

Officials: NC changes didn't hinder vote

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Election officials in North Carolina said Tuesday's primary ran smoothly in the face of stricter voting rules, but civil rights advocates assert the changes were difficult for some and will discourage others from turning out this November.

Tuesday's primary was an early test for new voting rules enacted by Republican legislators in the name of election security ahead of high-stakes contests for governor and president.

Democrats and their allies have slammed the new rules as an attempt to discourage racial minorities and poorer residents from turning out in a state with shifting demographics.

Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the State Board of Elections, told reporters the morning of Super Tuesday that no major issues with photo ID requirements had been reported.

Of the 695,000 North Carolinians who voted early, 216 had to cast provisional ballots for reasons related to the photo ID requirement, she said.

"In other words, only about three out of every 10,000 voters had to vote a provisional ballot due to the photo ID requirement," she said.

"We believe this is a strong sign that the word is getting out that you should bring your ID to vote." But Cheryl Carter, co-founder of Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan voting rights group, said her organization received "hundreds" of calls to its election hotline from people who had trouble navigating the changes.

"There was a lot of confusion," she said. "And if we have anything to say about it, North Carolina is going to get their act together."

In 2020, only about 75,000 votes – three-tenths of a percentage point – separated then-President Donald Trump and challenger Joe Biden. Analysts expect another close race, and national Democrats are looking to flip the state.

North Carolina was one of several states to pass stiffer measures in the wake of Trump's baseless claims of

election fraud, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

Along with requiring ID, some of the other changes ban ballot drop boxes, put tighter limits on mail-in ballot returns and eliminate the three-day grace period for ballots delivered late – even if they were postmarked by Election Day.

"I was horrified when they did that because we all know that the post office is not always reliable," North Carolina Secretary of State Elaine Marshall, a Democrat, told USA TODAY. "I believe if a voter has filled out their ballots and dropped it in the mail that they intended to vote, and it should be counted when the delay is not due to anything the voter did."

The stringent voter ID law was first passed in 2018, then stalled in the courts and was ultimately revived by the conservative-leaning state Supreme Court.

Yet many North Carolina conservatives wanted the law to go further as election distrust remains rampant on the right. Some have argued that stricter voting laws will help North Carolinians feel more confident in the state's elections. A national Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs poll last year found less than one-quarter of Republicans had high confidence that presidential election results will be counted accurately.

And along with the new laws, North Carolina voters are grappling with recent redistricting and administrative changes that give greater leeway for partisan poll watchers at election sites.

Some voters, activists and poll workers told USA TODAY they had not encountered any issues with voters lacking proper ID by mid-afternoon Tuesday. Collette Alston, chair of the North Carolina Democratic Party's African American caucus, was making the rounds to precinct locations in Charlotte. She said she had not uncovered any problems, crediting the party's voter education efforts.

"We did a good job of getting out in front of the issue before it became an issue," Alston said. "So, we pretty much had everything in place in order to get ready for today, and for November for that matter."