

Written Testimony of
Florida Secretary of State Cord Byrd
Before the Subcommittee on Elections
“Maintaining Election Operations in the Face of Natural Disasters.”

Thank you, Chairwoman Lee and Ranking Member Sewell, for the opportunity to speak before this committee about elections administration during natural disasters. June 1 marked the beginning of the Atlantic Hurricane season, which, in Florida, means that election season coincides with hurricane season. As such, it is imperative that we maintain robust election emergency plans. Florida does not delay or cancel elections; voters must have the opportunity to vote in fair weather or foul.

Let me begin by providing a brief background on elections in Florida.

Florida elections are overseen by the Secretary of State, Division of Elections, and are administered by the 67 county Supervisors of Elections.

By law, the Secretary of State also serves as Florida’s Chief Elections Officer. In this role, I work closely with the county Supervisors to ensure their duties can be carried out in accordance with the Florida Constitution and election laws.

Elections administration is challenging enough when the sun is shining. Darkening skies compound these challenges, which make emergency planning and preparation vital to our success.

During the last two election cycles in 2022 and 2024, five severe hurricanes hit different parts of the state. Storms, fires, floods, and power outages can all happen during a major weather event, so we must be prepared for everything. This includes excess humidity, which can impact ballot paper thickness which, in turn, can affect ballot processing.

In 2022, two major hurricanes hit Florida during the election cycle.

One 30 days before the election during the early voting period, and one during the election certification period.

Once we ensured that people were safe, I visited the affected counties to survey the damage. I saw first-hand the destruction and worked with the Supervisors of Elections in impacted counties to determine their specific needs based on the obstacles voters faced in their county.

Governor DeSantis then issued Executive Orders addressing the needs identified by the Supervisors. These orders established additional early voting sites, amended and extended reporting requirements for Supervisors, and extended deadlines for eligibility verification for voters.

As a result of these executive actions, the 2022 General Election voter turnout in the most severely impacted counties either closely matched or exceeded statewide voter turnout for that election year.

2024 was another active hurricane season with three hurricanes hitting during the 60-day election cycle. As always, we adjusted to ensure voters had every opportunity to cast a ballot.

The first hurricane hit just weeks before Florida's Primary Election. The second storm struck a month later, within a week of the Supervisors canvassing the first votes for the General Election. Weeks after the second storm, a third major hurricane came ashore less than a month before the General Election.

Again, I worked with the Supervisors to determine their specific needs, and Governor DeSantis acted by signing Executive Orders tailored to meet those needs. The EOs created a streamlined process for displaced voters to have their vote-by-mail ballots sent to where they were living after the storms. It also gave Supervisors of Elections the ability to relocate or consolidate polling sites or early voting sites.

We worked to make sure first responders and linemen, working long hours and away from home, had the opportunity to cast their ballots. This is an important point. While displaced voters must be afforded the opportunity to cast a ballot, so too must the people who are responsible for the maintenance of order and the restoration of power.

While these storms disrupted the daily lives of voters, we ensured it would not take away their ability to vote.

And in 2024, Florida saw its highest voter turnout in 30 years.

For example, Taylor County, in Florida's Panhandle, received direct hits from two of the aforementioned hurricanes, yet it saw a 90.9% voter turnout.

Citizens want to vote. It was truly inspiring to see people perform their civic duty despite being displaced by these devastating storms.

First, the natural disasters of 2022 and 2024 reinforced the importance of excellent coordination and planning.

Second, Florida has proven that elections can still proceed, even when emergencies are looming or when a community is recovering from disaster.

Third, Governor DeSantis has shown that Executive Orders are the key to election continuity.

Importantly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each emergency is different and at the state level, our role is to assess the counties' particular needs and find solutions.

Governor DeSantis and I used our executive powers to permit flexibility when warranted, while also maintaining the high standard of election integrity established in Florida law.

Once executive action is carried out, it's important to inform the public. During elections, my staff provides information to Supervisors and the public by issuing press releases, pushing messages on our official social media channels, updating our website, and answering calls to the voter hotline.

Emergency planning begins with coordination between state and county emergency responders and election administration officials.

Credit is also due to the voters themselves. We've learned that regardless of the circumstances, Floridians are determined to vote.

The Florida approach to elections is clear: we do not move or delay elections. Instead, we are committed to ensuring that voters affected by emergencies can still exercise their right to vote.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today about how Florida administers elections during emergencies. I look forward to answering any questions you may have for me.

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