

Georgia Democrats set new primary turnout record, outpacing GOP voters

Democrats set a new turnout record for primary voting in last week's Georgia vote, soaring past 1 million voters to outpace Republicans during an election plagued by significant obstacles at polling sites.

The latest results, still being tallied as absentee ballots are counted, show Democratic turnout in Georgia surpassed 1,060,851 – the previous high-mark set during the 2008 presidential primary when then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama trounced Hillary Clinton.

Republicans lagged behind, with more than 950,000 votes in last week's contest. But there was no competitive statewide contest on the ballot, since President Donald Trump had already captured his party's nomination and U.S. Sen. David Perdue faced no primary opposition.

Georgia Democrats pointed to the high numbers as another sign of voter enthusiasm headed into the November election. Joe Biden aims to be the first Democratic presidential contender to carry Georgia since 1992, and state Democrats are racing to flip two U.S. Senate seats and a suburban U.S. House seat.

The turnout numbers soared mainly due to a surge in absentee ballots after an expansion of mail-in voting ordered by Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, amid coronavirus restrictions. A review showed those mail-in ballots were roughly split between Democrats and Republicans.

It was also due to intense on-the-ground work cultivating potential voters. Scott Hogan, the party's executive director, said Democratic officials contacted 1 million potential voters in the four days before the primary.

The increase took place despite a series of problems created more hurdles for countless voters.



People wait in line to vote in the Georgia's primary election at Park Tavern on Tuesday, June 9, 2020, in Atlanta. Photo: AP Photo/Brynn Anderson

Tens of thousands never received their absentee ballots in the mail. And an Atlanta Journal-Constitution investigation found that human error, equipment failure and a complicated, multicomputer voting system combined to create chaos that resulted in hours-long lines.

A new high

The Democratic turnout centered on a U.S. Senate primary won by Jon Ossoff, who tallied about 52% of the vote to secure the nomination without a runoff. His vote total – about 560,000 ballots – far surpassed the 310,000 Democrats who voted in the Senate primary in 2016.

The party's turnout also eclipsed the heated gubernatorial primary in 2018 between Stacey Abrams and Stacey Evans, when roughly 550,000 ballots were cast.

On the GOP side, more than 1.2 million Republicans cast ballots in the 2016 presidential primary, which Trump carried by a wide margin. That year, Democratic turnout was more subdued: Roughly 760,000 Democrats turned out for a vote that Clinton handily won.

The increase in Democratic votes comes after recent demographic trends that encourage party leaders. An AJC analysis found that more than 320,000 new voters registered in Georgia since 2019, and many are younger and racially diverse – blocs of voters who tend to favor Democrats.

And top state Democrats hope to channel frustration over the federal and state coronavirus response, as well as the outrage over police brutality that's sparked nationwide protests for racial justice, into votes in November.

Abrams, who is talked about as a potential running-mate to Biden, said she's "absolutely certain" Georgia will get new attention from the Democrat's campaign.

"Our responsibility is to build on that, to not take it for granted, and to ensure that every voter – regardless of party – can participate in November elections," she said of the high turnout.

"When you break democracy, it breaks for everyone. When we fix it, we fix it for everyone. We have the numbers and I think we will win, but I want to win because the playing field is even."

Top Republicans, too, are likely to cast the Democratic turnout as a November warning. Perdue has long talked of the tight 2018 midterm as a wakeup call for Republicans, and he said in an interview he's eager to expose Democrats he said encourage a radical ideology.

"I've lived around the world and I've seen where governments become totalitarian," said Perdue. "I'm happy to start that fight today."