

US House Committee on House Administration
Field Hearing, Atlanta GA
July 10, 2023
Testimony of Cathy Woolard, Former Chairperson,
Fulton County Board of Registration and Elections

Members of the US House Committee on House Administration, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and welcome to Fulton County, Georgia. I look forward to discussing Fulton County's important work to administer safe and secure elections.

I have more than 20 years of experience in elections and election administration in Fulton County, which is the largest election jurisdiction in Georgia, and one of the largest in the country. Most recently, I served as the Chairperson of the Fulton County Board of Registration and Elections (BRE) from September 2021 until June 30, 2023. In addition, I am a former elected official, and a former candidate for multiple local and federal offices in Georgia. I've also participated in many Get Out the Vote campaigns over the years. During my tenure on the Elections Board, I gained significant insight into the work required to conduct free, fair, and secure elections.

When originally asked to serve on the Elections Board, I hesitated. I was aware of the importance of the role, and of the many challenges facing the Fulton County Elections Board. Duty prevailed, and after agreeing to serve, I was delighted to discover that the bipartisan board members were all focused on working together to improve election administration in Fulton County. In fact, Vice-Chair, Dr. Kathleen Ruth became a good friend and someone I'm pleased to be with here today. I also found a staff team that was weary of the negative attention, extra work from floods of open records requests, lawsuits, and reviews, and, later, voter challenges, that took time away from their actual election administration work.

FULTON COUNTY

Fulton County has over 800,000 registered voters, just under 200 election day polling places, 3000 or more election poll workers and temporary staff to recruit, train and deploy in a county that is about 70 miles from end to end with some of the worst traffic in the nation. The latter becomes very relevant when complying with reporting deadlines on election day, responding to emergencies, and deploying equipment and personnel across the county.

Big county election operations are generally more complex than those of smaller counties, but we all share a common goal of delivering a smooth, safe, and secure voting experience for our voters, while complying with state, federal and local rules, regulations, and policies. Some things may impact large and small counties differently, but we are all experiencing dramatically increased expenses, challenges hiring staff and recruiting volunteers, and a changing landscape of equipment, software, rules, procedures, and regulations that are generally beyond our control or input.

Despite the many challenges over the past few years, the Fulton County Board and Department of Registration and Elections has many successes to report. First let me give appreciation to my former Board colleagues: Dr. Kathleen Ruth, Mark Wingate, Teresa Crawford and Aaron Johnson. If I had to pick a board with whom to serve, I'd hope to come up with a group as dedicated as this one. We worked hard to be a productive and functional governance group. Over the two years I served, we spoke with one voice and singular focus on virtually every topic. Sometimes we spoke differently about things and sometimes we had to work a bit to get to the right place, but we were never distracted by negativity and dysfunction that can ruin progress toward solid outcomes.

We were faced with the need to hire a new Director of the Department during state and federal elections last year. As you can imagine, that was not an easy task. There are not many experienced election directors from jurisdictions as logistically complex as Fulton County. We did a nation-wide search and held hours of interviews. We were fortunate to have an experienced Election Chief in Nadine Williams and were able to evaluate her experience against other applicants as well as her actual performance for the primary, primary run-off, general and general run-off elections. In addition, her work and that of the department were observed and evaluated by both the State Performance Review Board and the Carter Center with good reviews. I doubt there are many candidates for any job that have an evaluation process as rigorous, and we are fortunate to have Ms. Williams in place as our new Director.

Later this month, our department will move into a new consolidated, purpose-built election center that will house our staff, equipment, board meetings and training classes in one location. Visitors will be able to observe our operations in a clean, safe, and secure facility, designed to provide greater and easier transparency. With a bit more notice, we would be happy and proud to host you for a tour of our new facility.

Just last month, the State Election Board voted unanimously to close the nearly two-year Performance Review of Fulton County election operations and the Board of Registration and Elections. We had many staff and Board interviews with the bipartisan Performance Review Board (PRB), provided copious documentation of operating procedures and training curricula, and hosted observers of both our 2021 local elections as well as all of the 2022 state and federal primary, primary run-off and general and general run-off elections. We were also asked by the Performance Review Board to allow the Carter Center to review our election processes and election day operations and so we provided further information and access to their review panel. I'm pleased to report that both review panels reported favorably on our operations and offered some guidance on how we might continue to do good work in the future.

In addition, Fulton County's audit department audited our financial operations and inventory late last year and found no material issues. They also confirmed that 100% of our equipment was accounted for. Our bar-coded inventory system helps us keep track of literally thousands of pieces of equipment that move in and out of our warehouses during elections.

I am proud of the work of the Fulton County Board of Elections and the improvements we've made.

GEORGIA SENATE BILL 202

In 2021, Georgia enacted Senate Bill 202 (SB202). This bill was pushed through the legislature on a partisan basis, and, contrary to the sponsor's inaccurate description, this bill does not improve election security in Georgia. In fact, SB 202 and subsequent election related legislation include multiple provisions that increase election administration expenses and logistical demands, but provide little or no election security improvements.

1. **Voter Challenges.** Likely the most onerous, expensive, and least productive provision in SB 202 is the section that permits individuals to challenge the voter registration of specific voters. While keeping accurate voter rolls is an important component in election security planning, in my experience, this provision does not actually improve voter list accuracy. In fact, giving individuals and advocacy groups the ability to challenge the voter registration of thousands of voters without consequence or to require compensation for the time and money spent complying with the law is distracting to our regular work maintaining voter rolls, alarming to voters who have been challenged, and has yielded NO referrals to the Secretary of State or Attorney General for illegal voting in the past 18 months. Fulton County takes many steps, such as monthly updates of new registrations and address changes received from the Department of Drivers Services, additional changes sent to us monthly by the Secretary of State, direct requests for address changes from voters as well as recent work with our county GIS department as well as an outside consultant to identify errors, new address locations and business/commercial addresses, to keep our voter list as accurate as possible. Of course, this important work takes time and resources. The Secretary of State has an important role to play in list maintenance through software improvements, address updates through the USPS and updates when voters are removed through normal procedures of notification. But let me say in the strongest possible terms that as laid out in SB 202, the voter challenge provisions keep us from the work at hand, cost money not anticipated and have failed to identify any instances of illegal voting.
2. **Performance Review Board.** While I am pleased that Fulton County is finally out from the cloud of the Performance Review Board, I want to be very clear that the legislation creating the Performance Review Board and the process for triggering a review is seriously flawed. The members of the Performance Review Board said as much in their final comments to the State Election Board. The legislation provides for just one legislator from the county in question to initiate the review. This easy trigger can be used to insert politics into a process that should be protected from partisan interference. It provides no guidelines for the time or operational parameters of the review and no funding for the review, other than that the county being reviewed should pay for things requested by the review panel. At present, jurisdictions under investigation for alleged criminal activity, like Coffee County, don't face similar scrutiny

because the trigger for starting a PRB rests on the will of their sole legislator, not the Secretary of State or State Election Board.

3. Restrictions on Drop Box Use. SB 202 restricted drop boxes to a limited number, placed inside a polling location and accessible only when the polling place is open and emptied once each day after hours. These restrictions have done little to help reduce lines, provide convenient access to voters who work challenging hours and reduce traffic congestion in and around polling places. Previously drop boxes were emptied twice a day during normal work hours. Now drop boxes, located miles from each other, must be emptied once a day, after normal work hours. This requires extra time and expense including overtime payment for two employees and the vehicles they use. While this may seem a minor issue, as we try to contain costs with little state and federal financial support, requirements that do little to improve outcomes are difficult to justify.
4. Limitations on absentee ballot requests to certain time periods are challenging to explain to voters and create additional work/expense. My own 92-year-old mother experienced the frustration of applying for an absentee ballot a week or so before the window opened which resulted in her receiving a letter back some weeks later (and within the window) stating that she had to reapply in the window. She's fortunate to have an election official as a daughter to explain why she had to reapply. Many people don't have such support and would find such a letter alarming and confusing. Combine that with the complexities of filling out the request and submitting it, makes voting for people who need assistance even more daunting.

NEED FOR ADDITIONAL FUNDING

Two things that don't get isolated for discussion are the real impacts of the distribution and spread of false information about election administration and the lack of federal and state funding for election operations. As election administration has become more complex, election administration costs have increased. Fulton County In 2019, elections cost roughly \$2.50 per voter in Fulton County. In 2021, after the implementation of SB202 and new (required) voting equipment, the explosion of election related accusations, open records requests and lawsuits, and increased personnel costs, the cost of elections rose to nearly \$10.00 per voter. Not only does SB 202 increase election administration costs, but it also restricts the ability of local election departments to apply for grant funding to defray election costs. Without any additional funding to manage the impacts of SB 202 and other new requirements, these additional costs have a real impact on county budgets and cause local taxpayers to (rightfully) wonder how costs could quadruple in such a short period of time.

False and fake commentary about election administration by pundits, politicians and advocacy groups does nothing to help isolate and address real problems. In fact, they generally distract us from the work at hand and the need to stay focused on increasingly complex election requirements. We all hold personal responsibility for protecting our democracy from threats from adversaries – foreign and domestic. And that includes the responsibility to insist on rigorous and objective analysis and a bipartisan joining of arms in defending and denying

repeated yet debunked election conspiracies. If you were to ask election administrators what's needed to help them do their job, additional state and federal funding for the work that they do day in and day out to provide safe, secure, and accessible elections is high on the list.

In conclusion, I want to thank the hard-working staff at the Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration and across Georgia for the work they do to ensure that we have safe and secure elections. Thank you for the invitation to participate today. I look forward to being of assistance now and in the future.