# Technical breakdown hangs over Georgia early voting



Credit: Alyssa Pointer / Alyssa.Pointer@ajc.com

**Check-ins slowed by voter information database**

The first week of early voting once again tested Georgia's voting system, and technical breakdowns and long waits returned.

An overloaded statewide voter registration system, combined with high turnout, created long lines of frustrated voters, raising questions with two weeks of early voting remaining:

Have the problems been solved, or was last week a precursor to larger challenges as Georgia races toward a Nov. 3 Election Day that is expected to be like no other?

By late Friday, the office of Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, the state's top election official, couldn't assure voters that the problem was fully fixed. His office could offer no details about the nature of a bandwidth problem that reportedly caused the delays. They said they had worked with their vendor, Civix, to expand the system's capacity.

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"We can assure voters that our office and county election officials are doing everything they can to ensure a good voting experience for the record number of voters turning out to vote even during a pandemic," Raffensperger's deputy, Jordan Fuchs, said in a statement to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "COVID-19 and the resulting massive increase in absentee ballots and voters who have requested absentee ballots but then show up at polls puts strains on systems and county election officials that were not previously present."

There were some encouraging signs as the week progressed.

Wait times that initially exceeded eight hours in some of the metro area's largest counties were gone. Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton and Gwinnett counties all had wait times under two hours, with many locations under 30 minutes or an hour.



Credit: Alyssa Pointer

Local election officials across Georgia worry that the voting slowdowns could resurface as turnout continues to rise. Early voting records are being broken each day, and large numbers of voters that usually come in the final week could again tax the state system, slowing the check-in process.

"We aren't seeing a drop-off" in voters, Fulton Elections Director Richard Barron said. "It's a concern because of the number of voters we're going to see. All of us are kind of waiting to see what's going to happen."

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Already, over 687,000 votes had been cast across Georgia during the first five days of in-person early voting. An additional 620,000 voters had returned absentee ballots.

During the 2016 election, over 252,000 voters cast ballots on the final day of early voting. This year, turnout could exceed 400,000 on the last day of early voting on Oct. 30 if trends continue at this pace.

Barron said Friday that the statewide computer system that checks in voters, called eNet, seemed to be functioning at about 80% of its normal speed.

The breakdowns concern voting rights advocates who worry long lines suppress voting.

"Some people are posting about missing appointments, missing time with families, missing meals. That's a huge sacrifice that no voter should have to do to cast their ballots." said Aklima Khondoker, Georgia director for All Voting is Local, an organization that advocates for greater voting access.

And frustrations boiled over last week for some local election officials who have had to improvise and develop workarounds to compensate for the state system's failures.

Coffee County Election Supervisor Misty Hampton posted a critical message Monday on The Buzz, the secretary of state's message board to communicate with election supervisors across Georgia.

"The state was screaming at us, to be prepared for the biggest election of our life, I WISH THE STATE PREPARED ENET FOR THE BIGGEST ELECTION OF ENETS LIFE. WE CAN NOT EVEN ENTER THE APPLICATIONS," she wrote.

Problems with eNet are not new.

The state contracts with Louisiana-based Civix, which manages and oversees the database. Local election officials said it has been sluggish in the past, but nothing like the statewide slowdown that they experienced last week.

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In Gwinnett, the county had over 35,000 voters at its nine voting sites through Thursday. Under the best of circumstances, those totals would involve voters waiting, but the state system compounded the problem, Gwinnett Election Supervisor Kristi Royston said. Wait times last Monday at the county's main election office topped eight hours.

As the week progressed, Royston said her team deployed additional machines and check-in stations at the main office and increased staff at some locations to help manage the large number of voters showing up.

She said by the end of Wednesday, the speed of the state system had started to improve. Royston is trying to prepare her staff and poll workers for whatever comes in the next couple of weeks. The county is still about 200 poll workers short of its goal of 1,827 for Election Day.

"We're evaluating everything to say if this happens again we'll be prepared for it," she said. "How do we take what we've learned and apply to the larger crowd that's coming? I think the main thing is knowing now it's a possibility. Let's be ready with our options if it happens."

In DeKalb, local election officials plan to add a website showing voters wait times at each early voting location this week, similar to websites already available in Cobb, Fulton and Gwinnett. DeKalb's wait times also reached 2 1/2 hours early last week but declined to about 30 minutes by the end of the week with the speed of the state system improving, Elections Director Erica Hamilton said.

"We started to have to look at alternate ways to look up voters," said Hamilton, who said the county started checking registrations through a separate backup system.

Some counties are relying on a Woodstock-based company, EasyVote Solutions, to help speed up the lines.

About 80 counties across Georgia, including Fulton, use the company's early voting software that helps streamline the voter check-in process. The software contains updated local voter rolls and allows local election workers to print out a filled-in election application when a person shows up at the polls, instead of voters filling them out by hand.

Election officials said this can cut down wait times by five to 10 minutes per voter. And with the state's database slow or malfunctioning for half the week, the EasyVote system became a lifeline for many counties. At times, it was the only way for frontline workers to verify voters were registered and to efficiently check them in to vote.

"It has been a godsend for us," Paulding Elections Supervisor Deidre Holden said. "I want to keep those lines moving."

The workaround, however, created another step in the process for tracking who voted. Local election officials who used the company's system to verify voters had to later enter into the state's eNet system that the voters had, indeed, cast a ballot. This meant election officials were sometimes working into the night after the polls closed to update the information.

In Wayne County, Registrar Susan Nash runs her one-person office that handles absentee ballots and advance voting in her southeast Georgia community. She stayed until well past closing all last week, including 11:30 p.m. on Tuesday, ensuring rolls were updated and inputting applications because of the various challenges.

"It's been a crazy year for elections," Nash said. "It's hard to keep up."

On Friday, even EasyVote's system proved imperfect. The company had a 30-minute crash that affected its early voting software. The company's CEO, Ron Davis, recognizes how many counties in Georgia are relying on its system to help ensure early voting goes well.

"We're trying to do everything we can," Davis said. "We've got a lot of work over the next two weeks to make sure we can keep this system up."