

ELECTION 2018

# Facts matter in threats against elections



**Leroy Chapman**  
My Opinion

Your vote counts.

We are 72 days from one of the most pivotal gubernatorial races in Georgia's modern history.

And the big question, besides who will be our next governor, is this one.

How many times will your vote count?

Against a backdrop of documented Russian meddling, potentially more meddling to come from foreign powers, aging electronic voting machines and partisan-fueled allegations of voter suppression and voter fraud, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the potential threats to our elections.

With the Nov. 8 vote fast approaching, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution is dedicating a large part of its newsgathering to telling the story of voting in Georgia. A key part is watchdogging the election process, from access to ballots to whether Georgia is prepared to defend itself from cyberattack.

There is nothing more important to our democracy than guaranteeing the constitutionally protected right to vote. Next in importance is voters' faith in our election system.

Every citizen who casts a vote needs to trust that his or her vote will be counted. The public needs to believe that at the end of the first Tuesday in November the final tally is accurate and every vote counted was cast legally. We also need to know that no one has been denied access to the ballot.

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Politics reporter Mark Niese is leading the AJC's efforts to find the facts. Media from across the country are descending upon Georgia to examine our voting system.

They're drawn to the following:

## A high-stakes election

Many political observers across the country see the Georgia governor's race as a test case for whether President Trump's path to electoral victory can hold in 2020. Georgia remains deeply conservative, something Secretary of State Brian Kemp, a Trump ally, is banking on to become

the state's third consecutive Republican elected governor. But demographic changes and growing popularity of progressive policymaking, perhaps a backlash to Trump, has Democrat Stacey Abrams confident she has a shot to become the nation's first African-American female to be elected governor.

## A longstanding election feud

Abrams and Kemp have long battled over elections and voting rights. Niese recently wrote about how Abrams' 2014 bid to register 800,000 voters of color within a decade was confronted by Kemp, in his role as secretary of state, with an investigation that eventually disqualified thousands of applications. The feud strikes at the heart of the political divide over election registration. Abrams has accused Kemp and

Republicans of using overregulation to keep Democratic-leaning minorities from registering. Kemp has insisted upon tight regulations, arguing that it's essential to election security. Partisan media will continue pushing the narrative that fits their candidate, with liberals accusing Kemp of wanting to suppress the vote and conservatives accusing Abrams of wanting to open the door to illegal voting.

## The specter of Russian interference

Georgia was named in a federal indictment of 12 Russian nationals in June that accused intelligence agents of snooping around local election-related websites, presumably searching for vulnerabilities. There is no evidence that the Russians, or anyone else, has successfully penetrated Georgia's

local election systems. But U.S. intelligence officials warned this month of continued Russian efforts to influence our elections through "information warfare," designed to sow division and distrust of American institutions. Given that the Georgia governor's race is the most watched election of this cycle, it's a safe bet that some disinformation could be directed here.

## No paper backup

Georgia is one of seven states that does not require a paper record of an electronic ballot. As reported in the AJC earlier this month, a federal judge is mulling whether to require Georgia to scrap its aging electronic voting machines in favor of paper ballots in time for the November election. A lawsuit filed by advocates of increased voter security argue that electronic machines are vulnerable to hacking, something the state has repeatedly denied. Kemp, as secretary of state, says he favors paper backup but he also insists that the voting machines are safe. Kemp has also recommended installing a paper system for a future election. The AJC will continue following that lawsuit and its developments.

These storylines will produce plenty of media attention. The most trustworthy and thorough examination of Georgia's election system will come from the AJC. We have the experience covering elections. We know the real vulnerabilities. We won't be swayed by politicians or political groups attempting to gain an elec-

tion advantage. Nor will we be unduly influenced by some ballot safety advocates whose hypothetical arguments about election system vulnerability are seldom backed by facts and evidence.

We will sort out the truth.

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