

As Ga. primary nears, early voting picks up

State has seen a nearly 40 percent increase in ballots cast this week.

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Early voting for Georgia's March 1 primary took a dramatic upswing this week as the campaigns set their focus

on this state and nearby South Carolina.

As of Tuesday, 63,503 early and absentee votes had been cast across the state, according to the Georgia Secretary of State's Office.

That's nearly a 40 percent increase over last week, the first of Georgia's three weeks of in-person early voting. At that time, the state reported 37,440 cast ballots, including

Early voting continued on A8

EARLY VOTING

Polling stations opened Feb. 8 for the Georgia primary. Early voting will continue through Feb. 26. This Saturday is the only Saturday that the polls will be open to early voters. Check with your local elections office for voting locations.

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28,546 in person.

In advance of the 2012 presidential primaries, about 144,000 Georgians cast in-person ballots over the course of the entire early-voting period.

Several metro counties added extra voting sites this year, anticipating high voter interest in the 2016 presidential race.

Rick Barron, Fulton County's director of registration and elections, said he was still surprised at how few county residents have opted to avoid potentially long lines on Election Day, despite the rise in early ballots cast.

"I expected we would have been at 10,000 by now at minimum," Barron said.

The state reported that 5,821 Fulton County residents had voted in person or by mail-in absentee ballot as of Tuesday, the highest for any county.

Barron and Kristi Royston, the deputy director of elections in Gwinnett County, said in decision may be keeping some from the polls.

"No one seems to be in a rush to cast a ballot," Barron said. "Some of the people that have come in to the sites come in, they look at the sample ballot and then they leave."

Robert Hydrick, a spokesman for Secretary of State Brian Kemp, said the uptick this week could be due to several factors, including better weather.

The campaigns also are ramping up their focus on Georgia. Former President Bill Clinton was here last week campaigning for Democrat Hillary Clinton. Bernie Sanders, her opponent, was at Morehouse College for a rally Tues-

WHAT TO BRING WITH YOU

Georgia voters must show photo identification when they vote in person. Approved forms of identification include a Georgia driver's license, even if it's expired; a state-issued voter identification card; a valid U.S. passport; or a valid U.S. military photo ID. For a full list of acceptable Georgia voter identifications, please visit the Georgia Secretary of State Office's site (www.sos.ga.gov).

WHERE TO VOTE

Any registered voter in Georgia can vote early. To verify voter registration and find early-voting sites, please visit the Georgia My Voter Page (www.mvp.sos.ga.gov). The Georgia Secretary of State Office's site is also a helpful tool (www.sos.ga.gov).

All counties will offer voting this Saturday, and some, such as Fulton, will offer Sunday hours. Visit your county's site to find out about Saturday voting hours.

- Cobb County (www.cobbcounty.org)
- DeKalb County (www.dekalbcountyga.gov)
- Fulton County (www.fultoncountyga.gov)
- Gwinnett County (www.gwinnettcounty.com)

day.

On the Republican front, Donald Trump is set to visit Atlanta on Sunday. John Kasich will be in town Tuesday.

So far, Republicans have been bringing out more voters; 40,218 to 23,187 for the Democrats.

Lynn Ledford, Gwinnett County's elections director, said voter turnout is "comparable" to the past two presidential preference primaries. She expects the number to "rise pretty quickly" once the additional seven locations open Saturday.

"We voted over 300 (Tuesday), and prior to that we'd been voting between 180 and 190 daily," Ledford said. "It's the normal progression that as you get closer to the election date itself, voter participation increases."

Carol Canty, 55, of Stone Mountain, and her mother cast their ballots Tuesday at DeKalb County's election headquarters on Memorial Drive. They couldn't wait any

longer.

"It's just the enthusiasm of the election itself," Carol Canty said.

Her mother, Gladys, 79, said her "mind was made up eight years ago." Both were wearing fleece jackets embroidered with Hillary Clinton's campaign logos.

"I want the candidate I support to win, that's why I voted early," said Sandy Smith of Lawrenceville.

Smith and her husband, Samuel, cast their ballots last week at Gwinnett County's polling site on Grayson Highway. Smith was determined "to beat the crowds."

"The advantage of early voting is the individual is allowed to fit it into their schedule, when they're ready and where it's convenient for them to go," Royston said.

Early voting runs through Feb. 26, with most metro counties offering Saturday and extended-hour voting during the final week.