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Expand access? A historic restriction? What the Georgia voting law really does.

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This story has been updated.

Opponents of Georgia's new elections law call it a blatant attack on voting rights, aimed specifically at suppressing the minority vote that helped propel Joe Biden's presidential win and gave Democrats two critical seats in the U.S. Senate. Backlash from the corporate world has been growing, and on Friday Major League Baseball announced it was moving its All-Star Game from Atlanta in response to the law. President Biden said last week the law amounts to "Jim Crow in the 21st Century," calling it "un-American" and "sick."

But Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp (R), who signed the bill into law last month, insists the opposite.

"I'm telling you the truth about this bill," Kemp insisted on WABE radio, Atlanta's NPR affiliate, on Tuesday. "It expands access."

A close examination of the language in the law shows it does contain new restrictions on voting; some are likely to make it disproportionately more difficult for poorer voters and voters of color to cast their ballots.

It's also correct that there are ways in which the law expands voter access, particularly in ways that will be visible in rural areas.

The context is important of course: This is playing out in the wake of Georgia's swing to Democrats in the 2020 presidential election and the ensuing baseless charges of fraud from the Trump campaign and its allies. Republican lawmakers in the state — as many of their counterparts across the country have — quickly began drafting a bill critics say is a political reaction from a party beholden to Trump.

The other important context: The long history of suppressing Black votes.

So let's look at what it does and doesn't do.

How the new law limits voting

It shrinks the window for voters to request mail ballots. Rather than allowing voters to request ballots six months from Election Day, the new law says voters can start requesting ballots 78 days out; counties can begin sending ballots to voters just 29 days before Election Day, rather than the previous 49 days. It also sets an earlier cutoff date for ballot application requests.

Critics say any mail delays with these shorter periods could lead to voters not getting ballots on time, or not being able to return them in time. But proponents of the law say voters simply don't need the 180 days they used to have to request ballots — and that moving up the cutoff date makes it less likely voters will receive ballots too late to get them back in time to be counted.

Counties and the state can send mail ballot applications only to voters who request them (as opposed to simply sending every registered voter a ballot application) and cannot fill in information ahead of time.

New voter ID requirements. Voters who cast mail ballots will have to provide one of several forms of identification. This provision — which replaces a signature match previously used to confirm voters' identities — is one of the most controversial because critics say it is likely to disproportionately affect Black voters.

Voters don't have to provide a copy of the identification, but could for example provide a driver's license number, social security number or other acceptable identification.

A limit on the number of ballot drop boxes during early voting. It essentially limits the number of drop boxes in each county to one per early-voting site, or one for every 100,000 voters in the county, whichever number is smaller. And the drop boxes can't be conveniently spread over the county, for example, in places where there aren't in-person early-voting locations; they all have to be located either in a county election office or at an early-voting precinct location. They have to be indoors, which critics say make them less accessible and could lead to crowds where voters are already congregated,

Shortened early voting in runoff elections. Instead of a minimum of three weeks of early voting in runoffs, early voting in runoffs will be held in a single Monday-Friday period.

State lawmakers get much more power over county and local elections (and Republicans have decisive majorities in both the state Senate and the state House). The law states that the General Assembly will select the chair of the state elections board, rather than the board being chaired by the Georgia secretary of state — an elected position. The chair is supposed to be nonpartisan. The state election board can investigate county election boards and has the power to suspend county election superintendents — though the law limits the state board to suspending four at a time.

You might remember Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, who became the target of his own party's ire after President Donald Trump put pressure on him over the results of the 2020 election; this provision seems like a direct reaction to that, ensuring partisan state lawmakers can control the election process more directly.

A ban on handing out food and water within 150 feet of a polling place, or within 25 feet of any voter. Republicans say this is aimed at stopping outside groups from influencing voters; Democrats say it's supposed to make it harder for people to wait in long lines, particularly on hot or cold days. Election officials are permitted to set up water stations — but they're not required to do so.

A few ways it expands voting:

A minimum number of drop boxes is guaranteed. Kemp has been arguing publicly that in rural counties that didn't have drop boxes in previous elections, this is an improvement (drop boxes weren't allowed in Georgia at all before 2020, and not all counties had them even during the pandemic). While the number of drop boxes is so limited it might not make a huge difference for voters, Kemp is correct that the law for the first time codifies requirements for a minimum number of drop boxes in each county.

An additional day of early voting in most rural counties. The new bill requires at least two Saturdays of early voting for each primary and general election (previous Georgia law required only one). It allows counties to choose when their early-voting locations are open, for a minimum of eight hours a day between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.

More resources for precincts so lines don't get too long. The law basically requires the state to monitor polling locations to see if any have lines longer than an hour, or still have voters waiting in line for more than an hour after polls were supposed to close. In those cases, the state is required to either form new precinct locations to ease the strain or beef up the existing polling locations' capacities to handle large numbers of voters. This applies specifically to populous precincts, mostly in urban areas.

Here's what didn't make it into the bill:

A block on Sunday voting. Earlier proposals called for a ban on Sunday voting. This proposal was seen as directly targeting Black voters, who often vote as part of church-run "souls to the polls" efforts that take place on Sundays.

A ban on no-excuse absentee voting. Georgia Republicans actually passed a bill in the state Senate a few weeks ago that would have banned no-excuse absentee voting, one of the most criticized — but not uniformly agreed upon — GOP proposals in the lead-up to the final bill. A few key Georgia Republicans, including Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan (R), opposed the idea — and it was ultimately removed from the bill Kemp signed into law.

How does this compare to other states?

Kemp and other defenders of the law say what's on the books now is in line with voting laws, even in blue states. Kemp cited Biden's home state of Delaware [in a Fox News interview Thursday](#), pointing to the ways Georgia allows more access.

Georgia's new voter ID requirement for mail ballots is one interesting comparison point. The state's old system required a cumbersome — and some said unreliable — signature-matching process, and the new law replaces it with a requirement for a driver's license, Social Security card or one of a number of other forms of ID prescribed by the state.

That's actually a little bit less strict than some of the strictest voter ID requirements in the country, where photo ID is required. Other states are closer to Georgia's new law, requiring some kind of photo or non-photo ID, including a Social Security number. And among those are blue states including Delaware, Washington and Connecticut.

The preservation of no-excuse absentee voting means Georgia isn't among the most restrictive states in terms of mail-in voting. In 2020, four states required a reason beyond the coronavirus pandemic to vote by mail.

