choosing without requiring major disruptions to the state's existing ballot-counting process.

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Lesson Two: Voting system changes and upgrades come with implementation costs

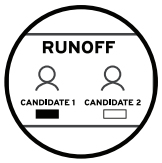
In recent years, Georgia lawmakers have explored various options for modifying the state's voting system. For example, earlier this year, the Georgia State Senate passed SB 214, which would authorize the use of hand-marked paper ballots statewide. The bill proposes transitioning to an optical scanning voting system that includes ballot-on-demand printing and allows electors—under certain conditions—to mark their ballots by hand rather than using electronic BMDs. While not yet enacted, the bill will be assessed again when the legislature reconvenes in 2026 and reflects an increasing interest among Georgia policymakers to give voters greater flexibility in how they cast their ballots. Importantly, this system would retain the use of tabulators to scan and record ballots, preserving both auditability and administrative efficiency.

Momentum in favor of hand-marked ballots also stems from a 2024 law—SB 189—that requires the removal of machine-readable QR codes from ballots beginning July 1, 2026.[82] Under the new statute, only human-readable text or filled-in bubbles may be used to tabulate votes. The change was driven by concerns that QR codes, which cannot be verified by most voters, undermined transparency and trust. However, while the law mandates significant equipment upgrades or replacements, it did not include an appropriation to fund the transition.[83] Election officials have projected that the cost of implementation will range from $25 million to more than $200 million, depending on the specific path Georgia takes to comply.[84]

79. "Glossary of Election Terminology," p. 47. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/glossary_files/Glossary_of_Election_Terms_EAC.pdf#page=47.
80. "Ballot Hand Counts Lead to Inaccuracy," Voting Rights Lab, Feb. 27, 2024. https://votingrightslab.org/2024/02/27/ballot-hand-counts-lead-to-inaccuracy.
81. "Hand Counted Paper Ballots," Verified Voting, last accessed April 7, 2024. https://verifiedvoting.org/election-system/hand-counted-paper-ballots; "Post-Election Audits," National Conference of State Legislatures, Sept. 11, 2024. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/post-election-audits.
82. "Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia 2024, volume 1," State of Georgia, last accessed June 16, 2025, pp. 1028-1043. https://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/data/dlg/ggpd/pdfs/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-bl407-b2024-bv-p1-belec-p-btext.pdf#page=1032.
83. Jessica Huseman, "Georgia bill to strip QR codes from ballots would cost tens of millions of dollars," Votebeat, May 2, 2024. https://www.votebeat.org/2024/05/02/georgia-voting-bill-strips-qr-code-from-ballots-cost-gabe-sterling.
84. Ibid.

These parallel developments—SB 214's optional hand-marked ballots and SB 189's QR code ban—underscore the evolving nature of Georgia's ballot design and voting system. Together, they represent both a shift in voter expectations around transparency and a growing call for legislative alignment between policy goals and implementation funding.

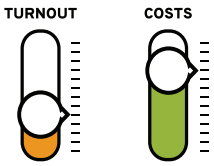
Runoff Elections



One especially unique feature of Georgia's election system is the use of runoffs in both primary and general elections. Runoff elections are used in jurisdictions that require candidates to receive more than 50 percent of the vote to win an election.[85] For Georgia races with three or more candidates, if none receive a majority of the votes, a second election is held four weeks later between the candidates who received the two highest vote totals.[86] Georgia is one of seven states that use this system for primary elections and one of three, along with Louisiana and Mississippi, that also use these runoffs in the general election.[87] North Carolina and South Dakota also use runoff elections, though only if a leading candidate fails to receive at least 30 percent and 35 percent of the vote, respectively.[88] While runoff elections do ensure that the winning candidate receives a majority of the votes cast in the runoff, Georgia's experience shows that these extra elections are persistently challenged by low turnout and high administrative costs.[89]

Background

The threshold for victory is one of the key distinguishing factors between different types of electoral systems, and the decision on what threshold to set represents a tradeoff between administrative simplicity and a candidate's broad support.[90] Under plurality voting, which is the most common approach used in the United States, the candidate that receives the most votes wins the election, regardless of what those votes represent as a percentage of the total votes cast.[91] While this system is simple from an administrative perspective because it requires holding only one election, it can result in victorious candidates with very narrow bases of support. For example, in the 2016 republican primary for North Carolina Congressional District 13, the winning candidate received 6,340 of the 31,000 votes cast.[92] These votes represented only a 20 percent share of the total, but it was sufficient to win under the plurality system because the remaining votes were divided among the other 16 candidates in the race.[93]



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85. "Runoffs in Primary and General Elections." https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/primary-runoffs.
86. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-501. https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-12/section-21-2-501.
87. "Runoffs in Primary and General Elections." https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/primary-runoffs.
88. Ibid.
89. Rachel Hutchinson and Ben Fitzgerald, "Low Turnout and High Cost in Primary Runoffs, 1994-2024," Fair Vote, Dec. 17, 2024. https://fairvote.org/report/low-turnout-and-high-cost-in-primary-runoffs-1994-2024.
90. Ryan Williamson and Matt Germer, "Reimagining the Ballot: A Comprehensive Look at Primary and General Election Systems," *R Street Policy Study* No. 310, October 2024, p. 3. https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/FINAL2-r-street-policy-study-no-310.pdf#.
91. "Alternative Voting Methods in the United States," United States Election Commission, March 2023, p. 3. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/Final_Alternative_Voting_Methods_in_the_United_States_508.pdf#page=3.
92. "06/07/2016 Official Local Election Results - Statewide," North Carolina State Board of Elections, July 2016. https://er.ncsbe.gov/?election_dt=06/07/2016&county_id=0&office=FED&contest=1037.
93. Ibid.

As noted above, in contrast, a runoff system requires that an additional election be held if the vote total for the leading candidate does not exceed a specified threshold. While used sparingly in the United States, the runoff is a common approach for electing presidents in countries all around the globe.[94]

While used sparingly in the United States, the runoff is a common approach for electing presidents in countries all around the globe.

Table 1 illustrates Georgia's sustained reliance on runoff elections over the past decade. It shows the annual distribution of the 73 primary runoffs held over the past 5 regular election cycles for the U.S. Congress and Georgia State Legislature. Although not included in this table, special elections held to fill vacancies resulted in another 26 runoffs over the same time period.[95]

Table 1: Primary Runoffs Held in Regular Congressional and State Legislative Elections, 2016-2024

	Total	2024	2022	2020	2018	2016
U.S. Congress	16	3	6	4	2	1
State Legislature	57	8	11	17	8	13

Source: "Georgia Election Results: Results for Recent and Historical Elections," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed May 2, 2025. https://results.sos.ga.gov/results/public/Georgia.

Georgia's use of runoffs also extends beyond campaigns for Congress or the state legislature; the 50 percent threshold also applies to offices such as Governor and Secretary of State as well as local municipal elections.

Although runoffs are deeply ingrained in the structure of Georgia's election system, there is often a major drop in participation, which undermines the goal of electing candidates that reflect the majority support of the electorate. For example, in the 8 legislative runoff elections held in 2024, there were 54 percent fewer total votes cast in the runoff elections that determined the winners compared to the original primary elections.[96] The drop-off was even more severe in the Senate District 38 Democratic primary, where turnout in the runoff fell by 78 percent.[97]

Although runoffs are deeply ingrained in the structure of Georgia's election system, there is often a major drop in participation, which undermines the goal of electing candidates that reflect the majority support of the electorate.

These low-turnout elections cost taxpayer dollars to administer, but alternative models exist that could help Georgia voters elect public officials more cost-effectively while maintaining higher levels of participation.

Lesson: Alternative electoral models such as RCV could help maintain voter turnout and reduce costs for taxpayers

Georgia's use of runoff elections has received growing scrutiny in recent years, particularly because of concerns related to cost, turnout, and voter fatigue.[98] A

94. Cynthia McClintock, "The Reform of Presidential-Election Rules in Latin America: Plurality, Runoff and Ranked-Choice Voting," Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, May 2019, p. 2. https://www.american.edu/centers/latin-american-latino-studies/upload/for-links-mcclintock_lasa_2019.pdf.
95. "Georgia Election Results: Results for Recent and Historical Elections," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed May 2, 2025. https://results.sos.ga.gov/results/public/Georgia.
96. "May 21, 2024- General Primary- Nonpartisan Election," Georgia Secretary of State, May 21, 2024. https://results.sos.ga.gov/results/public/Georgia/elections/2024MayGenPri; "June 18, 2024- General Primary/Nonpartisan General Election Runoff," Georgia Secretary of State, June 18, 2024. https://results.sos.ga.gov/results/public/Georgia/elections/2024JunPriRunoff.
97. Ibid.
98. Stanley Dunlap, "Senate runoff fatigue renews debate over election process in Georgia," Georgia Recorder, Dec. 8, 2022. https://georgiarecorder.com/2022/12/08/senate-runoff-fatigue-renews-debate-over-runoff-process-in-georgia.

2022 study estimated that runoff elections cost Georgia taxpayers more than $75 million during the 2020 election cycle alone.[99] Additionally, as mentioned earlier, voter turnout usually drops dramatically in runoff contests—by over 90 percent in some local races—raising concerns about representativeness and electoral legitimacy.[100] These secondary elections also extend campaign seasons, contributing to increased negative advertising and placing strain on election administrators and voters alike.

The two main approaches that Georgia could take to transition away from runoff elections include a shift to plurality voting where the candidate receiving the most votes is the winner or maintaining the existing requirement to achieve 50 percent support but using ranked choice voting (RCV) to determine the winner without holding a subsequent election.[101] Plurality voting introduces a whole new set of challenges, including the potential for winners in crowded races to be elected with very small bases of support, creating an incentive for candidates to seek support from narrow segments of the electorate. Alternatively, the potential for multiple rounds of voting under RCV incentivizes candidates to be broadly appealing to accumulate not only first-place votes from their strong supporters but also second-place votes that could be allocated to them under a runoff scenario. The RCV approach serves as an attractive alternative to Georgia's runoff system, as it holds the most promise for encouraging coalition building and positive campaigns focused on the issues.[102]

The RCV approach serves as an attractive alternative to Georgia's runoff system, as it holds the most promise for encouraging coalition building and positive campaigns focused on the issues.

Notably, Georgia already uses RCV for military and overseas voters covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act.[103] In these cases, voters may rank candidates on a single ballot, which is then re-tabulated if the race advances to a runoff.[104] This system allowed Georgia to shorten the runoff window from nine weeks to four weeks while remaining compliant with federal deadlines for transmitting and returning absentee ballots.[105] It also increases the chance that voters will participate in the runoff, as RCV does not require a subsequent action from voters, either to go to the polls or to fill out an early ballot weeks or months in the future.

RCV has been adopted in Alaska, Maine, and several local governments across the country.[106] While proposals to expand RCV have gained traction in some jurisdictions, they have also generated legislative pushback.[107] For the past two years, the Georgia State Senate has passed legislation that would prohibit the

99. Thomas Hartwell, "New Election System May Better Serve Georgians," Kennesaw State University, Oct. 31, 2022. https://www.kennesaw.edu/news/stories/2022/kennesaw-state-researchers-say-new-election-system-may-better-serve-georgians.php.
100. Ibid.; "Georgia Election Results: Results for Recent and Historical Elections," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed May 2, 2025. https://results.sos.ga.gov/results/public/Georgia.
101. "Glossary of Election Terminology," United States Election Commission, July 16, 2021, p. 67. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/glossary_files/Glossary_of_Election_Terms_EAC.pdf#page=67; "Ranked Choice Voting," National Conference of State Legislatures, April 18, 2025. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting.
102. Williamson and Germer. https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/FINAL2-r-street-policy-study-no-310.pdf#.
103. "Military and Overseas Voting," Georgia Secretary of State, last accessed May 2, 2025. https://sos.ga.gov/page/military-and-overseas-voting.
104. O.C.G.A. § 21-2-384(e). https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-21/chapter-2/article-10/section-21-2-384.
105. Adam Edelman, "How Georgia's new voting law affects the Senate runoff," NBC News, Nov. 19, 2022. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2022-election/georgias-new-voting-law-affects-senate-runoff-rcna57152.
106. "Ranked Choice Voting" National Conference of State Legislatures, April. 18, 2025. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting.
107. Ibid.

use of RCV statewide, though none of those bills have been signed into law.[108] At the same time, several Georgia cities have passed resolutions urging the General Assembly to authorize pilot programs for municipal RCV elections, reflecting continued interest in reform at the local level.[109] Permitting these pilot programs to advance at the local level would be a valuable exercise to explore the potential benefits of RCV, address any complications in a controlled environment, and—if proven a successful model—set the stage for rolling out the policy statewide.

Election Training for Law Enforcement

Georgia tends to be an early adopter of election policy reforms. In 1943, Georgia was the first state to lower the voting age from 21 to 18—a full 28 years before Congress codified that change nationally in the U.S. Constitution.[110] In addition, in the early 2000s, Georgia was among the first states to transition to new electronic voting machines and require voters to present a photo ID at the polls. Most recently, in 2024, Georgia became the first state to incorporate election law education into the state's police training curriculum.[111]

In recent years, there has been a national trend toward increased coordination between law enforcement and election officials. Georgia's law enforcement training requirement is the first example of a statewide commitment to elevating the baseline level of election knowledge across the law enforcement community. Enacted through the state's Peace Officers Standards Training Board (POST), the Georgia POST curriculum could serve as a useful model for other states seeking to adopt election law training for local law enforcement.

Georgia's law enforcement training requirement is the first example of a statewide commitment to elevating the baseline level of election knowledge across the law enforcement community.

Background

Election administration and public safety are two core government functions that primarily occur at the local level. Historically, there was minimal coordination between election officials and law enforcement personnel, and law enforcement's role was often limited to responding in the event of an emergency at a polling location.

However, in the aftermath of the 2020 election and with heightened concerns around the growing risks of political violence, election officials and law enforcement officers began to coordinate more.[112] Simple steps like communicating in advance, developing a plan, and conducting training exercises have become more common.[113]

108. Senate Bill 355, 2024, Georgia General Assembly. https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20232024/222143; Senate Bill 175, as passed Senate, 2025, Georgia General Assembly. https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20252026/235016.
109. "City/County Resolution Lists," Better Ballot Georgia, last accessed May 4, 2025. https://www.betterballotgeorgia.org/citycounty_resolutions_list.
110. Melanie Jean Springer, "Why Georgia? A Curious and Unappreciated Pioneer on the Road to Early Youth Enfranchisement in the United States," *Journal of Policy History* 32:3 (July 2020), pp. 273-324. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-policy-history/article/abs/why-georgia-a-curious-and-unappreciated-pioneer-on-the-road-to-early-youth-enfranchisement-in-the-united-states/E20B293C9CA1BC903E0EE37EC0BAD8C8; U.S. Const. amend. XXVI, § 1. https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-26.
111. Melissa Cruz, "Georgia mandates election training for police, as officials prepare for 'volatile' 2024," Savanah Morning News, June, 22, 2024. https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/06/22/georgia-mandates-election-training-for-police-officers/74162627007.
112. Alan Feuer, "Recent Poll Examined Support for Political Violence in U.S.," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/13/us/politics/a-poll-last-month-examined-support-for-political-violence-in-the-us.html.
113. "Five Steps to Safer Elections," Committee for Safe and Secure Elections, last accessed April 7, 2025. https://safeelections.org/five-steps-to-protect-our-elections-from-the-committee-for-safe-and-secure-elections.

For example, in preparation for the 2024 election, the Georgia Secretary of State hosted events across the state that brought local election officials and law enforcement representatives together.[114] Known as "tabletop exercises," these events allowed officials to prepare and practice responding to incidents that may occur before, during, or after the election.[115] Example scenarios included protests, cyberattacks, and natural disasters.

Tabletop exercises and other forms of coordination and planning are valuable and serve an important purpose, but not every frontline responding officer will have an opportunity to participate. In July 2024, the Georgia POST Council took an important step toward expanding the overall knowledge and awareness of election laws within the law enforcement community by adding 1 hour of election law education to the training that all new Georgia peace officers complete.[116] This first-of-its-kind training requirement went into effect at the start of 2025 and could serve as a model for raising the level of election law knowledge, as all states have their own version of a POST training board.[117]

Lesson One: Election law requires specialized and ongoing training for law enforcement

The state statutes that govern Georgia elections are extensive, complex, and frequently revised. Within the statutes, specific provisions address scenarios that law enforcement may encounter when responding to an incident at a polling location. Common examples include restrictions on electioneering activities near polling locations, rules governing the activities of poll watchers, prohibitions on threatening or intimidating behavior, and limitations on carrying a firearm within 150 feet of a polling location.[118] Having a clear understanding of these election-specific laws helps law enforcement tailor their response to an incident occurring at a polling location.

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While including this election law education for new officers is an important first step, it is also essential that election law be included as part of ongoing training. Refreshers are important because elections occur relatively infrequently compared to other law enforcement responsibilities and also because election laws are frequently amended. For example, since 2020, 19 states have enacted new laws that provide specific protections for election officials and poll workers, bringing the total number of states with such laws to 35.[119] While Georgia has two longstanding statutes that provide penalties for interfering with election workers, lawmakers have recently proposed additional protections.[120] Although

114. "Secretary Raffensperger Reaffirms Law Enforcement Partnership for Election Security," Georgia Secretary of State, Feb. 5, 2024. https://sos.ga.gov/news/secretary-raffensperger-reaffirms-law-enforcement-partnership-election-security.
115. "Election Security Partners Host 7th Annual Tabletop the Vote Exercise for 2024," National Association of State Election Directors, Aug. 27, 2024. https://www.nased.org/news/ttv24.
116. Carl Smith, "Georgia First in the Nation to Require Police Training in Election Law," Governing, July 11, 2024. https://www.governing.com/politics/georgia-first-in-the-nation-to-require-police-training-in-election-law.
117. "POST Portal," International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training, last accessed April 7 2025. https://www.iadlest.org/post-portal.
118. "Georgia 2024 Law Enforcement Quick Reference Guide," Committee for Safe and Secure Elections, last accessed May 4, 2025. https://safeelections.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CSSE-GA-Pocket-Guide_2024.pdf.
119. "State Laws Providing Protection for Election Officials and Staff," National Conference of State Legislatures, Jan. 13, 2025. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/state-laws-providing-protection-for-election-officials-and-staff.
120. Ibid.; Christie Diez, "New changes could come to Georgia poll worker protection bill," 11 Alive, Feb. 20, 2024. https://www.11alive.com/article/news/politics/poll-worker-protection-bill-hb-1118/85-0705f26c-a916-4fd4-a662-8c0e0070c4d7.

none are approved yet, issues like election worker safety underscore the value of such approaches.

Lesson Two: As election law trainings are adopted, ensure a clearly defined role for law enforcement

Ensuring open communication with the community and understanding the existing role that law enforcement officers play in the election process is key for states rolling out election law training programs.

Ensuring open communication with the community and understanding the existing role that law enforcement officers play in the election process is key for states rolling out election law training programs. For example, in Georgia, police officers are not physically present at polling locations unless they are responding to an incident.[121] On the other hand, in Alabama, Arkansas, Massachusetts, New York, and Wisconsin, police officers are required to be on-site at polling locations.[122]

Law enforcement training on election law is especially important in Georgia, given the unique balance of responsibilities between election administrators and peace officers. While officers play a critical role in maintaining public safety, Georgia law does not assign them direct authority over the administration of elections or the conduct of voters and poll workers unless responding to an active security concern. Preserving this separation of roles helps maintain public trust and ensures that no single actor or agency can assert undue influence over the electoral process.

Additionally, integrating election-specific de-escalation training into police instruction can help officers avoid unintentionally intimidating voters or interfering with election operations. For instance, the mere presence of uniformed officers near polling places may be interpreted differently across communities. Providing officers with clear guidance about appropriate engagement, restricted areas near polling sites, and the rights of voters helps reduce confusion and foster constructive interactions. Georgia's POST curriculum represents an important first step in that direction.

Conclusion

Georgia's election system experience is full of unique policy insights related to voter list maintenance, ID and citizenship verification policies, voting machines, runoff elections, and election law training for police officers. By exploring these topics, other states can learn from Georgia's experience to bolster trust in the election process. Similarly, Georgia can improve its election system by applying experiences and best practices found in other parts of the country. Ongoing experimentation—both in Georgia and nationwide—can strengthen trust in elections and ensure that systems continue to evolve in ways that meet the needs of voters.

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121. "Polling Places," National Conference of State Legislatures, Dec. 12, 2024. https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/polling-places.
122. Ibid.