

Elections in Morgan County after SB 202

In the Georgia General Assembly's 2021 Legislative Session, a sweeping election bill, SB202, was passed. There are several provisions that will make a large impact on voters, particularly absentee by mail voters and advance in person voters. The following is a general summary to help navigate the changes.

Absentee Ballot Application deadlines

Pre-SB 202, absentee ballot applications were accepted from 180 days before an election until the Friday before the election. Now, the application process window has shrunk: Applications are now accepted from 78 days (11 weeks) before an election until the second Friday before the election (11 days before the election).

How will this affect you? Most voters did not send in applications super early, so the application start date will not affect many. But we did have voters who submitted absentee ballot applications the last week of early voting. With the application deadline being 11 days before the election, you will need to submit an application for absentee voting by the Friday of the second week of voting. If you submit it past that Friday, you will not be eligible to vote by mail.

Absentee Ballot Applications

Pre-SB 202, anyone could turn in an absentee ballot application on behalf of another voter. Now, only the voter, a relative authorized to request an absentee ballot for such voter, or a person signing as assisting an illiterate or physically disabled voters with his/her application can handle or return the voter's completed absentee ballot application.

How will this affect you? Citizens need to be aware that they cannot pick up and deliver applications on behalf of others unless they fit into one of the above categories.

Absentee Ballot Applications Sent Out

Pre-SB 202, anyone could send a voter a pre-filled out absentee ballot application. This caused a lot of confusion to voters in 2020 because so many organizations were sending them out, leading voters to believe the application they had already filled out did not count or that the ballot they had already returned did not arrive or get accepted. Now, no one can send out pre-filled out absentee ballot applications to except a relative of the voter or a person signing as assisting an illiterate or physical disabled voter. If an organization sends out applications to voters, there will be a disclaimer saying this is not an official government publication and is being distributed by the organization.

SB 202 also has a provision that persons or entities that send out applications shall only mail applications to voters who have not already requested, received, or voted an absentee ballot in the election.

How will this affect you? Having the disclaimer on the application will give voters clarity on who is sending out the applications. Because absentee by mail voting was strongly encouraged in 2020 due to the pandemic, several organizations sent out absentee ballot applications to voters. This led to a lot of confusion for voters, thinking that our office was sending out several applications and then the voters completed several applications and returned them. This is hopefully cut down on the number of

applications voters complete and send in. This should also stop the flow of applications after the voter has already received or voted their absentee ballot, further cutting down on confusion.

Verifying Absentee Ballot Applications

Pre-SB 202, our office verified absentee ballot applications by signature match. We compared your signature on file with the signature on the application. Now, we will compare the identifying information you provide on the application, including driver's license number or state ID number and your date of birth. Your signature will still be required to complete the application.

How will this affect you? If you do not have a driver's license number or state ID number to provide, you will send in a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter with every application.

Absentee Ballot Mail Out

Pre-SB 202, our office started sending out ballots 49-45 days before the election to voters who had already submitted applications. Now, our office will start sending ballots out 29-25 days before the election. The only exception will be for UOCAVA (Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act) ballots. UOCAVA voters are voters who are active members of the Uniformed Services, their family members, and U.S. citizens residing outside the United States.

How will this affect you? You will have a shorter time from ballot mail out to return. If you are an absentee voter by mail, please be aware of when ballots are being sent out so that you can be on the lookout for them.

Verifying Absentee Ballots

Pre-SB 202, our office verified absentee ballots when you returned them to our office by signature match. Now, we will verify by comparing the identifying information you provide: driver's license number, state ID number, or last 4 of your Social Security number, plus your date of birth. The ballot envelopes are being redesigned so that a security flap covers your personal information. The voter will still sign the Oath of Elector on the outer ballot envelope.

How will this affect you? If you do not have a driver's license number, state ID number, or a Social Security number, you will send in a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter with the ballot.

Ballot Drop Boxes

In 2020, due to the pandemic, the State Election Board allowed counties to install absentee ballot drop boxes. Each county decided how many ballot drop boxes the county provided for voters and where they were located. The State Election Board promulgated rules for their use to make sure they were secure. Now, every county is required to have a ballot drop box and it will be inside our office and available during early voting hours. Pre-SB 202, depending on their location, a lot of boxes were available 24/7 until 7:00pm on election day. Now, they will be available during early voting hours only.

How will this affect you? In 2020, our ballot drop box was outside our office door, available 24/7 from the time it opened until 7:00pm on election night. Our ballot drop box will now be available inside our

office during the hours of early voting only. After early voting ends, you will need to hand the ballot to our staff or mail the ballot. The absentee ballot is still due by 7:00pm on election night, so we would not recommend mailing it at that late date.

Early Voting

Pre-SB 202, early voting hours were “regular business hours,” plus 9am-4pm the second Saturday of early voting if there was a federal or state candidate on the ballot. Our regular business hours were 8am – 5pm, Monday through Friday. Now, early voting hours are 9am-5pm, Monday through Friday, other than observed state holidays, plus 9am-5pm the first AND second Saturdays of early voting.

How will this affect you? The required hours Monday through Friday are an hour shorter, but voters now have two Saturdays to early vote, even during local elections. This gives voters two more days to early vote.

Provisional Voters

Pre-SB 202, voters who went to the wrong precinct (“out of precinct voters”) were allowed to vote a provisional ballot. Since some local races are specific to the precinct you vote in, they were not listed on the ballot so you were unable to vote on those races. Example: if you regularly vote at DFACS and are a Commission District 2 voter, but went to the Rec Department (Commission District 1) to vote, you would not see any Commission District 2 race on the ballot at the Rec Department so you would not be able to vote on that race. But most other races (Federal, State, County-Wide, etc.) would be on the ballot. Now, if you are in the wrong precinct, the poll worker will tell you the correct precinct to go to, and you will only be able to vote an out-of-precinct provisional ballot if it is **after 5:00pm** and you sign an affidavit stating that you are unable to get to your correct precinct before the polls close at 7:00pm.

How will this affect you? If you go to the wrong precinct before 5:00pm, you will not be allowed to vote provisionally. Our office recommends that you verify your correct precinct before election day. You can call our office or you can log on to the My Voter Page at mvp.sos.ga.gov to verify where to go.

Runoff Elections

Pre-SB 202, local and state runoff elections were held four (4) weeks after an election and federal runoff elections were held nine (9) weeks after an election. Now, all runoffs – federal, state, and local – will be held four (4) weeks after an election.

How will this affect you? There will no longer be two separate runoff elections. Last year, if it had been a normal year (and it definitely was not!), we would have held a runoff in December for Public Service Commissioner and a runoff in January for U.S. Senator. The two runoffs were combined, so we only had one in January. Now, we would be having both local/state runoffs and federal runoffs in one election, but it will be in the December timeframe (4 weeks after the election), not January. This will consolidate election days so voters will have just one runoff to go vote in instead of two. However, with the consolidated time frame of a runoff in four (4) weeks after the election, we will not have three full weeks of early voting. Early voting will start “as soon as possible but no later than the 2nd Monday prior to runoff.” This will effectively cut early voting down to one week.

You will also remember that the absentee by mail application deadline is 11 days before the election, so you will need to get your absentee ballot application into the office before early voting starts. If there is

any chance of a runoff, we recommend you submit your application at the time of the election so we have it in time to process. Example: if the election is in November, go ahead the week of the election and submit an absentee ballot application for the December runoff.

Conclusion

This article did not cover every single provision in SB 202, but this does cover most of the provisions that will have an effect on Morgan County voters. If you have questions or need clarification, please reach out to our office at jdoran@morgancountyga.gov.