

## Trump Supporters Disrupt Early Voting in Virginia

A group waving Trump flags and chanting “four more years” created a commotion at a polling location in Fairfax, Va. A county official said some voters and staff members felt intimidated.



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A group of Trump supporters waving campaign flags disrupted the second day of early voting in Fairfax, Va., on Saturday, chanting “four more years” as voters entered a polling location and, at one point, forming a line that voters had to walk around outside the site.

County election officials eventually were forced to open up a larger portion of the Fairfax County Government Center to allow voters to wait inside away from the Trump enthusiasts.

Election officials said that the group stayed about 100 feet from the entrance to the building and, contrary to posts on social media, were not directly blocking access to the building. But they acknowledged that some voters and polling staff members felt intimidated by what some saw as protesters.

“Citizens coming into and leaving the building did have to go by them,” Gary Scott, the general registrar of Fairfax County, said in a statement. “Those voters who were in line outside of the building were moved inside and we continued operations. Some voters, and elections staff, did feel intimidated by the crowd and we did provide escorts past the group. One of the escorts was the county executive.”

In an unnerved electorate, where concerns about voting rights and safely voting amid the coronavirus pandemic are at a fever pitch, the demonstration outside of a polling place served as preview of a likely contentious election season, and how groups may be utilizing tactics that rattle or even deter voters over the next six weeks.

The disruption came as President Trump has repeatedly sought to undermine confidence in the upcoming election, spreading falsehoods about voting by mail and declaring the election “rigged” before any votes have even been cast.

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The demonstration originated from a “Trump Train” parade that began in nearby Prince William County and featured Tommy Hicks Jr., the current Republican National Committee co-chairman. The event was set to end in the parking lot of the government center, which was also serving as the polling location on Saturday. Some of the people who attended the parade walked over to vote. Others gathered outside and began chanting, “four more years, four more years!”

Sean Rastatter, a vice chair at the Fairfax County Republican Committee who was at the polling location, said that he did not think any actions came close to voter intimidation, and that many of the discussions from members of the group were with journalists.

“I don’t think there was any way to need or feel intimidated in any form,” Mr. Rastatter said. He added that county officials asked the group on several instances to back away from the curb, and that the group complied.

Bryan Graham, the chairman of the Fairfax County Democrats who was also at the polling center, saw it differently, writing on Twitter that “the Republicans are straight-up attempting to intimidate voters at the government center.”

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In an interview, Mr. Graham said he’d “never seen or heard of anything like this happening before.”

“I was there when the county executive was there and I saw him walk multiple people through the crowd because they didn’t feel safe,” Mr. Graham said. “I don’t think it’s appropriate. We shouldn’t be doing things to make people feel unsafe.”

Steve Descano, the county attorney, did not directly address the demonstration in a statement posted to Facebook on Saturday, but said that he was “instructing my office to pursue cases of voter intimidation that may occur.”

Virginia election law states that it is illegal to “hinder or delay a qualified voter in entering or leaving a polling place,” and that it is also prohibited to perform any kind of political advocacy within 40 feet of any entrance to a polling place.

Videos of the demonstrators quickly went viral on social media, and show them gathering outside the entrance, holding up Trump campaign signs and chanting as voters walked past them.

Some election rights groups said that the Trump group might have still crossed a legal line.

“In Virginia, the safe zone around the polling location is only 40 feet, but that safe zone is for campaigning and trying to change a person’s vote,” said Sylvia Albert, director of voting and elections at Common Cause, a voting rights group. “Outside of that, in general, there are laws against intimidation. So I would say that even if they have a right to campaign, which they absolutely do, they do not have a right to interfere with someone’s right to vote or to intimidate them.”

“To me, this went beyond campaigning and they should have been removed.”

The first two days of early voting in Virginia were marked by high turnout and long lines, with voters beginning to line up early in the morning, hours before polls opened. The state offered expanded early voting in an attempt to alleviate crowding at polling centers during the pandemic.

Ms. Albert added that the demonstration underscored the need for counties and municipalities to develop contingency voting plans for all situations.

“Contingency plans aren’t only if there is a hurricane or a pandemic,” she said. “It’s also if something is making my polling location inaccessible to voters. That could be power going down, that could be people protesting and blocking the door.”