

This week I will devote this column to fair, accessible, secure, and transparent elections. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have offered similar election protocol legislation to insure that's Georgians who votes will feel confident that their vote is secure and their vote matters. After last year's uncertainty, we need to do more to reassure citizens that they can be confident in our voting process

The leadership of the House and Senate has devoted countless hours to look at the whole system of how our elections are conducted, the votes processed, and the ballots secured. The legislation covers many areas of the election process and administration, focusing on improving our existing systems, removing ambiguity, and building voter confidence.

One part of the election voting is the expansion of weekend voting days. I am a big supporter of allowing uniform weekend voting. The uniform days are key to ensure ballot security and prevents certain voting organizations from hijacking a day to vote. This allows for the same day throughout the state to allow for the consistent regulation of voting. Our legislation expands access to early voting statewide by requiring two mandatory Saturday early voting dates and allowing communities the option of voting on up to two Sundays during early voting. This is a significant expansion in ballot access and would apply in every county in the state.

I am also a big proponent of having voter identification laws. The need for an ID to travel, drive, buy medicine, etc. should be expanded to voting. Our legislation would require a voter provide a driver's license or state ID card number to request and submit an absentee ballot. This requirement replaces the subjective signature-match with a clear, objective standard to ensure that absentee ballots have security requirements like in-person voting.

One item I saw this last election cycle was private groups funding and establishing vote drop boxes. That, on its own, is a fundamental flaw of free and fair elections. The introduction of private systems in voting processes erodes the trust that we should have in our government's ability to conduct elections. By having secure drop boxes that are only accessible when the precinct is open, and actively monitored by an on-site election official, institutes trust that the ballot drop box is secure. By banning mobile polling locations, private funding for elections, and non-voting activities inside the voting precinct area will preserve the sanctity and security of elections.

One point I believe is a must is the use of security paper for the authentication of ballots. Much like the we use in the pharmacy business, we utilize security paper which cannot be copied and thus the security of a single vote is confirmed.

In conclusion, the next week in our legislature, it will be rife with dissension and disagreement as emotions will be exposed and friendships tested in our effort to secure the vote. I encourage you to contact me with your input and thoughts on proposed legislation or current events that may impact our community. I am in 226-A of the State Capitol. My office phone number is [\(404\) 656-5115](tel:4046565115) and my email is ron.stephens@house.ga.gov. I look forward to continuing this session and serving all of you.