National Vote At Home Coalition Analysis of Georgia Election Policy for 2021

A brief set of recommendations based on an analysis of current law and process

Georgia achieved monumental success this year in the conduct of their elections during a pandemic while implementing the largest statewide deployment of a new and improved statewide voting system that provided a more secure, auditable process with greatly improved county tabulation and adjudication systems for paper ballots. We are encouraged by the baseline systems that Georgia has in place to balance access, security, and integrity and are particularly pleased to see a no-excuse mail ballot policy, a robust early voting timeline, a strong data integrity framework in ERIC membership, a statewide signature verification process, and the implementation of post-election audits.

Georgia is on solid footing to further advance administrative and voter-centric reforms that will continue to make the process ***fair, accessible, secure, transparent, equitable, and reliable***. The election system must balance all of these values because one is not more important than the other. This is exactly why election policy is so delicate and challenging. If a voter has difficulty accessing the system due to a barrier, that makes the system less secure. Thus, we call on Georgia legislators to advance election policy reforms that consider all of these values collectively because that is ultimately how our democracy and election systems are stronger. When politicians put all voters first - just like businesses put customers first - everyone wins.

To improve the system in Georgia, we offer the following suggestions to the legislature:

1) **Create a single sign-up process for mail-in voting.** Instead of voters completing an absentee request each election, which is a massive data entry strain and costly to counties and taxpayers, Georgia should allow voters to sign-up for all future elections or a single election, similar to the rollover list now in use for certain voters. Secretary Raffersperger recently stated that mail-in ballots can strain county resources and this one solution to that challenge. Expanding the single sign-up/rollover list reduces data entry burdens and provides more predictability for election offices as they plan for resources each election. Arizona and Montana have this type of system and it has reduced costs and county workloads while also streamlining the process for voters. Florida also allows voters to sign-up for two general election cycles.

2) **Postage paid return envelopes.** Simplifying the return process for a ballot is just as important as simplifying the request process. Many rural voters have less access to polling places or post offices so covering postage provides equitable access across the state. Providing a business reply mail (BRM) process also streamlines the processing of ballots through postal operations because the BRM barcode is faster for USPS to process than first-class stamps.

Military and overseas ballot postage is already covered by the federal government in this way and some states like West Virginia cover postage for all mail ballots.

3) **Increased options for ballot return.** Many states with high mail ballot usage rely heavily on drop boxes as a return mechanism for ballots. Some are permanent boxes and video monitored 24/7, while others are a more temporary option, such as an attended box at city hall, a recreation center or a library. Georgia implemented drop boxes as a temporary measure in 2020, but should codify their use for future elections and set statewide security procedures to transfer ballots to election offices. Further, states are exploring more options like drive through drop offs and curbside solutions. These convenient drop-off options are sometimes a preferred method by voters who want an extra bit of reassurance that their ballot goes directly to the election official and is received on time. We highly recommend including provisions to allow for ballots to be received at polling or vote centers (where bi-partisan election judges already staff the locations), drop boxes and other locations deemed necessary by the county.

4) **Improve mail ballot envelope design & simplify the affidavit.** Our organization sponsored a training webinar with the [Center for Civic Design](#) on how to design mail ballot envelopes and that resource is [here](#). Georgia would benefit from simplifying the envelope affidavit language to eliminate confusing, outdated, and unnecessary language. This is an accessibility issue for voters and an important one that often gets overlooked. This would also help counties that are required to have dual languages such as Gwinnett.

5) **Ballot tracking & voter notification**. Ballot tracking software is a cost effective tool that increases voter confidence by allowing voters to track their ballot, much like tracking a package. It also enhances security and accountability of mail ballots for the elections office who can also track the ballots to make sure they have reached their destination. Furthermore, these tools can be used as another modality to contact voters if there is a signature mismatch or deficiency on their return envelope. Secretary Raffersperger implemented a [statewide ballot tracking system](#) this past cycle, and was one of the leading states to do so, and we recommend that Georgia renew this service for future elections and encourage the legislature to allocate appropriate funding for long-term use.

6) **Centralized mail ballot processing.** A centralized or regionalized mail ballot processing system can ensure uniform processing and tabulating standards and administration. The state would be able to maximize transparency, ensure procedural consistency, and increase efficiency. A centralized environment would also alleviate stress off of the counties and allow them to focus on in-person voting. Consolidating mail ballot processing operations also provides for efficiencies including technical support, creates more operational contingencies should emergencies arise with staff illness or lack of sufficient staff, and it makes observation of activities more efficient and more transparent for state staff, observers, the public.

7) **Implement security paper for mail ballots and in-person paper ballots.** One of Georgia's strengths is the statewide voting system and adding specialized security paper for mail ballots and in-person ballots would be an additional security enhancement.

8) **Increase ballot processing transparency.** To ensure that the election process is as transparent as possible, Georgia should implement best practices such as allowing poll watchers to observe the processing and counting procedures. Please see NVAHI's and the Carter Center's [paper](#) on transparency tips for more information. Additionally, the state should re-design the screen that shows signature verification and remove personal identifying information such as driver's license numbers or full dates of birth. The presence of this information on the screen has made it difficult for counties to offer more observation while balancing voter's personal security.

9) **More efficient use of address change data and information.** Georgia has established automated voter registration which has greatly improved the efficiency and accuracy of their voter registration and update process. However, Georgia could further streamline address updates especially by using the National Change of Address (NCOA) database and allow counties to make address changes and send a confirmation of the change. Currently, before the update can be made, a card must be sent which adds time to the process and is inefficient. States like Colorado have been making changes proactively for years using NCOA data and it is part of the reason Colorado has one of the most accurate and current address and voter registration information.

In summary, continuous improvement is important for policy-making and utilizing data and best practices is also key to making meaningful improvements that benefit all voters and the system as a whole. We see several areas which may or may not require legislative action where Georgia could implement voter-centric reforms. Creating a single sign-up option when requesting a mail ballot is an important place to start, but we also recommend implementing better ways of communicating with voters and ensuring the accuracy of the process, such as increasing access for poll watchers and continuing to use ballot tracking. However, there are also ideas that are not good for voters and election administration and have unintended consequences. This includes the proposals to require an excuse to receive a mail ballot which eliminates one of the aspects of Georgia's model that has been celebrated by experts on both sides of the aisle. Or the proposal to require a voter to include a photocopy of their identification in the mail ballot packet. This actually introduces security risks to the personal information being collected from the voter and the constitutional protection we have to vote a secret ballot. As an example, if the copy of ID is not properly removed from the envelope to ensure anonymity, the voters' choices could be exposed and violate the voter's right to a secret ballot. As with in-person voting, it is better to validate the voter at check-in (which is on the outside of the envelope with validation). Further, all voters do not have universal access to a copy machine, printer, and scanner to make the copy and thus, this sets up a barrier that now provides an inequitable voting experience.

So, we believe the proposals outlined above ensure that Georgia continues to have a fair, accessible, secure, transparent, equitable, and reliable election process and further strengthens current laws and procedures. And we will continue to advance voter-centric policies that put voters first.