POLICY ANALYSIS REPORT

GEORGIA ELECTION INTEGRITY ACT

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**Introduction**

 This report analyzes the Georgia Election Integrity Act (SB 202) and possible alternatives. The legislation states that, “protecting electors from improper interference, political pressure, or intimidation while waiting in line to vote is of paramount importance to protecting the election system and ensuring elector confidence” (Election Integrity Act of 2021). This report explores the policy issue of voter protection, the policy’s history and framing debates, the details of the policy itself, two viable alternatives, the rationales for choosing each, and makes recommendations for future policy action.

**Policy Issue**

This section explains the driving force behind the bill, the policy arena, the levels of government involved, the type of policy, and its current relevance. Georgia Senate Bill 202 (SB 202) was signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp (R) shortly after facing pressure from then-President Donald Trump and pressing Georgia election officials into flipping the state’s vote count for his opponent (Beauchamp, 2021). Political pressure from both Democrats and Republicans to protect voters was a motivating factor to pass this policy.

Kraft and Furlong (2021) identify six policy arenas: economic and budgetary policy, health care policy, welfare and social security policy, education policy, environmental and energy policy, and foreign policy and homeland security. Voting rights or voter confidence are not directly discussed, however, these constitutional rights have a broad reach in their end effect. A Georgia politician will run on various platforms related to the other policy arenas, and the confidence voters have in their electoral process will influence who is elected. Therefore, voter rights and fair electoral processes are fundamental tenets of democracy, due to the broad reach that voting ability has on policy that can be enacted by elected representatives.

Voter intimidation policies are addressed both by the federal and state governments. The federal government addresses voter intimidation in the U.S. Code because it infringes upon a citizen’s constitutional right to vote. Title 18 of U.S. Code Chapter 29 § 594, directly addresses voter intimidation and defines it as anyone who “intimidates, threatens, coerces, or attempts to … for the purpose of interfering with the right of such other person to vote or to vote as he may choose” (1948). While the Code provides a solid foundation for voter protection across the country, the state of Georgia exercised its own constitutional authority to expand voter protections through SB 202. As we will see, this “massive overhaul of election rules” has impacted almost every Georgia voter since it was signed into law (Fowler, 2021b).

Georgia SB 202 is a prime example of a regulatory policy: a “government restriction of individual choice to keep conduct from transcending acceptable bounds” (Kraft & Furlong, 2021, pp. 105-106). The language of the bill restricts from engaging in voter intimidation and determines the punishment for such acts (Georgia Election Integrity Act 2021).

Voter intimidation is still a relevant issue across the United States because of the increased political polarization after the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. Given the President’s interference in Georgia, state legislators want confidence to be restored in the electoral system, ensuring that every vote counts and that every voter has access to vote how they please. This policy offers a model that other states may wish to emulate or adapt and adopt, or perhaps avoid.

**History and Framing**

The history of federal policy protecting the right to vote dates back to the Civil Rights Act of 1870. This Act, also known as the Enforcement Act or the First Ku Klux Klan Act, provided criminal penalties to those who used violence or threats to prevent African Americans from voting (Federal Judicial Center). These protections were later amended by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, as amended in 1960 and 1964.

 Political systems theory stresses policy changes in response to the political environment at the time, where social and interest groups emphasizes the need for change (Kraft & Furlong, 2021, p. 81). The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was propelled by advocacy groups to expand and protect black voters in the country. Signed into law by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, this Act authorized the U.S. Attorney General to seek federal court injunctions if a member of the community faced discrimination while voting (U.S. House of Representatives). Later, in the Civil Rights Act of 1960, the provisions for court enforcement of voting rights were strengthened, and a new requirement to preserve voting records was made (Library of Congress). Additional legislation that provided voting protections came from the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Described as the nation’s “premier civil rights legislation,” the Act outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and/or national origin (National Park Service). This Act also desegregated polling places and further protected the right of members of minority communities to vote. These policies were enacted by the federal government to expand voting rights and to preserve the safety of all voters. Without this federal policy, states could discriminate against non-white voters who were essentially unprotected under law. Although these Acts did not completely halt discrimination, they did open the door for minorities to exercise their constitutional right to vote and to take legal action if these rights were infringed upon.

 Georgia’s push to change voting laws was one example of a larger effort to alter voting rights in multiple states. Research shows that in 2021, 49 states had introduced legislation that would restrict individuals’ ability to vote (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). There were record numbers of voters during the 2020 Presidential Election, followed by then-President Trump’s challenges to election legitimacy after losing the race (Eggers, 2021). It is possible that former President Donald Trump influenced Georgia Governor Brian Kemp and the legislature into writing and passing Georgia SB 202 into law due to accusations of the 2020 “stolen” election, which were found to be false. Joe Biden won the presidential election in Georgia in 2020, flipping the state from red to blue, as Donald Trump previously won in 2016 (Georgia Election Results, 2020). Georgia was a key swing state to win over in 2020, and shortly after Trump lost, the “stolen election” monologues began. Accusations of votes not counting, deceased individuals voting, and residents voting twice (by absentee or mail-in and in-person) quickly swept across the country.

Concerns about voter fraud were supported by conservative nonprofits like Heritage Action for America. They represent similar viewpoints to the many politically involved nonprofits promoting this type of restrictive legislation, such as shorter early voting windows, stricter policies for voter identification, limiting voting locations and voter purges (Brennan Center for Justice). Many Republican leaders supported these views. In defense of the policy in question, it was intended to remedy many issues that had previously plagued the voting system in Georgia. It was described by some legislators as a policy that would “makes it easier for citizens to vote and harder to cheat” (Republican Policy Committee, 2022). This similar phrasing was used with other voter legislation policies across the country. This bill has been described as bipartisan legislation, however by noting its contributors and supporters this shows the opposite. The bill lists 24 primary sponsors all of which are conservative, including the Republican Senate leader of the time Michael Dugan (Ballotpedia 2022). This bill was also well like by the Governor at the time Brian Kemp. Later he vocalized his support and listed a motivating factor for the bill during a debate in 2022. He noted that he was frustrated with the results of the 2020 Presidential Election, and these changes came as a direct result (Georgia Democrats 2022). To specify, Kemp did not mention election integrity, but the results of the 2020 Presidential Election as the reason to change voter accessibility.

As claimed by elite theory (Kraft & Furlong, 2021, p. 77), government actors sought to develop and enact public policy that differed from public opinion. The value of accessible voting held by the public was being trampled by a rhetoric of voter fraud held by the political elite. The elite used their money and political platform to validate restrictive legislation in the face of large protests (Nadler & Amy, 2021).

 Rather than making it easier to vote, the law creates barriers to practices that have previously enabled voter participation among low-income and BIPOC communities. Much of Georgia SB 202 disproportionately affected black communities, as hypothesized by the theory of social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This form of analysis can provide valuable insight to what happens when specific social identities are left out of the policy discussion. Strong political power and positive social constructions creates the Advantaged, weak political power and positive social constructions are the Dependents, strong political power but weak social constructs make the Contenders (i.e., the rich or unions), and weak political power and weak social constructs creates what is known as the Deviants. This lens highlights how SB 202 was utilized to disenfranchise individuals and prevent them from exercising a constitutional right.

**Policy**

Georgia SB 202 was signed into law with the intention to completely update the 2010 Georgia Election Code. The implementation of SB 202 was immediate, and its effects were visualized quickly in 2022, as during the next election cycle many voters came out to cast their vote. There have been numerous changes to Georgia’s election process due to the passing of this bill. These changes include shortening period to apply for a mail ballot, limits to available voter submission boxes, strict requirements for voter ID, limits to early voting, and banned delivering food and water to those in line to vote (Brennan Center for Justice 2021).

Some of the more divisive changes that have been noted are the limits to food and water to those in line to vote, and the shortened window for early voting. The distribution of food and water can be used as a device for coercion, however, this has not been reported as an issue. In areas with limited access to polling locations, this service could be a necessity to ensure people are comfortable while they wait to cast their ballot. With the changes to early voting periods, this directly affected black churches who often hosted Souls to the Polls events, where church goers were motivated to cast their ballot on the Saturday before the election (Associated Press, 2021). With this change to the early voting period, it effectively eliminated the need for this event, altering a way black voters had historically cast their ballots.

 What this policy did mitigate was any potential intimidation or coercion while people wait in line for voting (Republican Policy Committee, 2022). Any potential for coercion through this method is now outlawed while still allowing individuals to eat or drink in line, assuming they have brought the food or water themselves. Finally, many individuals have noted that this restrictive policy would limit individuals from voting, while in fact Georgia saw a record increase in voter turnout the following cycle. The Georgia Secretary of State Office reported 1,017,732 voters on October 25th which was an increase in 23% compared to the same time in the previous election cycle. While this bill was reported to potentially limit voter turnout the data does not back this up, this is attributed to citizens being motivated despite SB 202.

SB 202 also changed the time frame for a runoff election. During the Georgia Senators race between Raphael Warnock and Herschel Walker, neither candidate received a majority triggering a runoff. SB 202 shortened this runoff window from nine weeks to four weeks (Associated Press 2022). The implementation of this policy seemed to face little challenge.

There has been no direct evaluation of this bill from federal agencies like the Government Accountability Office. While various organizations like the Brennan Center for Justice and ACLU have highlighted many concerns, many of the direct challenges can be seen through local news articles about grassroot efforts to highlight the consequences of this bill. We have seen both quantitative and qualitative data to push various perspectives in relation to this bill. As mentioned earlier, Georgia did see an increase in voter turnout post SB 202. This quantitative evaluation criteria can show that no voter infringement is occurring through the bill. However, the counter to this is the notion that people are voting despite SB 202. These individuals are making a conscious effort to vote but at the cost of significant time spent.

Another challenge to the bill came in the form of a legal complaint filed with the Department of Justice, claiming that the changes would deny a constitutional right to vote based on race. These noted changes are unnecessary fines, shortened deadline to request absentee ballots, limitations to absentee ballot drop boxes, delivering food and water to voting lines, among others (Department of Justice, 2021). Through the Department of Justice website, it does not appear the complaint is currently moving as the last update was entered on November 22, 2022 (Department of Justice, 2022).

 In sum, this bill has limited coercion from outside actors to voters and may have contributed to the statistical increase of voter turnout in 2022. However, this bill does disproportionally affect marginalized voters of color and increases barriers for participation in the voting process. Other states have been able to reframe their voting rules to increase security without causing an undue burden to voters. They have accomplished this by expanding voting access and providing clear resources to eligible voters. Therefore, alternatives to Georgia’s SB 202 should be considered.

**Alternatives**

 The Brennan Center for Justice (2021) provides research on changes in election rules by state, and a comprehensive look at what is being altered. Its webpages note the restrictions of SB 202 alongside other bills that are expanding voting access. Not only do these expansions make voting easier but they also share Georgia’s policy goal to make elections more secure. One such law is Kentucky House Bill 574 (HB 574). This bill comes after the state made temporary changes to their voting procedures during the Covid-19 Pandemic to make voting easier. These changes were popular and were carried over into permanent additions, including no excuse early voting, an online portal to request absentee ballots, expanses to mail-in voting, an increase in voting drop boxes, and improved access to voters with disabilities. With its share of expansions there were minor restrictions to the mail-in vote window and changes to their voter purge systems.

While this HB 574 was not solely expansive in nature, it reprioritized strategies to make voting more accessible for all. This bill was wildly accepted, noted as a bipartisan bill, and passed in the House 91 to 3 and in the Senate 33 to 3 (Legiscan 2021). Kentucky’s Governor at the time Andrew Beshear, who was a strong supporter to HB 574, noted his goals to “make voting easier, but harder to cheat” (Courier Journal 2021). This is the same value held by many Georgian legislators and one of the reasons for SB 202’s creation. However, Kentucky accomplished the same goal with a vastly different bill. The implementation of this bill shows that creating safer elections is viable without limiting access to voters. Similar to SB 202, HB 574 is a regulatory policy. The bill does constrain certain aspects of voting while decreasing barriers in other ways. Secretary of State Mike Adams noted that the bill is both “pro accessibility and pro security” (We’re Your Mountain Television, 2021).

Overall, this bill seems to have more pros than cons. It offers more opportunities for individuals to vote, utilizes technology to improve accessibility, and offers citizens more opportunities to cast their vote. Evaluation of its actual effects may find potential flaws; however, none are apparent at this moment. Through this example, Georgia could achieve their goal of improved their election integrity without disproportionally limiting marginalized citizens’ ability to vote.

 Another policy alternative is to revert to practices in place prior to 2021. Before Georgia SB 202 was signed into law, the state held elections through previous iterations of the 2010 Georgia Code, Title 21, Chapter 2. This chapter has fifteen articles and details every aspect of Georgia elections from general provisions to precinct and polling places, to what to do in the event of contested elections and primary results (Georgia Election Code, 2010). These provisions and more come as “standard code,” since they are foundational to unrestricted voting.

The 2010 Georgia Election Code was undoubtedly less restrictive than the current legislation in place. For example, Chapter 2 Article 9 § 21-2-332 allowed for the use of portable polling facilities across the state at the election superintendent’s discretion (Georgia Code, 2010). This gave the opportunity to vote for people who are disabled, who otherwise may have voted by absentee ballot, and for those who lived outside of a reasonable distance from their precinct’s designated polling place. Article 10 § 21-2-387 allowed for the creation of a pilot program that established secure online absentee voting for uniformed and other citizens residing out of the country. For Georgia residents still living in the United States, Article 10 § 21-2-385 defined the terms for absentee voting, mainly focusing on those who are physically disabled or confined to a hospital. This provision allowed people with disabilities to securely cast their ballot and seal it with their signature which acted as an oath that their vote is valid. The double-enveloped ballot would then be delivered to the registrar or absentee voter clerk by an immediate family member (father, mother, child, spouse, etc.) who would be identified by the disabled absentee voter and confirmed by the registrar or clerk (Georgia Code, 2010). Though the complexities of absentee voting may show in this statute, it did not restrict physically disabled individuals from voting. The 2010 Georgia Code for election protocol actively provided opportunities for all residents of Georgia to vote, despite their physical limitations.

 Yet, in terms of security, the state of Georgia already had provisions in place to prevent anyone from voting twice in any election. Article 10 § 21-2-388 canceled absentee ballots of voters who were present to vote in their precinct on Election Day (Georgia Code, 2010). This means that no individual could vote twice legally, and that if a voter applied for an absentee ballot but showed up to vote, their absentee ballot would not be counted over their polling place vote, and their vote would not be counted twice. The language of Georgia SB 202 insinuates that residents could have repeatedly voted more than once in any given election but could not have done so legally with Article 10 § 21-2-388.

 Overall, it would appear that the changes included in SB 202 were not needed, removed a constitutional right, and pushed the state into a negative spotlight.

**Choices**

 Throughout our policy analysis process, we have uncovered that Georgia SB 202 has put voters in a difficult position to cast their ballot. The lengthy bill stripped away most of the provisions from the previous law in place, 2010 Georgia Code, Title 21, Chapter 2. However, because of external factors, like influence on Governor Brian Kemp by former President Donald Trump, SB 202 was passed and signed into law with minimal changes to its original language.

 Despite multiple widespread claims that the 2020 presidential election was “stolen,” and that mass voter fraud occurred throughout the country, many sources and expert analysts have made attempts to correct these claims. Although there is a significant lack of evidence (little to no evidence) to support the claims of this “rigged” election, a state like Georgia and their legislature thoroughly believed that their electoral system required stricter regulation (Bump, 2022). Aside from data showing that the 2020 election was fair and regulated, Georgia politicians made the choice to stick to their strict Republican Party lines and impose stricter voting protocol within the state.

 The three policy options, Georgia SB 202, Kentucky HB 574, and the previous 2010 Georgia Code, Title 21, Chapter 2, can be analyzed further using technical and ethical approaches. Beginning with Georgia SB 202, our previous research shows that this bill is unethical at its core, as it created unnecessary barriers for voters in Georgia. We can see this through the elimination of mobile voting buses, limited ballot drop-off boxes, and more regulation on who is eligible to receive a mail-in absentee ballot. Subsequently, Georgians with disabilities or unreliable transportation are faced with the unethical consequences of SB 202. Their right to vote in a free and safe manner has been extremely limited, despite personal hardships they may face. Technically speaking, SB 202 was passed with the intention that its effectiveness in future elections would eliminate cases of voter fraud in the state. However, with actual cases of voter fraud being minimal, SB 202 is essentially ineffective as there was no major problem of voter fraud to address. Instead, SB 202 has imposed greater restrictions on the personal freedom to vote.

 Moving to Kentucky HB 574, this bill gave Kentucky voters more expansive and inclusive opportunities to vote safely and securely. The state took the election provisions that were used during the COVID-19 pandemic and made them law. This includes no-excuse early voting, the creation of an online portal to request an absentee ballot, and expansions to mail-in voting. Ethically, HB 574 has a clean slate, as it allows voters across the state to vote how they please in a reliable manner. The bill has proven to be effective throughout the pandemic and accounts for equitable voting access. HB 574 still includes language that requires ballots (whether voting in person or by mail) to be received by a specified date, so that the state can be efficient with its counting process.

 2010 Georgia Code, Title 21, Chapter 2 on state elections was the previous policy before Georgia SB 202 was signed into law. Although the state’s election code may have been outdated, it still provided ethical considerations for mail-in and absentee voting and the use of mobile polling places as needed or requested. The major overhaul of election protocol that is SB 202 made the antiquated provisions from the original 2010 Georgia Code even more outdated. The technical aspects of the prior election code would need to be updated for efficiency purposes, but they still gave Georgia voters an equitable opportunity to cast their ballot in a way that is best for them.

 Based on the research, 2010 Georgia Code, Title 21, Chapter 2 would have been the best option to keep in place in Georgia. While the existing election code would undoubtedly need updating, it would still be more inclusive for Georgians to exercise their right to vote. Georgia SB 202 is an unethical piece of legislation that infringed upon Georgia voters and their liberty to vote. The 2010 Georgia Code was not completely broken, as evidence has shown, and did not allow any instances of voter fraud to go unprosecuted. With ethical factors taken into consideration, Georgia SB 202 is a backwards piece of legislation, and the 2010 Georgia Code could have been updated and remained in place to ensure that all voters across the state could vote freely and fairly.

**Recommendations**

Through the above-mentioned alternatives, there are recommendations that are readily available. One is to leave the policy as is and continue to allow citizens to develop ways to vote through the current rule base. Citizens will adapt to the policies in place, creating opportunities to exercise their constitutional rights. While this is not an expansive policy, this allows citizens to continue to exercise their right to vote. The second option would be strengthening access while also improving various security measures, as seen through Kentucky HB 574. Georgian legislators could have looked to many states and identified different options to alter their election policies. As noted by the Brennan Center for Justice, in 2021, 25 states all passed laws that offered an expansion for voting rights (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). Each state can be looked at as a case study for voting expansion and each rationale could be applied to what suits Georgia’s needs. These two forms seem to have been the easiest options for a legislature to take while constructing legislation; however, neither of them seem to be considered. The main error with this policy seems to lie with an inaccurate depiction of the true issue. The assumption with this bill is that mass voter fraud occurred in part due to early voting windows and mail in votes. Concerns regarding voting security will not be remedied by limiting early voting or mail in ballots.

Additional recommendations would be to engage in cultural competency while law making and considering more innovative options. By engaging actively in cultural competency, a law maker could understand events like Souls to the Polls and adjust their legislation accordingly. Using empathy while engaging with constituents is a valuable tool to gain this cultural competency. As mentioned, Georgia could have looked elsewhere to create their policies or been a trailblazer in utilizing modern technology to increase access and security simultaneously. In the information age, recent technology, like blockchain (Jafar, Aziz, Shukur, 2021) can be used to create a secure form of voting while also improving accessibility. Should voting concerns arise for Georgia, or any other state, these factors should be considered while addressing a vital constitutional right to our democracy.

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***Written Assignment Grading Rubric***

|  | **Excellent = 5** | **Good = 3 - 4** | **Unsatisfactory = 1 - 2** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Format**10% = score \* 24.75\*2=9.5 | * *Every* format and citation item noted in the syllabus is adhered to correctly
* Microsoft Word is used with automatic formatting tools
 | * *Most* format and citation items noted in the syllabus are adhered to correctly
* Microsoft Word is used with only some formatting tools
 | * *Few* format and citation items noted in the syllabus are adhered to correctly
* Microsoft Word is used without formatting tools
 |
| **Writing Style**20% = score \* 44\*4=16 | * Well-organized and logical
* Clear outline that follows the assignment
* Grammar, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation is correct
* Professional voice—concise, clear, direct, and opinion where appropriate
 | * Somewhat organized and logical
* Assignment elements included, but difficult to follow
* Some grammar, sentence structure, spelling, and/or punctuation errors
* Journalistic voice—repetitive, off-topic content (fluff) and opinion where inappropriate
 | * Disorganized or illogical
* Unclear coverage of assignment elements
* Numerous grammar, sentence structure, spelling, and/or punctuation errors
* Non-academic voice—mostly opinion, redundant, wandering
 |
| **Substantive Content**70% = score \* 144\*14=70 | * Fully and correctly covers all substantive content requested
* Conclusions are logical based on what is covered
 | * Covers most substantive content requested correctly
* Conclusions mostly follow what is covered
 | * Covers little to no substantive content requested or covers it incorrectly
* Conclusions disconnected from what is covered or missing
 |