

Democrats sue to prevent mandatory hand counts in Georgia

BY MARK NIESSE

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

ATLANTA

The Democratic Party sued Monday to stop a new Georgia election rule that would require poll workers to count the number of ballots after polls close, saying it would cause "problems and delays."

The lawsuit, filed in Fulton County Superior Court, seeks to invalidate the hand-counting requirement approved by the State Election Board this month, which could create delays in reporting results in the presidential election.

"This rule is nothing more than a blatant attempt by Donald Trump and his MAGA lackeys on the Georgia State Election Board to cast doubt on our elections and undermine the outcome," said Monica Guardiola, acting co-executive director of the Democratic National Committee.

The lawsuit was backed by Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign.

The rule requires a count of the number of ballots cast, not a count of which candidate received more votes. Vote totals are reported separately.

Supporters of the hand-counting rule, which passed on a 3-2 vote by the board's Republican majority, said it is needed to ensure that all ballots are accounted for after polls close. Trump had praised the members who approved it as "pit bulls" during an Atlanta rally in August.

"It's the perfect time to count the ballots anyway, and it's better to do it at the beginning than try to do it at the end when you don't have a remedy for a miscount," board member Janice Johnston said before approving the rule.

The lawsuit, filed by the Democratic National Committee and the Georgia Democratic Party, asked a judge to throw out the hand-count rule, which would go into effect just before the election.

The court case alleges that the rule contradicts state law and undermines orderly administration of elections.

A separate lawsuit by Democrats that contests new requirements for certifying elections is heading to a trial on Tuesday.

That case challenges new State Election Board rules that call for a "reasonable inquiry" before county election boards certify the results, and that allow election board members to examine "all election-related documentation."

How Helene's destruction could affect voting in North Carolina's election

BY KYLE INGRAM
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In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene's destruction in Western North Carolina, concerns have emerged about whether residents affected by the storm will be able to cast their ballots in the November election.

Disruptions to the postal service, destruction of polling places, missing or damaged IDs and more could all pose challenges to voters with only 36 days left until the election.

"This is all a cascading series of disasters," Gerry Cohen, a member of the Wake County Board of Elections, said.

DISRUPTIONS TO POSTAL SERVICE

On Sunday, the U.S. Postal Service announced it had temporarily suspended services in much of Western North Carolina, including any areas with ZIP codes starting with 286, 287, 288 and 289.

It also listed 39 post offices whose operations would be suspended until conditions are safe.

These closures could present challenges to voters in Western North Carolina seeking to vote by mail.

So far, nearly 250,000 North Carolinians have requested an absentee ballot for this year's election. Nearly 10,000 requests have come in from Buncombe County, which was severely impacted by Helene.

Corinne Duncan, Buncombe County's election director, said the county's main focus now is life, safety and basic needs.

"Personal safety of election services staff is currently our top priority," Duncan said in an email. "We are working to account for all staff and board members. Some are

stranded due to road blockage."

She added, however, that the post office is running and election staff were able to drop 200 ballots in the mail on Monday.

Phone lines for several of the counties hit hardest by Helene were down on Monday as The News & Observer attempted to contact board of elections offices.

The absentee voting period has already been reduced this election.

While mail-in ballots were supposed to be sent to voters on Sept. 6, most were delayed another 18 days by a court order after third-party presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. sued to get his name off the state's ballot.

Most absentee ballots went in the mail just a few days before Helene hit Western North Carolina.

"I suspect if these things were in people's mailboxes Thursday and Friday, a lot of these counties, you can see stuff just completely washed away," Cohen said.

In addition to that, voters now have a shorter deadline to get their absentee ballots in. State lawmakers passed a bill last year that requires all mail-in ballots to be received by the county board of elections office by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day.

Previously, any ballots that came in within three days after the election would still be counted, so long as they were post-marked by Election Day.

Voters concerned about postal delays can deliver their absentee ballot in person at their county board of elections office.

A voter who has requested an absentee ballot may also choose to vote in person instead, so long as they do not return the absentee ballot.

POLLING PLACES FOR EARLY VOTING

Flooding and destruc-

tion may make polling places unusable as election workers prepare to begin in-person early voting on Oct. 17.

Duncan said that Buncombe County has not yet completed site assessments at polling locations.

The facilities where election staff work, however, were not damaged but are currently without access to water.

Changes to a county's early voting plans can still be made, but state law sets out certain limitations.

Previously, the executive director of the State Board of Elections could exercise emergency powers to respond to the impact natural disasters might have on elections.

Last year, however, state lawmakers stripped the director of that power and instead gave it to the State Board of Elections itself.

That board is currently comprised of three Democrats and two Republicans, who would have to use these emergency powers in an open meeting.

There also isn't much time left to make changes to early voting sites.

State law requires all early voting sites within a county to be open for the same number of days. That would appear to make any changes to polling sites difficult after Oct. 17.

Having usable polling sites isn't the only concern for counties conducting early voting. With many residents displaced by Helene, counties may have difficulty staffing polling sites.

"It's gonna have a likely enormous impact if all these polling places have been washed away and early voting sites are not available and poll workers are not available," Cohen said.

"So I don't know what the solution is, but there's not much time to figure it out."

VOTER ID

For the first time in North Carolina's history, voters will have to present photo identification to vote in a presidential general election.

However, state law provides an exception to this requirement for voters affected by natural disasters.

Anyone affected by Helene can fill out an affidavit, either in-person at a polling place or via absentee ballot, saying that they have been a victim of a natural disaster and are unable to produce their ID.

They will then cast a provisional ballot, which will be reviewed by the county board of elections before being accepted.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP?

Counties could face heavy financial burdens as they attempt to recover polling places, fix damaged equipment and prepare for voting after Helene.

This also comes after counties were forced to foot the bill to reprint millions of ballots following the state Supreme Court's decision in Kennedy's lawsuit allowing him to withdraw his candidacy.

Cohen said the legislature, which will be back in session next week, should reimburse counties for those costs.

A law passed last year prohibits the use of any private donations for election administration.

Counties are also still

accepting volunteers to work the polls during early voting and Election Day.

STATE GRANTS FLEXIBILITY TO ELECTION WORKERS FACING CLOSURES, POWER OUTAGES

In an emergency meeting on Monday, the State Board of Elections voted to give local election workers greater flexibility in processing absentee ballots in the coming weeks, as western counties feel from Helene's impacts.

Executive Director Karen Brinson Bell said 14 of the 22 western counties contacted by the board reported that their elections offices are currently closed and could be for several more days.

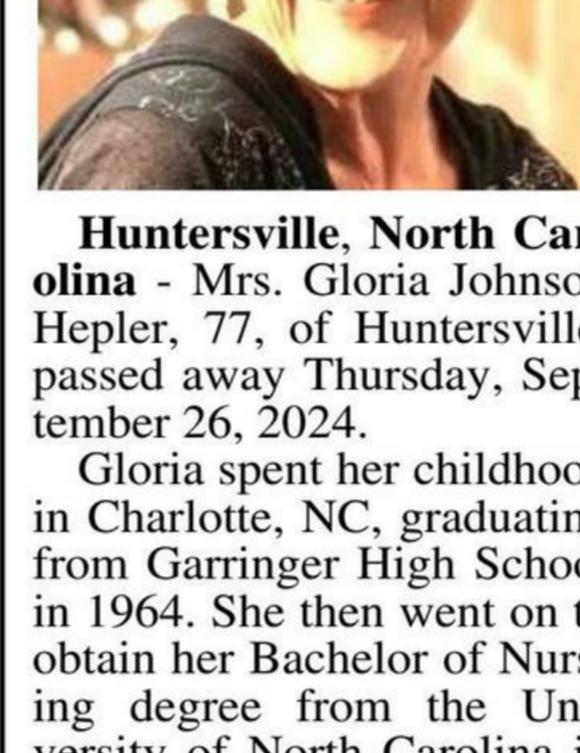
"Our hearts really do go out to these people that we consider elections family," she said. "... At this time, many of them still don't have contact with family members. They're facing damages, some total losses at their own personal properties, and so we are trying to be as responsive as we can to what their needs are."

County election boards are typically required to meet every Tuesday to receive and process absentee ballots, but the state board's resolution will allow them to reschedule those meetings.

Brinson Bell also said the state is currently in the process of creating a webpage to answer questions about the hurricane's impact on elections.

Obituaries

Gloria Johnson Hepler
December 22, 1946 - September 26, 2024



Huntersville, North Carolina - Mrs. Gloria Johnson Hepler, 77, of Huntersville, passed away Thursday, September 26, 2024.

Gloria spent her childhood in Charlotte, NC, graduating from Garringer High School in 1964. She then went on to obtain her Bachelor of Nursing degree from the University of North Carolina in Charlotte and was part of the first Nursing School graduating class in 1970.

She married Philip Johnson in 1968. Their family moved to Martinsville, VA, where she worked as an RN at Martinsville Memorial Hospital. She was a member of First Presbyterian Church, and she began many life-long friendships in Martinsville.

She & Phil moved to the Charlotte area in 1998, where they could be closer to family.

They were married for 38 years, and she was a loving caregiver to her husband be-

fore his passing in 2006.

She later married James (Jimmy) Hepler, and they shared 14 loving years together. They attended the St. Albans' Episcopal Church and created many happy memories at their beach home in Sunset Beach, NC.

Gloria took special joy in knitting and reading but was happiest when she was surrounded by family and friends. Gloria was a beautiful person inside and out. She touched so many lives and was so loved. She will be dearly missed.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Don and Thelma Wilkinson, and her sister, Marlease Knight.

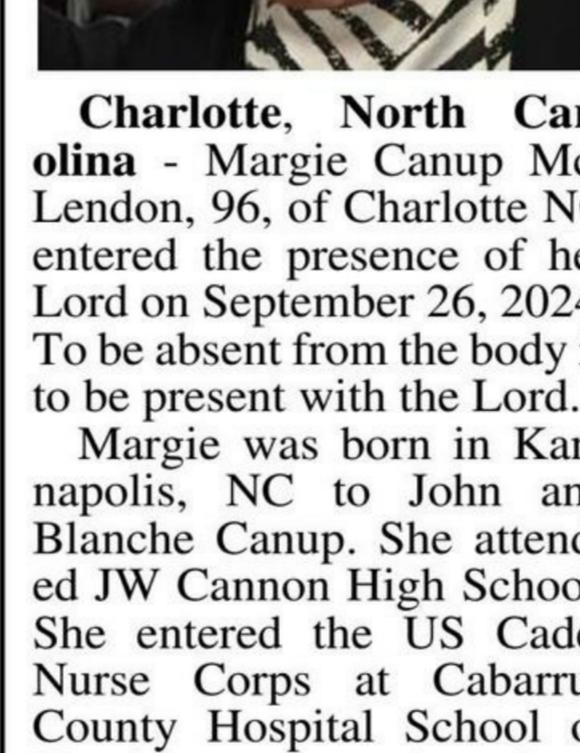
She is survived by her husband, Jimmy Hepler, her daughters, Amelia Johnson of Huntersville, Sara Carpenter (Nathan), and grandchildren, Philip and Levi Carpenter of Hampstead, NC.

Her memorial service will be held at 2:00 pm, Saturday November 2, 2024, at James Funeral Home in Huntersville, NC. The family will receive friends immediately following the service at the funeral home.

Memorial contributions may be made to The Children's Home Society of NC at www.chsn.org.

Donations to The Alzheimer's Association are also appreciated and can be made at www.alz.org.

Margie Canup McLendon
June 29, 1928 - September 26, 2024



Charlotte, North Carolina - Margie Canup McLendon, 96, of Charlotte NC entered the presence of her Lord on September 26, 2024. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Margie was born in Indianapolis, NC to John and Blanche Canup. She attended JW Cannon High School. She entered the US Cadet Nurse Corps at Cabarrus County Hospital School of Nursing and graduated an RN in 1948 with the last class of cadets as the war was over.

She remained in the nursing field for several years before meeting her sweetheart, Gene. They married in 1950 and shortly thereafter, she became a full time mom to the treasures of her heart, Michael and Mac. She lived a long, very selfless life. She was the most amazing wife

and mother and gave all she had to them. Anyone that knew Margie, loved Margie.

Margie was preceded in death by her parents, John and Blanch Canup, her sister Phyllis Pepper, her 2 sons; one not named as he was stillborn, 1 that was 8 days old Eugene Bennett McLendon, Jr. and husband of 65 years Eugene "Gene" McLendon. She is survived by her sister, Jonnie Critz (Frank) of Kannapolis, sons Mike McLendon (Nancy) of Charlotte, NC and Mac McLendon (Kathy) of Lodge, SC. Her grandchildren, Glenna Hagedorn (Ken), Lewis McLendon (Sarah), Anna Nolan (James), Maddy McLendon and Katy McLendon. And 6 great grandchildren.

There will be a service honoring Margie at Waltonwood Providence 5039 Providence Country Club Drive, Charlotte, NC 28277 on Friday October 4 at 10:30 a.m.

The family would like to express our appreciation to the care staff at Waltonwood Providence. They loved and cared for Margie like family, especially our beloved Beatrice. We will be eternally grateful.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to the care staff at Waltonwood Providence.

Obituaries

Hugh Kennedy, Jr.
February 12, 1962 - September 16, 2024



Charlotte, North Carolina - A Celebration of life will take place Sunday October 6th, 2024 at The Road Church's new location at 13700 Lawyers Road, Mint Hill, NC (formerly St. Luke Catholic Church). The service will be at 3 p.m. with visitation to follow. For full obituary, please visit www.mcewenminthill.com.