



BASICs Restoring Confidence in Georgia's Elections By Karen Handel

Introduction

The people of Georgia will gain confidence in the elections when they can trust the results and the elected officials – the Secretary of State -- who conduct them. The next Secretary of State must be someone who the voters can trust, someone who has a **comprehensive** platform of reform, and someone who has the skills and experience to actually implement that plan. There are real, fundamental problems with the way elections are conducted in Georgia. From voter registration to absentee ballots and Election Day voting to the counting of votes – our elections system is in need of meaningful reform.

For the past several months, I have met with numerous local elections officials from all over the state. These elections officials represent counties where hundreds of thousands of votes are cast and those where they are cast in the hundreds. I have listened and taken to heart their recommendations and suggestions. This platform, developed with input from elections officials and citizens across the state and after extensive research, is my vision for the Secretary of State office.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank our state's elections officials. They work tirelessly every day on behalf of all of us. My commitment to each of them is that, once elected Secretary of State, the local election officials will be partners in the process and their ideas, suggestions and observations will always be welcome. After all, regardless of the ideas and plans I put forward, it is the locally elected officials who will be asked to implement many of them.

The BASICs Approach to Comprehensive Election Reform

Ballot Accountability, System Integrity, and citizen Confidence are the **BASICs** to improving the elections process in Georgia. My comprehensive reform plan focuses on the BASICs and will heighten voter confidence in our elections – and make Georgia a national leader for open, honest and efficient elections.

My goal as the next Secretary of State is a simple one: Make Georgia elections the model for every other state in this country.

The problems that need to be addressed vary in scale. The largest, and perhaps most challenging issue, is that our electronic voting machines are already outdated and will

ultimately have to be replaced. Other issues are addressed with common-sense adjustments in election law that will instill voter confidence in our election process.

The BASICS Plan

I. Ballot Accountability

In order for our citizens to have confidence, we must establish a program that ensures ballot accountability for every single vote that is cast in Georgia. To ensure accountability, we have to make fundamental changes and improvements in the backbone of our system – voter registration.

Step One: Establish a Truly Centralized, Fully Integrated Voter Registration System

The Voter Registration System is the backbone of our elections system. The key to ballot accountability – and more secure elections – is ensuring the cleanest, most up-to-date voter registration list. The system should be constantly managed, as well as regularly and systematically purged.

The existing statewide voter registration file is inefficient and based on outdated software and hardware technology. The processes employed for managing the statewide list are disjointed, cumbersome, and do not facilitate accuracy and seamlessness. This is an invitation for inefficiency, uncertainty and potentially fraud.

While there is a statewide system, it is based on outdated technology and does not meet the ever-increasing complexities of managing data of this magnitude. From a practical standpoint, Georgia has 159 counties - - which means that, essentially, we have 159 voter registration files. Each county supplies its list to the Secretary of State's office. From there, little more is done than simply consolidating the 159 files into one file. While the state relies on the counties to provide an accurate and current list of voters, the counties rely on the Secretary of State to provide the names that should be removed from its roles.

Consider the following: The Secretary of State obtains various data from the counties. County superior court clerks provide the names of people convicted of a felony involving a crime of moral turpitude, while Federal courts provide the list of those convicted of other felonies. Probate judges provide the names of those declared mentally incompetent. The Secretary of State then distributes a list of names to the counties to be removed from the voter roles. To further confuse the process, the Secretary of State is notified – by the local registrar of vital statistics -- of those who are deceased, removes those names centrally, and then notifies the counties of the removal.

In addition to the obvious lack of efficient data management, the current system does not allow for changes in voter registration through 'Motor-voter' registration and provides no link to the "motor-voter" registration process. Further, there is no practical way of managing address changes when over 400,000 Georgians move within our state

each year. And, because the current statewide system was implemented prior to the establishment of national standards, it is exempt from these best practice guidelines.

As part of the BASICs plan for elections reform, the Secretary of State will design, implement and maintain an enhanced voter registration database to provide a truly universal and fully-integrated statewide voter registration system. This will be updated regularly and be fully accessible to the counties. Counties will continue to register voters into the system, while the system will support these efforts by automatically verifying the new registrant's voter eligibility.

The Secretary of State will be responsible for supporting the counties in the registration process by taking the responsibility for managing and maintaining this data system. This will take a burden off the counties and will ensure uniformity and enhance accuracy in Georgia's voter file.

Step Two: Provide uniformity in the voter registration and identification qualifications.

The General Assembly did the right thing in passing legislation that requires a photo ID when voting in Georgia. It's only common sense. If developing nations, like Venezuela, Nicaragua, Liberia, Nigeria and Iraq can require identification for their voters, then Georgia should too. I will continue to be a strong proponent of the photo ID requirement in Georgia.

But, just as you are now required to show a photo ID when voting in Georgia, you should also be required to present photo identification when registering to vote. The registration process should be in line with the voting process as another check in the system.

The more safeguards we put in place the less opportunity there will be for fraud, and that will restore confidence in our elections process.

Step Three: Ballot Accessibility

Ensuring that only U.S. Citizens are participating in our elections

Voting in this country – in this state – is one of the most important rights that we have. Every time a fraudulent vote is cast, it cancels out a valid one. Stronger safeguards must be implemented to ensure that only legal U.S. citizens are voting in our elections.

While legal and illegal immigrants, guest workers, and convicted felons are not allowed to vote, very little has been done to ensure they are not. Significant – yet relatively simple – reforms are needed in this area:

- Develop a process whereby the Secretary of State is provided a list of those excused from jury duty for not being a U.S. Citizen, so that they can be purged from the voter registration roles.

- Fight against any measure to give Georgia drivers' licenses to illegal immigrants.
- Work with the General Assembly to devise a process to verify that every voter on our rolls is a U.S. Citizen and to pass legislation requiring that all new voters in Georgia be required to prove they are a U.S. citizen before they are allowed to register to vote.

Currently, individuals registering to vote simply check a box confirming that they are US Citizens. That is not enough. With the estimated number of illegal immigrants in Georgia exceeding 200,000, we must do more. I will.

The penalties for violating these measures should be strict, sending a clear message that voter fraud in Georgia will not be tolerated.

Assisting those in military service

With so many military installations in Georgia and thousands of our brave men and women serving overseas, the Secretary of State must take every step possible to ensure that a soldier's right to vote is not jeopardized because they are serving our nation.

The State Elections office must work proactively with the military to implement programs and procedures for the processing of all absentee ballots for military and overseas government and civilian voters. This is particularly important for runoff elections given the short time-span over which the process takes place. Runoffs are held four weeks following an election (three weeks for a primary) so military personnel have a very short window to request a ballot, have it mailed overseas to them, fill it out and have it returned to Georgia in time to be counted. Every effort should be made to assist the voting process for our Country's soldiers. The Secretary of State's office should work with the U.S. Department of Defense to facilitate the timely delivery and receipt of ballots to military personnel overseas.

II. System Integrity

If the voting system does not have integrity, there is no way to ensure the results. A comprehensive approach to elections reform must include several steps that will improve the integrity of the entire Georgia voting system.

Step One: Vote Verification

Provide for a Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail on all Electronic Voting Machines, Audits and Software

Voters should have the ability to review their ballot both electronically and manually on paper, with the opportunity to correct their ballot, before it is officially cast. Unfortunately, the electronic voting machines currently used in Georgia's elections are already obsolete and cannot feasibly be retrofitted with a Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) device. Therefore, implementing VVPAT will require the replacement of all of the current voting machines. As we need to ensure that the new electronic voting machine

platforms meet federal guidelines and are scalable and flexible to accommodate future enhancements.

There is federal legislation pending in Washington to require voting machines to be equipped with a VVPAT device.

As Secretary of State, I will establish a commission that includes both county and state elections officials to make recommendations regarding new purchases of electronic voting machines. Procedures must be established for audits of elections to verify that the electronic vote totals are accurate. The paper audit trail should be the determining factor in discrepancies in the vote and should be the ballot of record.

Any software used in Georgia for electronic voting machines must also meet federal standards and its accuracy verified by independent certification. The highest security measures must be in place to ensure that software is not tampered with from the time of certification to the vote-taking place.

We need to move quickly and expeditiously, but at the same time, we need to ensure that the system we are putting in place is well designed and thoroughly thought out, given the time and expense of rolling out these new machines. The state should bear the cost of implementing the new statewide voting system.

Step Two: Implement Additional Security Measures

There are numerous measures in place to ensure the security of the existing voting machines and to prevent tampering. However, there are additional security measures that must be put into place.

Currently, the “hashing” program – which is the process of verifying that the software system on the server at the county level has not been corrupted or tampered with -- is an optional process at the county level. These servers create the memory cards that are used in the voting machines on Election Day. As Secretary of State, I will make this process mandatory with each and every server undergoing the hashing program just prior to an election and before the memory cards are created. Those servers and machines must then be locked down after testing for use on Election Day.

In order to guard against the possibility that unauthorized programmers could illegally manipulate the electronic voting machine software, my office will put into place Parallel Election Day Testing. This would protect against a program that manipulates votes only during the time in which voting would normally be taking place, and for any other time would be dormant. With this program, randomly selected voting machines will be subjected to on-site Election Day testing by experts -- just as if it were in regular use throughout the day. By implementing this program of Parallel Testing, any software illegally loaded into the voting system would be detected and rectified immediately.

My office would ensure that every county has a detailed “Election Security Plan” to ensure that everyone in the elections process is prepared for any problem or situation that may come up. This plan should address the processes of pre- and post- election security, the internal controls that are put in place and the physical security of the voting equipment.

For those counties which do not already have a “Election Security Plan,” my office will assist the developing of a plan that meets the needs of each individual county.

Election Day Audit Teams will also be created. These teams will randomly select various precincts for Election Day audits to ensure that election equipment is functioning properly and election procedures are being properly followed. These teams will also be available to support the counties on Election Day and to respond immediately to problems.

Step Three: Absentee Ballots

Require photo ID for voters who vote absentee.

Individuals who vote by mail should be required to provide a copy of a valid form of identification with their request for an absentee ballot. Thereafter, voters must submit a copy of their photo ID in the official return envelope that accompanies the actual ballot. Otherwise, the vote will not be counted.

If a valid ID is required to register to vote and to vote in person, the absentee mail process should not allow a loophole that provides the biggest opportunity to commit fraud. This is a common sense idea that would protect anyone from fraudulently casting a ballot under a fake name or for somebody else without their knowledge.

Make voter absentee ballot fraud a felony.

So much attention is paid to the potential for voter fraud on Election Day that the tremendous potential for fraud with absentee ballots has been overlooked.

Current Georgia law makes it a felony to offer money or objects of value in exchange for voting for a candidate. However, fraudulent casting or handling absentee ballots are misdemeanors. This must be changed. If we are going to seriously address voter fraud in Georgia, we must get serious about the consequences of fraudulent voting activity. It should be a felony for anyone who fraudulently receives, marks, or turns in absentee ballots. The state should prohibit “payment by the piece” to anyone for registering voters, gathering signatures or requesting absentee ballots.

Create Oath for Absentee Ballot Requests

Any voter requesting an absentee ballot must swear an oath that they are a citizen of this nation and state and be prosecuted if the oath is found to be false. Currently, under Georgia law, there is no such oath requirement.

Step Four: Establish an Election Review and Recommendations Process

Establish an Elections Task Force

One of the first steps I will take, as Secretary of State is to form an Elections Task Force. This task force will be comprised of state and local election officials representing counties of varying size, geographic location and demographic make-up.

The Task Force will oversee the independent audit process and develop plans to address issues they help identify. This will provide for an outside review of all aspects of the election process in Georgia.

Establish an Office of Inspector General

As Secretary of State, I will create an office of the Inspector General with the specific duty of investigating complaints of election fraud and voter or poll worker intimidation. This office will work directly with local and state law enforcement officials to ensure that legitimate complaints are not simply ignored or lost after an election has occurred – but rather investigated thoroughly and timely and that those warranting it are pursued aggressively.

Step Five: Elections Staff and Poll Worker Training and Recruitment

With the new voting equipment and the increasing complexities of our elections process, there is an ever-increasing need for professional training and enhanced expertise.

The Secretary of State’s office will work with county elections officials to improve training for poll workers and local election employees. Georgia must have elections staff and poll workers that are well trained in procedures and processes – and also in how to effectively deal with problems on Election Day.

I will also look to enhance and promote the Student Election Worker Program. This very worthwhile initiative provides an opportunity for high school students who meet certain requirements and complete proper training to be excused from school on Election Day to work in the polls. I will also encourage home-schooled students to participate. Not only will this help provide qualified poll workers, but will help encourage young Georgians to get involved in the elections process.

III. Citizen Confidence

In order for citizens to trust those who are elected, they need to first have faith and confidence in the elections process. This means that Georgia’s Secretary of State must ensure that Georgia’s elections meet the highest standards of integrity.

The steps presented in the Ballot Accountability and System Integrity sections will make our elections more secure and more efficient -- instilling confidence from our citizens. At the same time, we can take additional steps to make our elections more open, transparent, and accountable to the people.

Step One: Publish the Georgia Elections Report Card

As Secretary of State, I am committed to being accountable to the people. The State Elections Office will publish a report card every two years following the election. This report card will be an open, honest evaluation of Georgia’s elections. I will include and rely upon input from elections officials from all over Georgia in publishing this report.

Step Two: Improve Voter Awareness with the “Georgia Votes!” initiatives.

The Secretary of State's office will undertake a community campaign to educate the voters of Georgia about elections procedures and changes in elections laws – including the implementation of the photo ID requirements.

I will also partner with veterans organizations and civic groups to develop plans to remind our citizens of the great sacrifices made by past generations that gave all of us the right to have our votes counted accurately on Election Day.

Conclusion

The BASICs approach to elections reform -- Ballot Accessibility, System Integrity and Citizen confidence – will make our elections more honest, more efficient and more open for all of Georgia's citizens. My plan for comprehensive reform includes a centralized voter registration process, new voting machines with paper audit trails, changes in current state law, and various common sense changes in policies and procedures.

I am the first – and only candidate – to present a clear, concise plan of action for reforming our elections. I look forward to continuing to travel the state to lay out my plan for change and working with our General Assembly and local elections officials to implement it once I'm elected Secretary of State.

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