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Practicing Democracy

A letter from Georgia

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Today, America makes its choice between two fundamentally different visions of what it stands for. As people line up across the country to cast their vote, the whole world will be watching, as it has been for the last few months. The reporter's gaze on the U.S. – we are no exception – tends to focus on the country's many undeniable pathologies that render its self-portrayal as democracy's global leader partly a self-delusion. To some, the rise of Trumpism and the virulent white supremacist ideology fueling it has merely laid bare what has always been a self-evident truth: the U.S. was neither conceived as nor is it truly committed to the idea of multi-racial democracy.

This, however, paints an incomplete and unfair picture of the country and its people. Specifically, it overlooks the long-standing fight by Americans to improve their imperfect yet incrementally inclusive democratic system. That struggle has shaped the United States since their founding several hundred years ago. And that fight has taken on renewed vigor ever since Trump first won the Electoral College in 2016. Trump's rise to power, his relentless assault on America's institutions and democratic ideals has spurred a movement of countless Americans who are tirelessly working to achieve two things: first, getting people to the polls, and second, protecting the integrity of the election process.

To see what this fight for democracy looks like in practice and person, we travelled to Atlanta, Georgia last weekend. Once a key site of the American civil rights movement that brought about the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Georgia has become a decisive swing state in 2024. Traditionally a Republican stronghold, it flipped in 2020 when Biden won by just 11.000 votes. For many Georgia Democrats, this shift fundamentally transformed the meaning of their vote: what was previously at best an act with symbolic significance due to the distorting effect of the Electoral College can now decide the fate of the entire country, with repercussions for the world at large.

Voting as an Obstacle Course

For the Democratic Party's volunteers in Georgia, this degree of influence has translated into a heightened sense of responsibility. Keenly aware of the difference only a few thousand votes make, their work has begun months, even years, before today's fateful twelve hours. Two aspects are key to understanding the nature of their work: first, despite the significance of Election Day, Americans have actually been able to cast their ballots for several weeks now. With over 75 million votes already cast in early voting, today's ballots are just the final step in a much longer electoral process. Second, casting one's vote in Georgia is no easy feat. In 2020, the Republican governor signed a law requiring voters to provide a driver's license or a passport, which many – often underprivileged people – do not possess. It also drastically shortened the time window to request an absentee ballot and cut down the number of boxes per county to drop them. Taken together, this turns voting into an increasingly onerous obstacle course for people living in the state.

These hurdles specific to Georgia come on top of already existing hoops that all voters must jump through. All eligible voters must first register to vote, rendering voting an opt-in process. Requiring such additional effort can have a deterrent effect. After registration, voters may have different options depending on their state: early in-person voting, absentee-ballot voting, or in-person voting on Election Day. The latter is always on a Tuesday, a working day for most people, which creates a further barrier. Addi-

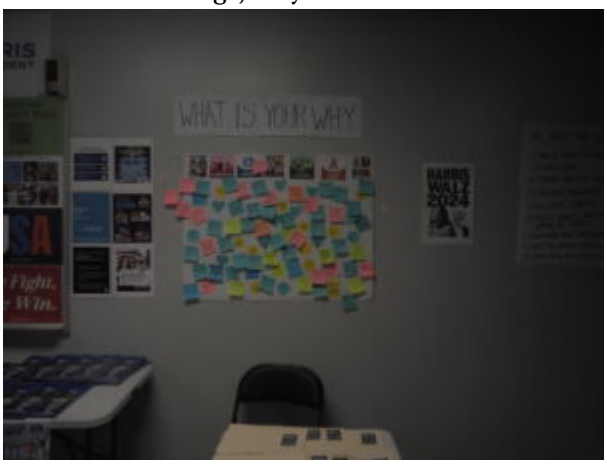
tional obstacles include changing registration requirements, unclear instructions, difficulty locating one's polling place, and lacking the time and resources required to get there. This is why the work of volunteers is essential: they run hotlines to answer questions and clarify changed requirements, knock on doors to encourage and point voters to their polling place, and offer rides to and from the polling station.

Democracy as a Movement

To organize these efforts, Democratic volunteers in Atlanta gather each day in a modest building, nestled in a residential area: the Democratic headquarters. Outside, signs direct volunteers to the parking lot, and people wearing HARRIS-WALZ T-shirts halt traffic to help volunteers cross safely. In the building, people are cheerfully but resolutely buzzing through rooms with a pizza slice in one hand and a clipboard in the other. The walls are covered with posters reading "Win the Whole Dem Thing" and "STOP TRUMP." Volunteers of all ages pop in and out, some of them friends, some of them strangers who just met: A white working Mom who does phone banking from home, answering questions on how and where to vote. A recent university graduate who wants to go into political campaigning himself one day. Two friends from San Francisco and Seattle who rented a car for the weekend to knock on doors and get people out to vote. And a young, black woman who leaves her job early every day to register new volunteers at the office. All of them, each with motivations and stories unique to them, were here to enable others to make their choice and with them America's.

While the mood at the headquarters was exuberant, our initial attempts to speak to people were met with a sense of suspicion. Years of relentless Republican efforts to intimidate election officials and volunteers, to infiltrate and hijack these community spaces and abuse the trust and openness that characterizes them has left many justifiably cautious and worried about their safety. After one of the volunteers agreed to speak to us, they guided us through the bustling hallways and rooms full of people making calls, collecting data and distributing food. Far from just being an operational headquarters for a candidate's campaign, it was clearly a place where people came to meet, connect and build community. People looked out for each other, reminded us to hydrate and to grab a snack.

Democratic movements, like all movements, thrive on a sense of community; but they are also sustained by a shared sense of purpose. In the front room, a big poster asked: What is your why? Scribbled down were answers like "equal opportunity", "reproductive freedom", "common sense" as well as "federal judges," "small business" and "decency". To many, the 2016 election was a wake-up call, a shock they wanted to turn into action rather than paralysis. Volunteering for the Democratic party has given them a cause, a community, and for many it has become an addiction. "You catch the bug", they said.



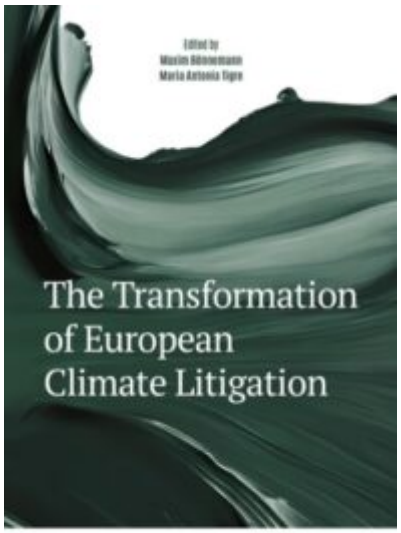
Democracy as a Practice

Presidential candidates cannot win the election without volunteers like them: ordinary people – many women – who often balance a full-time job and a family on the side. Some even pause their careers and travel from across the country – from Boston, Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco – to spend weeks, even months, helping in Georgia and other swing states. The scale and intensity of Republican's efforts to undermine the election and obstruct and delay the process has required and provoked an equally determined Democratic response, one so demanding that paid professionals alone cannot sustain it. What should be a basic democratic process – voting – has been transformed

into a nationwide movement, engaging thousands for months to ensure every vote is cast and counted.

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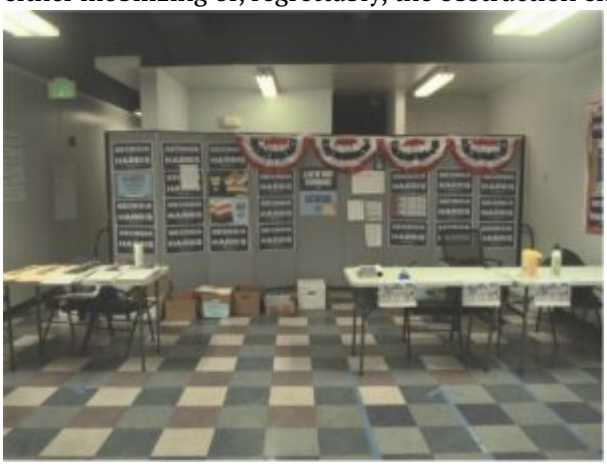
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Yet, while so many pour themselves into defending the integrity of democracy, the word "democracy" itself was rarely mentioned to us. It is also absent in volunteer training materials on how to persuade voters. Instead, canvassers are trained to ask voters what issues concern them, why they have not yet voted, and explain how Harris' policies will address their concerns and struggles. Mobilizing people to cast their vote requires listening and appealing to them as individuals such that referencing abstract ideals feels unnecessary, even unhelpful.

At the same time, many of the tasks these volunteers fulfil, such as canvassing – going from door to door, seeking conversations with undecided voters who have not cast their ballot yet – are, in a way, democracy in action. Democracy is ultimately not a set of institutions nor of individuals who periodically enjoy an elevated position of decision-making power. It is a practice, one that takes courage and dedication to keep it in place and alive, and that requires the continuous and seemingly futile attempt to reach out to the other, whether they be next-door neighbors or fellow citizens, even in the face of slammed doors and refused conversations.

From Counting to Certification

However, just getting people to the polls is not where either mobilizing or, regrettably, the obstruction ends.



After votes are cast, they need to be tabulated and tallied (that is, fed into machines). For each step observers from both parties are present. The dedicated voter protection team of the Democratic Party works tirelessly for up to 14 and 16 hours at a time, closely monitoring the integrity and fairness of the entire election process. When discrepancies arise, so-called adjudication panels, composed of Republican and Democratic ballot-monitor volunteers, are contacted. They gather evidence and ensure that the process of

voting runs as smoothly as possible. Many, like some of the volunteers we visited in Georgia, are on call around the clock to address legal issues and report to the so-called Boiler-Room, which consists of legal experts who decide whether or not to escalate the issue further, eventually up to litigating it in court.

Once all votes are counted, they still have to be certified. In Georgia, the certification process extends until November 11, with responsibility lying with the state's Republican Secretary of State, Brad Raffensberger. Despite his party affiliation, he is known for sticking to the rules, pushing back against misinformation, and has promised "fair and fast and accurate" election results.

America's Choice

Many of the people we spoke to channel their disillusionment with institutions, procedures, and politicians into their activism. They understand that democratic institutions can only be as good and democratic as the people that use and sustain them. They also understand that organized civic engagement may be the most effective way to resist authoritarian takeovers of institutions that were, initially, born out of that very spirit of civic dedication.

Legions of Americans have been working on the ground to ensure participation, to allow their voice to be, quite literally, counted, and to obstruct Republican efforts to take this opportunity to shape their own path, both as individuals and as citizens, away from them. To them, the only thing that matters is that every person gets to vote and that every vote counts, no matter who casts it and for whom. Today, the volunteers we talked to will drop their pinboards and pens, their phones, yard signs, banners, and flyers at 7 pm, after days, weeks and months of intense focus. The first part, getting out the vote, may be done. The second part, getting it all certified and withstanding an already building Republican onslaught on the election system, is just about to begin once polls close on Tuesday night.

For now, we are, as those we spoke to this weekend in Georgia, "nauseously optimistic" as America makes its choice. Whatever that choice will be, whichever side "wins", Georgia showed us that there will always be more to US democracy than whoever sits in the White House.

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Stay tuned for this week's regular editorial. That's it for today. Take care and all the best,

The Verfassungsblog Team

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