

PERFORMANCE REVIEW BOARD REPORT ON FULTON COUNTY ELECTIONS

January 13, 2022

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SUMMARY

- In prior years, disorganization and a lack of a sense of urgency in resolving issues plagued Fulton County elections. However, Fulton County has shown improvement in administering elections from 2020 to 2022. This improvement is due to a multitude of factors. Prior staff that oversaw elections, voter registration, redistricting, and absentee ballots are no longer with the office, and new staff can bring new energy and renewed commitment. Training, processes and procedures, and overall organization have all been improved as well, but those things need further improvement to ensure readiness and success in the 2024 election cycle.
- The Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration is engaged and helping to drive those improvements. Replacing the board would not be helpful and would in fact hinder the ongoing improvements to Fulton County elections.
- The County Manager's Office in Fulton County has continued to be involved in planning, strategizing, and preparing for upcoming elections, which has positively contributed to improved execution of elections.
- Like election officials across the state, Fulton County elections staff show daily dedication and effort in carrying out and seeking to improve the administration of elections in Fulton County. Director level staff and the Fulton County Board of Elections need to ensure that staff has the necessary tools and guidance to ensure best practices and compliance.
- The Performance Review Board members individually donated hundreds of hours to this project and The Carter Center donated almost 4000 people hours. Both observations (which were conducted independently) noted significant improvement from the 2020 election, but both also noticed things that could use additional improvement, including further improvements to training and processes.
- The existence of the Performance Review helped incentivize Fulton County to make improvements to their elections, but it took an enormous amount of donated work, and it is difficult to see how it is a sustainable process that can continue to positively influence election administration in Georgia without some reforms. A positive, proactive, and periodic review process, appropriately funded, designed to support and assist all counties with election process improvements could be more effective than the performance review process in its current iteration.
- While the Performance Review Process has seen improvement in Fulton County elections since the 2020 election, further improvement is still needed to ensure readiness for the 2024 presidential election cycle. Presidential election cycles see more voters than midterms and take even more planning and preparation to ensure successful execution. Georgia will be a competitive state in next year's elections, so election preparation needs to recognize that

Fulton County's actions (and all counties in Georgia, for that matter) will be heavily scrutinized by political parties, campaigns, candidates, and activist groups. To ensure successful execution of the 2024 election, Fulton County should continue the improvements it has already embarked on and prioritize the areas for improvement noted in this report. Those areas are:

- More contextualized poll worker training
- Environment of order, organization, and control
- Compliance with State Election Board Regulation regarding ballot review
- Planning and Preparation based on capacity and execution
- Review polling place layout
- Compliance with Georgia law regarding sequestration during early tabulation

BACKGROUND ON FULTON COUNTY ELECTIONS

Fulton County has a long and well-documented history of issues administering elections.¹ The 2012 Presidential Election in Fulton County resulted in the largest fine ever issued by the State Election Board and required remedial training.² In that election failures in timely processing voter registration applications snowballed into significant issues for voters on Election Day.³ This “snowball” effect, where problems on Election Day are generally indicative of earlier failures in the election administration process, was also very present in the June 2020 primary in Fulton County.

The June 2020 Primary Election was marked by long lines and confusion in Fulton County. That election, which occurred during the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, was uniquely difficult from an election administration perspective. Massive increases in absentee ballots were difficult for all election officials to keep up with. Pandemic fears increased the already difficult task of recruiting and training poll workers and finding adequate polling locations. Georgia election officials faced the added difficulty of having to implement a new paper-ballot voting system during the 2020 Election Cycle. Implementing a new system always increases logistical and training issues, and issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic stretched election officials to their breaking point. But while every county in Georgia faced those issues, many Fulton County voters had a uniquely bad experience.

Some of the reasons for the issues in the June 2020 primary, in addition to the exigencies mentioned in the above paragraph, were outside Fulton County’s control. In addition to certain polling locations electing not to make themselves available due to the COVID-19 pandemic, other locations were not available due to previously existing remodeling schedules. This led to combining many precincts into one voting location and to utilizing locations that were not typically polling locations, such as Park Tavern in Midtown Atlanta. Fulton’s Chief Registrar at the time was hospitalized due to COVID-19 and another long-time employee passed away due to the virus. However, Fulton’s response to these circumstances added to the Election Day difficulties, specifically the hiring of poll workers on the weekend before Election Day and not ensuring adequate training of those poll workers.

Following the June 2020 Primary Election, the State Election Board considered multiple complaints regarding the election in Fulton County, including accusations that absentee ballot applications were not processed, that polling places did not open on time and did not have all required forms (such as recap sheets), and that poll workers were not adequately trained. The State Election Board found probable cause to send the complaints to the Attorney General’s office for

¹ “Fulton to Retool Absentee Vote System” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (1993); “Touch and No-Go in Fulton? Unreadiness for New Voting System Raises Florida Effect Fears” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (2002); “Fulton Needs ‘Wake-Up Call’” *The Macon Telegraph* (2008); “Claim: The ‘Error Rates’ for Fulton County Elections Department are ‘Well Below the Average, Rating: False’” *Politifact* (2012); “Fulton County Tries to Recover from Election Problems” *Athens Banner-Herald* (2014).

² [“State Approves Fulton Election Settlement.”](#) *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (August 13, 2015).

³ [“Fulton Elections Investigation Sent to Attorney General.”](#) *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (December 17, 2013).

further prosecution, but instructed the Attorney General’s office, Secretary of State’s office, and Fulton County to try to resolve these issues with an eye toward improving the issues prior to the November 2020 General Election.

In October 2020, Fulton County and the State Election Board agreed to a Consent Order to resolve the complaints stemming from the June 2020 Primary Election.⁴ That order included certain remedial measures that Fulton County agreed to implement prior to the November 2020 General Election as well as the appointment of an independent, non-partisan monitor. The consulting firm Seven Hills Strategies was appointed by the State Election Board as the independent monitor. Carter Jones, of Seven Hills Strategies, spent more than 270 hours observing all aspects of Fulton County’s election processes and was granted full access by Fulton County.⁵ Seven Hills Strategies’ report noted that it saw no instances of dishonesty, fraud, or intentional malfeasance, but that it did see areas of disorganization, sloppiness, and mismanagement.⁶

REQUEST FROM GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR PERFORMANCE REVIEW

On July 15, 2021, Senate President Pro Tempore Butch Miller and twenty-two of his Republican colleagues in the Georgia Senate sent a letter to Rick Barron, then-Director of the Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration, requesting answers to questions regarding the double-scanning of nearly 200 ballots and Fulton County’s audit tally sheets. Senator Miller requested a response by July 22, 2021. On July 21, 2021, Mr. Barron responded that he wanted to provide answers to the inquiries but that he needed approval from the Fulton County Board of Elections prior to sending responses, that the next board meeting was scheduled for August 12, 2021, and that he would not be able to meet the requested deadline.

On July 27, 2021, Senators Matt Brass, Kay Kirkpatrick, and John Albers (Republican members of the Senate Fulton County delegation), along with twenty-two other members of the Senate Republican caucus, sent a letter to the State Election Board invoking O.C.G.A. § 21-2-106 and requesting a performance review of Fulton County based on their failure to respond to Senator Miller’s questions.

On July 30, 2021, Speaker Pro Tempore Jan Jones of the Georgia House of Representatives, joined by four other Republican members of the Fulton County delegation in the House of Representatives, joined their Senate colleagues’ request for a performance review of Fulton County elections, mentioning the same issues as their Senate colleagues in addition to “persistent sloppiness in election processes over multiple election cycles.”

⁴ “Consent Order.” State Election Board Cases 2020-016 and 2020-027, attached hereto as Exhibit A.

⁵ “State Election Board Report- Post Election Executive Summary” *Seven Hills Strategies* (February 16, 2021), attached hereto as Exhibit B.

⁶ “[Report Shows No Fraud But Many Problems with Fulton Voting Process.](#)” Georgia Public Broadcasting. (February 17, 2021).

PERFORMANCE REVIEW PROCESS

On August 18, 2021, pursuant to the request from the requisite members of the General Assembly, the State Election Board appointed a Performance Review Board consisting of Stephen Day, member and former Chair of the Gwinnett County Board of Elections; Ryan Germany, General Counsel for the Office of the Secretary of State; and Rickey Kittle, Chair of the Catoosa County Board of Elections.

O.C.G.A. § 21-2-106 states that the duty of the performance review board is “to make a thorough and complete investigation of the local election official with respect to all actions of the local election official regarding the technical competency in the maintenance and operation of election equipment, proper administration and oversight of registration and elections, and compliance with state law and regulations.” “Local election official” is defined in relevant part to this performance review by O.C.G.A. § 21-2-105 as “a county board of elections or a county board of elections and registration.”

After completing that thorough and complete investigation, the performance review board is to “issue a written report of its findings to the Secretary of State, the State Election Board, and the local governing authority which shall include such evaluations, judgments, and recommendations as it deems appropriate.” O.C.G.A. § 21-2-106(b).

The Performance Review Board utilized a multi-faceted approach to accomplish the required “thorough and complete investigation,” which spanned across the municipal elections in 2021, the redistricting process, and the 2022 election cycle. We reviewed existing documentation regarding Fulton County elections, particularly the report of independent-monitor Seven Hills Strategies. We conducted an interview with Carter Jones, the author of that report, to get his insights into the performance review process and into Fulton County elections generally. The Performance Review Board itself observed pre-election, Election Day, and post-election processes at Fulton County in both the 2021 municipal elections and the 2022 general and runoff elections. This observation included at least four separate visits to the Fulton County Election Processing Center during the 2021 and 2022 elections to observe absentee by mail processes, equipment and paperwork return, vote tabulation and uploading, and other operations. It also included visits to at least nine different election day polling places and seven separate advance voting locations.

In addition to the observation of the Performance Review Board, The Carter Center, which has observed more than 100 elections in 39 countries since 1989, was invited by the Performance Review Board and the Fulton County Board of Elections to observe the November 2022 General Election in Fulton County. The thorough investigation that the Performance Review Board conducted would not have been possible without the independent observation efforts of The Carter Center. The Carter Center greatly expanded the reach of the three-person Performance Review Board, who each had other election-related duties to attend to during the 2022 election cycle. The Carter Center contributed almost 4000 people hours to observation, as well as recruiting, managing, and training their observers and then analyzing and reporting the data they gathered. Their assistance was invaluable, and their work was of the highest quality. The Performance Review Board is exceedingly grateful to The Carter Center for their time and effort.⁷

⁷ “2022 General Election Observation: Fulton County, Georgia.” *The Carter Center*. Attached hereto as Exhibit C.

The Performance Review Board conducted formal interviews of key current and former staff members at Fulton County elections, reviewed Standard Operating Procedures, compared those Standard Operating Procedures to procedures in other counties, and interviewed members of the Fulton County Board of Elections.⁸ We also were in close contact with the Secretary of State’s Investigations Division and Elections Division as they looked into issues that were relevant to the ongoing review, including redistricting following the 2021 Census and processing of absentee ballot and absentee ballot applications.

OBSERVATIONS

2020 Election Cycle

Before moving to the observations of the Performance Review Board, this section will discuss the 2020 elections in Fulton County based on our review of Seven Hills Strategies’ report, interview with Carter Jones, discussions with Secretary of State Elections Divisions, and review of Secretary of State investigations. We will then move to the current status of Fulton County’s elections process with the intent of showing the marked improvement in both preparation and performance from 2020 to 2022.

Regarding the 2020 elections that occurred prior to the outset of the performance review process, our interviews and review of materials confirmed much of what has already been written about those elections in Fulton County. In our interview with Carter Jones, the author of the Seven Hills Strategies report, we found him to be knowledgeable, fair, and well-informed regarding Fulton County operations. We concur in his finding that we did not see any indications of fraud, dishonesty, or intentional malfeasance in the 2020 election results in Fulton County, but we did see how a lack of careful planning and precision in ensuring that processes were strictly followed led to errors and to an overall environment that appeared unorganized. In an election with as much interest from voters, media, and others around the country and world, the organizational deficiencies identified in Seven Hills Strategies’ report were apparent to voters, observers, and media.

For example, in a pattern that echoed the issues from the 2012 General Election (where a failure to timely process voter registration applications led to difficulties on Election Day), the June 2020 Primary Election saw a failure to timely process absentee ballot applications “snowball” into voter frustration, a high number of absentee ballot requests being cancelled, and long lines on Election Day. In June 2020, these issues were exacerbated due to policies that Fulton County put in place to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and by issues outside the control of Fulton County (long-time polling places choosing not to make themselves available due to COVID-19, other polling places being closed for previously scheduled remodels, etc.).

⁸ The two Republican Party-appointed members of the Fulton County Board of Elections did not respond to requests for interviews.

While the November 2020 General Election and January 2021 Runoff Election were smoother than the June 2020 Primary (in large part thanks to the remedial measures from the October 2020 Consent Order) Seven Hills Strategies still observed areas where a lack of precision and strict adherence to policies and rules made post-election activities more difficult. Again, many of these difficulties were exacerbated due to policies the Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration chose to put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and by a post-2020 election environment filled with misinformation and false allegations that increased the difficulty of performing all election-related tasks.

Secretary of State Investigators who investigated complaints regarding the November 2020 General Election in Fulton County elections had similar findings to the Seven Hills Strategies' report—no evidence of fraud, dishonesty, or intentional misconduct, but persistent disorganization that made it difficult to get to the bottom of certain claims. Our review reaches a similar conclusion—we do not see any evidence of fraud, intentional misconduct, or large systematic issues that would have affected the result of the November 2020 election. The fact that three separate counts of the 2020 presidential race in Fulton County (initial count, hand-audit count, and machine recount) all showed very similar results supports this conclusion.

Hand-Count Audit of 2020 Presidential Race

One example of Fulton County's disorganization leading to errors and those errors being used to make claims of fraud are the allegations regarding the hand-count audit of the November 2020 Presidential contest that were investigated by Secretary of State Investigators in Case No. SEB 2021-181. In that case, citizen-activists brought to light errors made on tally sheets and in data entry. In a presentation to the State Election Board on March 18, 2022, Secretary of State Investigators confirmed data-entry errors in Fulton County but found that the citizen-activists conclusions (that such errors obviated the usefulness of the hand-count) were not substantiated.

Independent audit experts confirmed to Secretary of State Investigators that some amount of human error is expected in large hand-counts and that the types of errors seen in the Fulton County audit are the typical types of errors that are seen in hand tabulations. As part of that investigation, Fulton County stated that one reason for the errors was that the Arlo system used for the audit did not have required naming conventions for batches and allowed counties to utilize their own naming conventions. However, the fact that Fulton County did not use standardized naming conventions in their hand audit of the 2020 presidential race indicates a failure of planning and execution to avoid a predictable issue, not something that should be blamed on the Arlo system. The State Election Board referred Case No. SEB 2021-181 to the Attorney General's office, and it remains there for final resolution.

Additional contributing factors to the challenges that occurred in Fulton County's hand-audit that were outside of the county's control include that this was the first election with paper ballots in more than twenty years, so this was the first time the county had put in place and executed paper ballot batch management procedures for such a large number of ballots. Due to its status as the largest county with the greatest number of votes to count, Fulton also ran up against the deadline to complete the hand-count audit and was not able to do reconciliation checks of its data entry.

Other counties, including large counties, did have time to check their data entry and caught and corrected errors prior to submission. A full hand-count audit was not something that was planned for or expected in any county. It came about due to the state's new audit requirement and the fact that the margin of the race for president (the contest selected for the audit) was incredibly small, so counties were not allowed much time to plan and train prior to execution of the audit. The environment post-election in Fulton County in 2020 was also extremely difficult to operate in given an influx of poll-watchers and public from around the country that made even regular operations difficult. Of course, policies put in place to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to these difficulties.

In conclusion, Secretary of State Investigators did confirm the existence of errors in the Fulton County audit, but independent audit experts confirmed that the existence of those errors was not surprising given the expected error rates in hand counts, the fact that Fulton did not have time to double check data entry, and the other circumstances surrounding the audit. Those same experts confirmed that some level of data entry errors are expected in a full hand-count, and they do not alter the overall conclusion of the audit, which confirmed that Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential race in Georgia.

Double-Scanning of Ballots

One of the allegations leading to the General Assembly's request for this review was that ballots were double scanned. As has already been reported, Secretary Investigators substantiated the allegations that two batches totaling almost 200 ballots were double scanned during the initial count of the November 2020 election.⁹ As one election expert said, and the Performance Review Board concurs, double-scanning of ballots is "something that should never happen."¹⁰ Contributing factors in this case likely include poor batch management and storage practices (also a contributing factor in errors in the hand-count audit and the recount), a time crunch created by the failure to utilize the early scanning period, and significantly heavier usage of central scanners due to the massive increase in absentee ballots resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and a corresponding increase in paper jams.

The January 2021 U.S. Senate Runoff

The January 2021 U.S. Senate Runoff Election showed improvements from the November 2020 General Election, most notably in that Fulton County took advantage of the early scanning period for absentee ballots, which decreases the time crunch and rush to scan the ballots (increasing accuracy) and leads to faster posting of results on Election Day. Other reasons for these improvements include the fact that election officials and poll workers had more experience running elections with the new equipment, a decrease in the number of absentee ballots to issue and process, and greater familiarity with COVID-19 protocols.

⁹ ["Some Ballots Initially Double-Counted in Fulton Before Recount."](#) *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. (July 13, 2021).

¹⁰ *Id.*

2021 Municipal Elections

After being appointed in August 2021, the first elections that the Performance Review Board observed in Fulton County were the 2021 municipal elections administered by Fulton County. These elections are orders of magnitude smaller than a presidential or midterm General Election, but they are still valuable to see how a county performs essential election functions. The 2021 municipal elections were significantly smoother than the 2020 elections in Fulton. On Election Night, one performance review board member was present at the Election Processing Center and spoke with Mr. Foris Webb, III, the Atlanta Municipal Clerk. Mr. Webb has observed elections in Fulton County (municipal elections, but also county, state, and federal elections) for 24 years, and he stated that the 2021 municipal election in Fulton was the smoothest one he had observed to date.

The Performance Review Board observation similarly showed smooth operations and significant improvement from the 2020 election. Some of this improvement is undoubtedly due to the fact that a municipal election is much smaller than a presidential election, but it also seemed that Fulton had improved some of their processes since 2020.

One area that contributed to the improvement in operations was staffing. Fulton County created and filled several key and new management positions. These new positions include a Deputy Director, an Absentee Ballot Manager, and a Manager for the Ballot Marking Equipment. The additional managers had staff focused on their areas, allowing for responsibilities to be more spread out and better executed.

Absentee Ballot Process

One example of improvement was identified during our observation of absentee ballot procedures. Following the 2020 election cycle, Fulton County split responsibility for managing the absentee ballot process and the registration process, which had been under one manager. Fulton County created and filled a new position of the Absentee Ballot Manager who supervised staff dedicated to absentee ballots. The Absentee Ballot Manager was new to her role in 2021 and had not been in charge of absentee ballots in 2020. This change seems to have resulted in significant process improvements. Our observation was that the processes put in place by the Absentee Ballot Manager were effective and compliant with Georgia law. The location where absentee ballot processing occurred was set up to ensure a good flow of the process while ensuring ballot security and allowing required transparency to poll watchers. The Absentee Ballot Manager stated that part of the training conducted for staff executing those processes is making sure they are aware of how important the task is to the success of the overall election and focuses on quality control.

Equipment Handling

Another issue Fulton County addressed following the 2020 election was to split responsibilities for managing ballot marking devices and other election site supplies. Fulton County hired a new manager responsible for ballot marking devices and assigned technicians to specific polling sites to address issues with the equipment. Fulton County also implemented a supply scanning system

that allowed more accurate and timely tracking of supplies and equipment. While this supply scanning system does not appear fully implemented, it is a positive step.

Advance Voting

We also observed several advance voting sites, including Sandy Springs Library and Metropolitan Library. At both locations, voting was proceeding smoothly with almost no wait time. Fulton had added a person to advance voting locations to ensure that voter credit was promptly and properly given in the ENET voter registration system and reconciled ENET voter credit with paper Advance Voting Ballot Applications filled out at the time of check-in. This reconciliation check is a noted improvement and shows increased attention to these important processes.

The Performance Review Board also observed advance voting at Buckhead Library and C.T. Martin Natatorium. The observation of those two locations occurred on the last day of early voting so traffic was heavier. Buckhead Library had some poll workers who did not show up that day and was experiencing long lines to vote. The check-in process was going smoothly, but we observed that some check-in stations were not being utilized due to the lack of staff. Buckhead Library is a popular voting location, but the setup is a bit cramped due to space that's available. On that same day, C.T. Martin Natatorium had a full complement of poll workers and kept a short line to vote. The facility at C.T. Martin Natatorium is bigger and allowed for more ease of movement.¹¹ We also noticed that the poll manager at C.T. Martin would jump-in to staff a check-in station when the line got long, which seemed to really set a good tone for all poll workers at that location.

Election Day

On Election Day for the municipal elections in November 2021, the Performance Review Board had a presence at Fulton County Election Headquarters, at the Election Processing Center, and at polling places around the county. At headquarters, Fulton County has an impressive system of logging issues that are reported at different polling places. But the overall atmosphere still seemed disorganized and reported issues did not seem to result in a sense of urgency to resolve. The Performance Review Board was able to visit locations that had specific issues reported such as North Springs High School in Sandy Springs and Independence High School in Roswell. Overall, voter experience on Election Day seemed to be smooth. Typical turnout during municipal elections is significantly lower than in a presidential or midterm election, so issues are able to be resolved without leading to major backups in voting. The two issues discussed below are indicative of the types of issues that can occur when administering an election.

¹¹ Finding good, centrally located polling locations that have sufficient space, parking, accessibility, security, etc. is a difficulty for election officials across the country, especially in urban environments and even more so since schools have understandably stepped back from being polling locations. We conclude that Fulton County does a good job managing this difficulty. Fulton County election seems to have a very good relationship with the Fulton County library system, and while the available space in libraries is not always large, libraries provide good accessibility, availability, and are under county control. We also understand that library staff has also been trained to assist in some election tasks, which could be a huge benefit. The Performance Review Board recognizes the vital assistance the Fulton County Library System plays in ensuring that Fulton County can continue improving administration of elections.

At North Springs High School, the poll manager noticed she was missing the key to the cabinets that store the ballot marking devices and scanners. Even though she reported this issue the Saturday before the election, the key to the cabinets was not delivered until 10:00 a.m. on Election Day. To the poll manager's credit, she utilized available backup procedures (i.e., emergency paper ballots) to ensure that voting was able to occur beginning at 7:00 a.m. on Election Day.

At Independence High School in Roswell, the equipment was delivered to the location much later in the day before the election than was scheduled (schedule for 2:00 p.m. but did not arrive until 8:30-9:30 p.m.). The equipment was incorrectly delivered to a cafeteria downstairs, but the poll manager was told by school officials that was not the proper place. The poll manager alerted Fulton County on Monday night that the equipment needed to be moved to a different location. She was told that a logistics team would be present at 5:00 a.m. on Election Day to move the equipment, but that team did not show up until 1:00 p.m. on Election Day. Fortunately, the poll officials (all female), took the initiative to manually move the necessary equipment themselves up a steep incline. They were up and running by the time the polls opened at 7:00 a.m. and had no delays to opening.

These examples both show poll managers utilizing their training and showing initiative to successfully resolve issues. The fact that backup procedures were utilized to ensure that voters were still able to vote without delay shows a massive improvement from the June 2020 Primary. However, the issues at both of those locations were ones that could have been avoided by better control and execution of the equipment delivery process.¹² These issues were also both noticed by poll managers well in advance of opening of the polls, and a quicker response from Fulton County would have mitigated the need for the extra steps that had to be taken by poll officials.

At the Election Processing Center on Election Night, we observed that the system for tracking memory cards that had already been uploaded was disorganized. Fulton County actually had to recertify their election results after the Secretary of State's office pointed out to them that certain checks did not add up. Fulton County found memory cards that had not been uploaded. This is something that should never happen, would not happen with better organization, and would be caught with better checks and balances.

Redistricting

After the 2021 municipal elections and prior to the 2022 elections, all counties in Georgia had to redistrict voters following the new district maps passed by the General Assembly following the decennial census. Just like voter registration and the absentee ballot process, redistricting is an essential election process where errors can "snowball" into voters being in the wrong location, long lines, and confusion on Election Day. The Secretary of State's Elections Division, particularly Deputy State Elections Director Dr. Jesse Harris, communicated frequently with Fulton about their redistricting. Utilizing a mapping tool, the Secretary of State's office checked all counties state and federal redistricting work to identify voters that may have been placed in the wrong district

¹² One of the improvements observed in the 2022 election cycle by both the Performance Review Board and The Carter Center was improved organization in the warehouse. This improvement, if it is kept up, should help to minimize issues with equipment delivery moving forward.

and flagged those records for counties to review. In one of the initial checks, the mapping software identified approximately 30,000 records for counties to review. Approximately 20,000 of those records were in Fulton County.

Fulton County had new staff in charge of redistricting. Once the information regarding potential errors was brought to their attention, they worked diligently to resolve any issues. Fulton County also separately contracted with a mapping service to help them check their work for county level districts. Due to the delay in the census caused by COVID-19, which caused maps to be passed by the General Assembly later than in previous cycles, the corrections that Fulton County was making were occurring closer to the May primary than is ideal. It also became clear that Fulton had not prioritized monthly and annual “street maintenance” (the process that ensures that street names and numbers in the voter registration database are updated to account for new development).

In other large counties, street maintenance is a monthly process regardless of whether redistricting is occurring. As a result of neglecting the street maintenance process, the new staff in Fulton had to spend significant time “catching up” on tasks that ideally would have been completed prior to redistricting. However, at the end of the process, one expert at the Secretary of State’s office said that he thought Fulton’s voter database was in better shape than it had been in a long time. This was due to dedicated effort by Fulton County elections staff, support from others in Fulton County, (including the County Manager) to ensure that elections had the resources they needed, and assistance from the Secretary of State’s office.

2022 Election Cycle

In an effort to expand the reach of the three-member Performance Review Board and to further inform the review, the Performance Review Board and the Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration entered into an agreement with The Carter Center to provide independent, non-partisan observation¹³ of Fulton County’s election. In addition to The Carter Center’s observation, the Performance Review Board also conducted some limited observations of advance voting and processes at Fulton’s Election Preparation Center when advance voting equipment and ballots were being returned.¹⁴

During advance voting in the November General Election, The Carter Center deployed 64 observers to all 36 early voting locations and the four “outreach” advance voting locations, collecting over 330 observation reports on advance voting. On Election Day, the Center deployed 104 observers to 217 of the 249 polling places in Fulton County. The Carter Center also observed absentee ballot processing, election night drop-off, and tabulation. Their analysis is based on direct

¹³ “Nonpartisan election observation is an impartial process where observers systematically gather data determine whether an election was fair, peaceful, and credible... [N]onpartisan observers have no stake in the election outcome. They do not interfere in the election day process, even if they see something take place that should not happen. They are trained to understand the election process as specified by law and report on whether election day procedures are being correctly followed.” The Carter Center Report on Observation of Fulton County Election, pg. 5.

¹⁴ Due to the fact that the Performance Review Board members have election-related duties that they must also attend to, the members were limited in what observations they could perform in the November 2022 election. The Carter Center observation was vital to the ability to complete the review in a timely fashion.

observation, desk analysis of documents provided by Fulton County, and conversations with Fulton County staff.

The Carter Center's observation and the Performance Review Board's observations were conducted independently from each other, but both reached similar conclusions. The Performance Review Board observed dedicated poll workers working efficiently to process voters. Voter check-in was proceeding smoothly at the locations we observed (Buckhead Library and Chastain Park), averaging between 55 seconds and 2 minutes and 55 seconds per voter. The overall process was more organized than 2021, which was more organized than 2020. This conclusion was echoed by the poll manager at Chastain Park and by Fulton County elections staff. We also observed that the Elections Preparation Center looked cleaner and more organized than it had in 2021. Fulton County had also implemented a new inventory tracking system that aimed to help with equipment delivery and return. The inventory tracking system is not perfectly implemented yet, but the fact that they have added it shows a recognition of the importance of organization and preparation to the overall election process.

The Carter Center observed that both advance voting and Election Day were calm and peaceful. During advance voting, lines were generally short, ranging from no line to a maximum of 25 minutes. The last day of advance voting saw longer lines (also noted by the Performance Review Board observation). On Election Day, lines generally stayed under 15 minutes throughout the day. Most voters waited far less than 15 minutes, with 57% of observed polling places having no line at all and 38% had lines of 5 minutes or less. Lines at opening were manageable at all observed locations. The longest line at opening at an observed location was 43 people and observers reported that it was cleared quickly. The Carter Center also noted that the presence of compliance officer during advance voting, tasked with ensuring reconciliation of voter credit and voter check-in throughout the day, and a technical specialist, tasked with troubleshooting equipment issues, helped streamline processes.

The Carter Center also noted that election workers were generally friendly, enthusiastic, and helpful to voters, and that there was a strong emphasis on customer service. This is no small task given that workdays could be up to 14 hours.

The Carter Center observed good processes for tracking and processing absentee ballot applications and absentee ballots, similar to what the Performance Review Board observed in 2021. They noted that absentee ballot applications were received by the mailroom, timestamped, opened, and batched in groups of 50 for processing, with batch cover sheets used to track each group of 50 through the process, recording the total accepted or rejected. Applications were processed and reconciled to the voter registration database each night.

In another big improvement from the November 2020 election, Fulton County fully utilized the early scanning period to scan verified and accepted absentee ballots prior to Election Day. Utilizing this time period (codified in Georgia law by S.B. 202 following the 2020 election) allows absentee ballot scanning to be less of a rush, provides more time for quality control checks, and still allows the county to get results posted quickly after the polls close. Observers witnessed absentee ballot processing from initial receipt through verification and tabulation. Best practices were observed at

each step of the process, including using small batches, tracking each batch via a cover sheet that logged any ballots that were removed (e.g., ballots rejected during verification), and reconciling counts of ballots at various stages throughout the process. Following processes like this in an organized fashion is what ensures that the double-scanning of ballots that occurred in 2020 is not something that happens again. One other improvement noted by the Performance Review Board from 2021 to 2022 was a more organized system for storing memory cards when they are returned to the Election Processing Center for tabulation.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Both The Carter Center and Performance Review Board observed significant improvements since 2020, but observers also noted things that could use further improvement.

While poll workers generally seemed better-trained in 2022 than 2020 given that essential functions were successfully performed with relative uniformity, poll worker training can still be improved. The Carter Center observers noted that more contextualized training that helped poll officials understand the big picture “why” of certain administrative steps would be beneficial. For example, the processes of checking seals and properly filling out recap sheets were completed by poll officials, but there did not seem to always be an understanding of why and how these processes were undertaken. Both of those processes are important for overall system security and for public confidence in elections, and both are also ways to potentially find any issues at the point where they can still be easily resolved.

General organization can continue to improve as well. While the reality is that there is no such thing as a mistake-free election, a tightly organized environment lessens the opportunity for mistakes and increases the probability of catching mistakes. For example, in the May 2022 Primary Election, just like in the November 2021 Municipal Election, the Secretary of State’s office noticed that Fulton County did not upload all memory cards that contained votes. The issue was resolved prior to certification, but it’s something that should not have happened and, at the very least, should have been caught with basic reconciliation checks.

Another observation that can be resolved through better training is compliance with the State Election Board regulation that requires the poll official stationed at the ballot scanner to “offer each voter specific verbal instruction to review their printed ballot prior to scanning it.”¹⁵

The Carter Center also noted that the “outreach” locations opened on college campuses for advance voting had the most significant staffing challenges, with poll managers having to give inexperienced staff on-the-job training. These locations were not initially planned to be advance voting locations, but they were added at the request of activist groups.¹⁶ Preparation and planning is vital to successful election administration. In determining plans for polling locations, we assume the Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration is already taking into account what can

¹⁵ Georgia Rules and Regulations 183-1-12-.11(8).

¹⁶ [“Following ACLU Complaint, Fulton to Host Voting on College Campuses.”](#) *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. (August 11, 2022).

feasibly be accomplished by available resources and staff. Altering plans at the request of activist groups, who may be driven by motivations other than Fulton County executing a smooth election, can lead to the significant staffing challenges that The Carter Center observed.

We have already mentioned that finding suitable polling places is a difficulty for all, and especially urban, election officials. But one thing Fulton can pay more attention to is the layout of equipment at polling places. Voter privacy, voter flow, and appropriate transparency for certified partisan monitors should all be considered when determining setup and layout. Of course, given that available space will not always be perfect, it is not always possible to maximize each of those considerations, but polling place setup should be intentional and thought through.

One area noted by The Carter Center where significant improvement is needed is in following the sequestration requirements of O.C.G.A. § 21-2-386(a)(6) during early tabulation.¹⁷ Fulton County should be applauded for taking advantage of both the early processing and early tabulating opportunities offered by Georgia law. Early processing and early tabulation ensure that sufficient time and care can be offered to those vital processes, which increases accuracy, while still allowing timely reporting of results. But the rules in place that allow for those processes to be done securely must be followed to ensure fairness and confidence.

Fulton County also has relatively new staff managing certain process since the 2020 election. The Performance Review Board's observation is that staff is dedicated and open to improvements when the necessary tools and guidance are provided. As The Carter Center stated well:

Election processes are complex logistical exercises. As such, there are always opportunities for continuous improvement of processes to bolster efficiency and maximize appropriate and contextualized transparency. This process of continuous improvement relies on the observation of systems and processes and the creation of monitored feedback loops so that lessons from one election can be integrated into systems to improve future elections.

We hope that Fulton County will continue to build on the significant improvements that our review has noted since the 2020 election cycle.

Fulton County's Future Plans

In addition to the improvements that the Performance Review Board and The Carter Center were able to observe, Fulton County has also taken other steps that we believe can lead to even further improvements in future elections.

¹⁷ Georgia law, clarified by S.B. 202, allows for both an early processing period where absentee ballots can be scanned but not tabulated (i.e. election officials can essentially do everything to prepare absentee ballots for tabulation but not yet tabulate) and a period beginning at 7:00 a.m. on Election Day where absentee ballots can be tabulated as long as all participants are sequestered so that results cannot be know by anyone outside that room until the polls close.

Elections Central Location

Many of the issues in 2020 were caused by or at least exacerbated by the fact that tasks and personnel were spread across many different locations. This was even more so the case in 2020 due to processes put in place to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, but even outside of pandemic circumstances, Fulton County election operations are spread across multiple locations.

In Spring 2023, Fulton County plans to move to one central location (“Elections Central”) where they will be able to conduct all election operations. Elections Central should reduce miscommunication and allow more visibility to managerial staff. Elections Central also shows the commitment of the Fulton County Commission to ensuring that Fulton County Elections has the resources they need to be successful.

Budget Priority

Along the same lines as the move to Elections Central, it became clear through our interviews that the Fulton County Commission now takes the budget needs of Fulton County Elections more seriously. One benefit of all the challenges from the 2020 election is that it showed people other than just election officials that election administration is a difficult and complicated logistical operation. Executing elections with the precision, integrity, and voter convenience that Georgia voters deserve and election officials want takes adequate resources.

We did not review the Fulton County Elections budget as part of this review, so we cannot speak to specifically to that issue. We have heard some rumblings that Fulton County Elections is overfunded. We are not able to speak specifically to that allegation, but it is the opinion of the Performance Review Board that elections in Georgia have generally been underfunded, not overfunded.

Improvements to Poll Worker Training

Even before The Carter Center’s observation noted that some improvements to training would be beneficial, members of the Fulton County Board of Elections had already identified improvements to poll worker training. This came across in our interviews with Cathy Woolard, Chair of the Board, and Teri Crawford, one of the members. Apparently, certain poll managers noticed some weaknesses in training and approached the board about reworking the training manual. We understand that project is in progress. It is also encouraging that the poll managers themselves sought out to improve the training.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- In prior years, disorganization and a lack of a sense of urgency in resolving issues plagued Fulton County elections. However, Fulton County has shown improvement in administering elections from 2020 to 2022. This improvement is due to a multitude of factors. Prior staff that oversaw elections, voter registration, redistricting, and absentee ballots are no longer with the office, and new staff can bring new energy and renewed commitment. Training, processes and procedures, and overall organization have all been improved as well, but those things need further improvement to ensure readiness and success in the 2024 election cycle.
- The Fulton County Board of Elections and Registration is engaged and helping to drive those improvements. Replacing the board would not be helpful and would in fact hinder the ongoing improvements to Fulton County elections.
- The County Manager's Office in Fulton County has continued to be involved in planning, strategizing, and preparing for upcoming elections, which has positively contributed to improved execution of elections.
- Like election officials across the state, Fulton County elections staff show daily dedication and effort in carrying out and seeking to improve the administration of elections in Fulton County. Director level staff and the Fulton County Board of Elections need to ensure that staff has the necessary tools and guidance to ensure best practices and compliance.
- The Performance Review Board members individually donated hundreds of hours to this project and The Carter Center donated almost 4000 people hours. Both observations (which were conducted independently) noted significant improvement from the 2020 election, but both also noticed things that could use additional improvement, including further improvements to training and processes.
- The existence of the Performance Review helped incentivize Fulton County to make improvements to their elections, but it took an enormous amount of donated work, and it is difficult to see how it is a sustainable process that can continue to positively influence election administration in Georgia without some reforms. A positive, proactive, and periodic review process, appropriately funded, designed to support and assist all counties with election process improvements could be more effective than the performance review process in its current iteration.
- While the Performance Review Board has seen improvement in Fulton County elections since the 2020 election, further improvement is still needed to ensure readiness for the 2024 presidential election cycle. Presidential election cycles see more voters than midterms and take even more planning and preparation to ensure successful execution. Georgia will be a competitive state in next year's elections, so election preparation needs to recognize that

Fulton County's actions (and all counties in Georgia, for that matter) will be heavily scrutinized by political parties, campaigns, candidates, and activist groups. To ensure successful execution of the 2024 election, Fulton County should continue the improvements it has already embarked on and prioritize the areas for improvement noted in this report. Those areas are:

- More contextualized poll worker training
- Environment of order, organization, and control
- Compliance with State Election Board Regulation regarding ballot review
- Planning and Preparation based on capacity and execution
- Review polling place layout
- Compliance with Georgia law regarding sequestration during early tabulation