Debacle in Georgia primary casts doubt on US elections

Patrick Martin
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The statewide primary election held in Georgia Tuesday—one of five states holding contests on June 9—turned into a debacle, with voters describing multiple breakdowns in precinct operations, mainly in the densely populated Atlanta metropolitan area.

Voters waited as long as four-and-a-half hours to vote, and in some cases found precincts closed or without ballots when they arrived. Local judges issued emergency orders to allow precincts to remain open past the 8 p.m. statewide closing time in 20 of the state's 159 counties, including many of the most populous.

According to a summary by the *Washington Post*, problems at the polls included:

• New poll workers brought in to replace those who declined to participate because of the danger of the coronavirus.

• Relocation or closure of 10 percent of polling locations because of the coronavirus.

• New ballot-marking devices that replaced a paperless system a federal judge had ruled was insecure.

• Insufficient preparations to count the record 1.3 million mail-in ballots sent by voters.

• A large increase in voter turnout overall, in part driven by the widespread protests over the police murder of George Floyd.

Voting rights advocates, civil rights groups and Democratic Party officials accused the Republican-run state government of deliberate voter suppression, noting that the problems were concentrated in the Atlanta area, which is heavily black and Hispanic. Republican officials cited the same figures to claim that local Democratic Party officials in Fulton County (Atlanta) and DeKalb County (Atlanta inner suburbs) had made insufficient preparations for the voter surge.

There are elements of truth in both explanations. One thing is certain: both local and state officials had ample time to make preparations, since the primary elections were originally set for March 24 and were postponed to May and then to June 9.

Besides Atlanta and its immediate environs, there were problems in Cobb and Gwinnett counties, further out from the center of the metropolitan area, and in Savannah. Gwinnett County, which is Republican-controlled, reported that polling equipment was delivered only on Election Day in 10 percent of precincts, forcing voters to cast "emergency ballots" while the machines were being set up. Many precincts ran out of these ballots.

Because of the coronavirus-related closure of schools and social clubs previously used as precincts, there was a consolidation in many areas into what one official called "megaprecincts." But social distancing rules limited the number of voters to four at a time, causing long lines. Voting machines were repeatedly sanitized during the day, further slowing the process.

The crisis at the polling stations was compounded by delays in counting the torrent of mail ballots, far larger than in any previous election. The state mailed out ballots to every registered voter, and 1.3 million were returned by the deadline of Election Day. State officials apparently insured that the resources were available to count these ballots in rural counties, but did not supply sufficient support to counties that comprise the Atlanta metro area.

Representatives of both capitalist parties issued statements calling the vote results into question. Senior counsel Justin Clark, a Trump campaign aide, denounced the huge number of mail-in votes as illegitimate,

claiming, "The only way to make sure that the American people will have faith in the results is if people who can, show up and vote in person."

Biden campaign attorney Rachana Desai Martin told the Associated Press that the scenes in Georgia were a "threat" to democracy. "We only have a few months left until voters around the nation head to the polls again, and efforts should begin immediately to ensure that every Georgian—and every American—is able to safely exercise their right to vote," she said.

Two former US senators from Colorado, both Democrats, went further, issuing a warning published by *Politico* that if the breakdowns in Georgia were repeated in the November 3 presidential election, Trump would make use of them to remain in power regardless of the outcome of the vote.

Tim Wirth and Gary Hart wrote, "with protests sweeping the country and Trump encouraging a strong response from police departments and the National Guard, voters should be worried that Trump could encourage or impose curfews, postal service problems and a military presence at the polls that might dampen voter turnout on Election Day."

They warned that in the event of continuing or recurring civil unrest, "Trump could declare a national emergency and federalize the National Guard, and deploy other parts of the military, to keep order in key cities and states on Election Day. Such a response could be seen as intimidating to liberal and minority groups, and would likely have the effect of dampening turnout… Last, Trump could meddle with the US Postal Service, which could have a big impact on an election with so many ballots being cast through the mail."

Even without such intervention, the long delays necessitated by the hand-counting of mail ballots—which cannot be easily mechanized for scanning because of the conditions in which the ballots arrive—may delay declaring results in a close election, leading to a protracted period of political uncertainty. The state of Pennsylvania did not resolve all contests from its June 2 primary until Monday, June 8, for example.

In Georgia, vote tabulation continued well into the day on Wednesday, leaving several contests undecided. Under Georgia law, if no candidate wins 50 percent of the vote for a Democratic or Republican nomination, there must be a runoff between the top two candidates. Several candidates were just short of the 50 percent mark needed to avoid a runoff set for August 11.

Jon Ossoff, the favorite of the Democratic Party establishment to challenge incumbent Republican Senator David Perdue, won 50.5 percent of the vote according to reports Wednesday night and will be the party's nominee for the US Senate in November. Ossoff narrowly lost a 2017 special congressional election in the Atlanta suburbs that, at more than $80 million, was the most expensive House of Representatives contest in US history.

Unusually, Georgia has two US Senate seats on the ballot in the same year. Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler, named to fill the vacancy left by the resignation of Senator Johnny Isakson due to failing health, faces a November 3 "jungle primary" against both Republican challenger Doug Collins, a sitting congressman, and several Democratic opponents, with a runoff likely in January.

All five states that held primaries Tuesday made extensive use of mail ballots. All five have Republican secretaries of state in charge of the election procedures, and three of the five—Georgia, Nevada and West Virginia—sent out mail ballots to all or most registered voters, leading to a significant increase in turnout.

In one other result from Tuesday's voting, Paula Jean Swearengin, a supporter of Bernie Sanders, won the Democratic nomination for the US Senate from West Virginia, defeating former state senator Richard Ojeda, a former Army Airborne commander with backing from pro-military groups. Ojeda was an unsuccessful Democratic candidate for Congress in 2018.

Swearengin won 38 percent of the vote compared to 33 percent for Ojeda and 29 percent for Richie Robb, former mayor of South Charleston. Swearengin will run against incumbent Republican Senator Shelley Moore Capito, who has raised more than $3 million for the race compared to Swearengin's $29,000.

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