

Trump plays a new role: Campaigner in chief

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President Donald Trump addresses the crowd at a Dec. 5 rally in Valdosta, Ga., for U.S. Senators Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, who are both facing runoff elections. | Ben Gray/AP Photo

VALDOSTA, Ga. — President Donald Trump on Saturday night tried on a new role: campaigning for someone not named Donald Trump.

It didn't look any different.

Trump has rarely left the White House or appeared in public in the aftermath of the election. But he landed in Georgia ostensibly to promote Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler in two runoff races that will determine which party controls the Senate during President-elect Joe Biden's first two years.

It was Trump's first political event where the intended focus wasn't his own election — or re-election. And he spent a surprising amount of time forcefully urging Georgians to vote in “the most important congressional runoff, probably in American history.”

But in the end, the performance didn't change — Trump mostly promoted himself. He falsely claimed the election was rigged and he won the election, even though states that have certified the election have more than the 270 Electoral College votes needed for Biden to win. He complained about investigations against him. And he stepped up pressure on Republican Gov. Brian Kemp to overturn the results of the election, following their call this morning.

“They cheated and they rigged our presidential election, and they're gonna try to rig this election too,” Trump said to a large crowd of supporters in Georgia, some of whom traveled from states as far away as California and Ohio to hear the president speak.

“I think they say that if you win Florida and if you win Ohio, in history you've never lost an election. This has got to be a first time — but the truth is they were right, we've never lost and we're winning this election,” Trump said, for a moment appearing to acknowledge a loss to Biden.

“If I lost, I would be a very gracious loser,” Trump said. “If I lost, I would say I lost and I would go to Florida and I would take it easy.”

As Trump welcomed Loeffler and Perdue on stage, the crowd erupted into chants of “Stop the steal!” and “Fight for Trump!”



Sen. David Perdue speaks as President Donald Trump and Sen. Kelly Loeffler listen at a campaign rally at Valdosta Regional Airport on Dec. 5. | Evan Vucci/AP Photo

“If you don't vote, the socialists and the communists win,” Trump said. “They win. Georgia patriots must show up and vote for these two incredible people. They are two of the finest people you will ever meet.”

But he acknowledged doing a rally for someone else wasn't his favorite activity.

“I don't like doing it for other people. I said David and Kelly called and said will you do a rally? I said not really,” Trump said jokingly. “I don't do it for other people.”

The event was an early indication of what Trump's post-presidency might look like and the quandary it will pose for the Republican Party. Trump remains the GOP's dominant figure, with a loyal fan base he can motivate to vote. But hopes that Trump, as ex-president, will use his stature to boost down-ballot candidates is becoming complicated by the fact that Trump is likely to use any platform to boost his own standing — and perhaps his own 2024 presidential run.

“He's still the dominant figure in the Republican Party by an enormous margin and he's still the person who can turn out votes,” said Trump ally and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who represented Georgia.

Trump's star power was certainly a draw for rally-goers like Molly Mausser, who trekked from California's Bay Area to attend the rally. “I just wanted to be a part of it,” Mausser said. “I feel kind of repressed in California. Love the whole movement, love Trump, love all of it. We're going to turn this thing around.”

But Trump has a “two-front problem,” Gingrich said. “His own reelection and then he also has to get these two people elected so we can control the Senate. So he’s got to figure out how to balance both.”

So far, Trump has discussed Georgia almost exclusively to advance false claims of widespread voter fraud in the state and to belittle any local officials who don’t agree with him. On Twitter, he has been castigating Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp instead of boosting Perdue and Loeffler.

Before leaving for Georgia on Saturday, Trump's tweets centered around his own hopes to overturn election results in the state, urging Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to do signature verification of ballots, claiming falsely it would “show large scale discrepancies” in the vote.

Trump spoke to Kemp by phone Saturday morning, according to a person familiar with the situation, when he asked the governor to call a special session of the state legislature to elect new electors who would support the president. Trump also asked Kemp to do an audit of signatures on ballots. The Washington Post was the first to report the call.

Trump pushed the issue even further the night before, as his campaign filed yet another lawsuit in Georgia, this time asking for the state to “order a new election to be conducted in the presidential race,” because of “systemic misconduct, fraud, and other irregularities.” Biden won the state by roughly 12,000 votes — a result both Trump’s own administration and Georgia Republican officials say was not tainted by widespread voter fraud.

And then there is the doubt over election security sowed by two pro-Trump attorneys in the state, Sidney Powell and Lin Wood, in their separate legal bid to overturn the November results. Georgia officials have warned that Powell and Wood’s most recent lawsuit, which is seeking to freeze voting machines, could “significantly and materially interfere” with the state’s preparation for the two Senate runoffs on Jan. 5. Outside of the courts, Powell and Wood are also encouraging Trump’s supporters to boycott the Jan. 5 election, falsely arguing that the state’s electoral system is hopelessly corrupt.

On Saturday night, Trump briefly pushed back on calls to boycott the runoff race vote.

“Friends of mine say we are not going to vote because we are angry about the presidential election,” said Trump. “It’s almost like a protest. But if you do that, the radical left wins.”

It didn’t matter that even some of the state’s own Republicans are calling on Trump to drop his incessant allegations of Georgia voter fraud.

“President Trump’s Justice Department has seen no widespread fraud,” Raffensperger said earlier this week. “They have had multiple investigations, like us. And our investigators have seen no widespread fraud, either.”

Trump called on the crowd to make sure Raffensperger “knows what in the hell he's doing.”

Raffensperger has rejected calls to step down by Trump, Perdue and Loeffler after the president failed to beat Biden in Georgia and neither Perdue nor Loeffler surpassed the 50 percent threshold required by state law to win.

At the rally, Trump's message of voter fraud fell on willing ears.

People at the rally told POLITICO they'd traveled from as far as California or Ohio, with others coming from nearby Alabama, Tennessee or Florida to support the president. All said they fully believed Trump's false claims that the election had been stolen from him. Several had a similar message the president would give a few hours later: they would accept his loss if they thought it was legitimate, but they believed his accusations of fraud.

“I think he won it. I think it was stolen. I think it's a fraud. I think he had the votes to win,” said Jim Holdridge, a retiree from Lubbock, Texas, who said he came to Georgia to volunteer for Perdue's campaign.

“You feel helpless because you've done everything you can,” Holdridge added. “We had the Republican turnout was as high as you could probably get. And to find out that it could potentially have been defrauded — hey man, if the guy lost, he lost. If Trump lost you can deal with that. What you can't deal with is the concept of your vote didn't matter.”

Anna Deblanc, a retired registered nurse from Central Georgia, said she was at the rally to support the senators and that she “absolutely” believed Trump won the election.

“If this was a fair and true election with no machines that were manipulable, I would hate to have Biden as president but I would have to accept it,” she said. “But under these circumstances there is no accepting it. It is not valid to me.”

Behind the scenes, Republican party officials are closely watching to see if the wild conspiracy theories about the election could dampen their efforts in the race. But so far, officials say there has not been a marked change in polling. They are also keeping a close eye on early voting turnout, as even a slight dip in turn out could sink their chances.

“It is a real concern and it's the reason Republicans are working overtime to contact every voter,” said a Republican strategist working with the campaign. “We have a pretty low bar set for what the president can do down there to be helpful, and if we can get even a few minutes of him telling people to turn out of the vote, that is a win.”

After the rally, the strategist noted Trump “overcame the low bar,” especially when he noted voter registration deadlines.

A recent Survey USA poll showed both Perdue and Loeffler narrowly trailing their opponents, Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock. Ossoff has a 2 percentage point edge over Perdue, while Warnock is 7 percentage points ahead of Loeffler.

Jason Miller, a senior adviser to the Trump campaign, said the president's remarks were intended to portray Ossoff and Warnock as "the crazed left-wing radicals they are."

And he pushed back on criticism that the campaign's legal efforts have undermined the runoff campaigns.

"Rooting out fraud isn't just about ensuring the rightful outcome of 2020, it's about making sure they don't occur again on Jan. 5 and don't happen in future presidential elections," Miller said.

But Republicans have expressed frustration with the campaign's dead-end legal efforts, which they say have made their work harder in Georgia.

"If we weren't having his recount and a president unable to accept the results, we would have a pretty clear path" to victory in the runoffs, another Republican strategist said.

Even those in the president's inner circle are expressing public concern about Powell and Wood, who held a rally earlier this week in Alpharetta and implored Trump supporters not to vote on Jan. 5. Privately, Trump reached out to Wood to stop his efforts, and allies of the president and Republicans have tried to paint Wood as a Democrat up to mischief. Donald Trump Jr. called their remarks "nonsense."

"Ignore these people," he tweeted. "We need ALL of our people coming out to vote for Kelly & David."

Trump Jr.'s aides have even launched a super PAC, Save the US Senate PAC, that is airing ads featuring the president's son trying to mobilize the MAGA crowd.

The chaos in Georgia has given Republicans a preview of party politics after Trump leaves the White House, with the president eyeing a comeback bid and showing more interest in his own fight than the fate of the party.

"Let's be very clear we're not in the post-Trump part yet," said Matt Gorman, a GOP strategist. "This is one of the last chapters of it right now. He is still the president and we still need him to get us over the finish line here."

Alex Isenstadt and James Arkin contributed to this report.