

## **Georgia's Journey Down the Purple Brick Road: A Review of the 2018 Georgia Mid-Term Election Results**

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### **Abstract**

*The demographic shifts that have occurred in Georgia over the last three decades provide the foundation for the move from red to purple and eventually to blue. The new migrants, to Georgia, are not southern Democrats or even right-wing Republicans. Since 2010, the number of Georgia residents has increased 9,688,709 to 10,519,475 in 2018. This is an increase of 830,766 or about an 8% increase in population. These new residents are not driven by southern angst and suspicion of the north. These new Georgians are receptive to moderate social and fiscal policies. The migration of the United States population from the West, Midwest, and Northeast to states in the Sun Belt, such as Georgia is now beginning to bear electoral fruit.*

*Keywords: electoral politics; voter suppression; African-American vote; demographic shifts*

To explain the 2018 midterm election, and in particular the Georgia gubernatorial race, it is important to look at the multiple layers that impacted the election results and not just pinpointing one major issue that swayed the election results one way or another. Political rhetoric, changing demographics, and legalized voter suppression have combined to create an environment challenging traditional thinking and political analysis of the electorate and electoral politics of the present and future for Georgia.

The 2018 Georgia gubernatorial race was noteworthy on many levels, including the nomination by a major southern political party of an African American woman, which was a historic nomination for any state, in particular a southern state, to place the election into the

annals of political history. However, the race became infamous, by some calculations, because of the accusations of systematic voter suppression.

This new environment changing traditional political thinking in the United States as well as in Georgia, has created a space where citizens, who were already untrusting of the political process, had their suspicions confirmed by the legal and state-wide voter suppression techniques and acts. The acts of, including yet not limited to, reducing voting locations, reduction in the number of voter machines, and “exact match” laws, were implemented and highly publicized which could have had an impact on the lack of citizens engaging in the electoral process – contributing to self-imposed voter depression of the vote.

To date, a half dozen lawsuits have been filed, all in some fashion, raising the question of voter suppression. Thus far, five of the suits have been decided in favor of those alleging some degree of voter suppression. The last one is in adjudication, including a new lawsuit brought by the ACLU – three of Georgia’s largest counties alleging voting irregularities in the 2018 general election. The rulings dealt with the arbitrary consolidation of polling sites, the ability of non-English speaking citizens to use an interpreter and raised serious concerns with the so-called “exact match” policy.<sup>1</sup> The latter gave an enormous amount of discretion to election officials to determine if a signature was that of the applicant. The state also used a policy dubbed “use it or lose it.” If a citizen had not voted within a three-year span, his/her name would be placed in appending file to be purged from the voter role under the Georgia Law.<sup>2</sup>

In the last decade, the Georgia Secretary of State office has purged over one million voters. In 2017, the Office purged approximately 660,000 voters. In 2018, the number of purges

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/what-you-need-know-about-georgia-000-pending-voters/0aulxJglullpKgMmpexBmK/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/412195-georgia-purged-more-than-100000-people-from-voter-rolls-because-there-didnt>

was approximately 90,000.<sup>3</sup> In many of these purges the reason given was under a state law that allows a voter's name to be purged if the voter did not participate in the previous election. The so-called "use it or lose it" policy. Of the 90,000 purged in 2018, close to 80% were African American citizens – considering African Americans are about 30% of Georgia's overall population. What has occurred is a confluence of factors both nationally and locally. It is important to note that the policies used to implement these purges were all under the color of law.

What has fueled many of the changes is the gutting of the Voting Rights Act (VRA).<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Section 4 of the VRA was unconstitutional. Section 4 was the trigger that allowed the U.S. Department of Justice to force a jurisdiction to request preclearance before enacting any changes that might dilute or impede voting. In short, federal oversight of voting practices was established under the VRA. The enactment of the VRA helped to drive up voter participation; in some instances, by five (5) to eight (8) percent.

The decision against preclearance gave license to many states, including Georgia, to enact exact match laws and close polling precincts. Many of the closed precincts occurred in predominantly African American or poor neighborhoods. The number of voter roll purges have increased in Georgia since 2013 and the end of the VRA.<sup>5</sup>

While voter suppression efforts plagued the 2018 Georgia midterm election, it is important to note that the 2018 midterm elections also played out in a highly charged, divisive, partisan, and culture-social war. The first two years of the Trump administration have unleashed overt displays of racism, xenophobia, and sexism. The designation of states as either red or blue

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<sup>3</sup> Van R. Newkirk II, *Atlantic*, November 6, 2018, "The Georgia Governor's Race Has brought Voter Suppression into Full View."

<sup>4</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder* 570 U.S. (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Desmond Ang, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, "Do 40 years old Facts Still Matter? Long – run Effects of Federal Oversight Under the VRA."

in the media and by politicians only serves to further polarize the country which drives voters to vote party rather than voting on policies. This is a clear when many politicians and television/cable pundits refer to areas that voted for Trump as “Trump Country” further strengthens the polarization of the geographic area and citizens living in those areas. Because midterms are usually a referendum on the sitting president, Trump sought to accentuate this by making a vote for his endorsed candidates as a vote for him. This was evident in the Georgia race. Trump endorsed Brian Kemp during the Republican primary and both Trump and Vice President Pence made appearances for Kemp during the general election.

**Comparison of Registered Voters and Voter Turn-Out**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number Registered Voters</b>	<b>Number of Overall Votes Cast</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Votes Cast</b>
<b>2014</b>	5,191,182	2,596,947	50.3%
<b>2018</b>	6,428,581	3,949,905	61.44

Source: [www.sos.ga.gov](http://www.sos.ga.gov)

While the overt efforts to suppress votes did not impact the percentage of votes cast, the efforts of suppression could have created an environment of self-suppression where voters did not attempt to vote in the election because of the highly publicized efforts to suppress votes. The outcome of the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial race will have consequential outcomes not only for Stacey Abrams and Brian Kemp; the outcome will accelerate or slow Georgia’s fade from a red state to a purple state moving forward. The outcome has the potential to force the Georgia Democratic Party to accept the reality that the party’s core constituency is black; and the party’s viability lies with its’ black constituents. Yet, continued African American support will come with a price. The state Democratic Party will need to move beyond symbolic support for African

American candidates and provide the resources needed to win state-wide races. Reliance on white younger émigrés to the state will not sustain and grow the party into the future if the Democratic Party wants to move toward being a more political competitive state.

The demographic shifts that have occurred in Georgia over the last three decades provide the foundation for the move from red to purple and eventually to blue. The new migrants, to Georgia, are not southern Democrats or even right-wing Republicans. Since 2010, the number of Georgia residents has increased 9,688,709 to 10,519,475 in 2018. This is an increase of 830,766 or about an 8% increase in population. These new residents are not driven by southern angst and suspicion of the north. These new Georgians are receptive to moderate social and fiscal policies. The migration of the United States population from the West, Midwest, and Northeast to states in the Sun Belt, such as Georgia is now beginning to bear electoral fruit.

### **2016 Presidential Results**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Number of Votes</b>
<b>Trump (R)</b>	2,068,623
<b>Clinton (D)</b>	1,837,300
<b>Johnson (I)</b>	123,641
<b>Difference (vote by which Trump won) – 107,682</b>	
<b>Registered Voters – 5,439,571 – Number of Votes Not Cast 1,401,007</b>	

Source: [www.sos.ga.gov](http://www.sos.ga.gov)

The influence of these migrants was evident in Georgia during the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential races when Barack Obama received 45 and 43 percent of the electoral vote respectively, and Hillary Clinton’s share of the popular vote in 2016 was 1,837,300 (45.5%). These numbers, although not winning numbers, demonstrate the steady build of a more moderate

electorate. The 2018 Georgia midterms results will serve as an indicator as to whether the state continues its' move to purple.

For Georgia Republicans, like their national counterparts, this midterm election has graphically pointed out the inability and failure of the party to expand its' base to younger populations, college educated women, and the expanding immigrant populations.

**Select Counties Outside Immediate Metro Area – Abrams Percentages**

<b>County</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Dooly</b>	44.3	Peach	47
<b>Early</b>	46.9	Quitman	43.6
<b>Lowndes</b>	41.6	Twiggs	46.8
<b>McIntosh</b>	39.9	Washington	49
<b>Meriwether</b>	40.4	Webster	40
<b>Mitchell</b>	43.5	Wilkes	40
<b>Wilkinson</b>	44		

Source: [www.sos.ga.gov](http://www.sos.ga.gov)

The Republican base is centered in the rural and non-metropolitan areas of the Georgia, yet, Stacey Abrams expanded the popular percentage of the Democratic vote in the state to approximately 49%. The ability of Abrams to increase the state-wide percentage was helped by cutting into some of the traditionally strong Republican rural and non-farm rural areas outside of the immediate metro area.

### Georgia Gubernatorial Races: 2010, 2014, and 2018

	2010	2014	2018
<b>Reg. Voters</b>	5,033,307	5,168,664	6,428,581
<b>Deal (R)</b>	1,365,382	1,345,237	
<b>Barnes (D)</b>	1,107,011		
<b>Carter (D)</b>		1,144,794	
<b>Kemp (R)</b>			1,978,408
<b>Abrams (D)</b>			1,923,685
<b>Difference</b>	<b>258,821</b>	<b>200,443</b>	<b>54,723</b>

Source: [www.sos.ga.gov](http://www.sos.ga.gov)

The table demonstrates the rise in the Democratic vote in Georgia’s Gubernatorial Races.

Democrat Roy Barnes’s lost to Republican Nathan Deal in 2010 and Deal defeated Jason Carter in 2014. In 2018, Abrams also lost to Republican Brian Kemp. However, since Barnes’ lost to Deal in 2010 the participation rates of Democratic supporters in gubernatorial races has increased along with the number of registered voters.

### Comparison of Total Registered Voters and Votes Cast

	Registered Voters	Votes Cast	Percentage that Voted
<b>Black Men</b>	905,980	423,496	46.7%
<b>Black Women</b>	1,212,570	717,557	59.2%
<b>White Men</b>	1,771,890	1,101,947	62.2%
<b>White Women</b>	1,967,596	1,222,921	62.2%
<b>Latino Men</b>	94,438	37,026	39.2%

<b>Latino Women</b>	111,514	51,791	46.4%
<b>Asian Men</b>	71,871	31,040	43.2%
<b>Asian Women</b>	79,015	35,921	45.5%

Source: www.sos.ga.gov

The 2018 midterm elections to Georgians was evident in the turnout for early voting, over two (2) million votes were cast. An additional four (4) million votes (60% of voters) were cast in the general election. Both turnouts represent record breaking participation for midterm and off-presidential year general elections for African Americans, women, young whites, and educated white women.

While the historic nature of the Abrams campaign fueled interest and participation in other campaigns in the state, that is, the Abrams' factor helped the turnout for other races, including significant number of general election votes for an African American Democratic candidate for state school superintendent who polled 48.87% of the vote in this state-wide race.

Yet, more predictive of Georgia's move to a politically purple state was the successful election of Lucy McBath in Georgia's 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. The McBath victory comes in part as a result of the failed run of Democrat Jon Osoff in 2017.

**Georgia 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional Special General Election: June 2017**

<b>County</b>	<b>Osoff (D)</b>	<b>Handel (R)</b>
<b>Cobb</b>	33,114	45,688
<b>DeKalb</b>	33,928	24,117
<b>Fulton</b>	58,475	64,994
<b>Total</b>	125,517	134,799

Source: www.sos.ga.gov

The McBath victory points to a weakening of the Republican hold on white suburban voters. The sixth district is comprised of parts of suburban Cobb, DeKalb, and Fulton counties. This is a district gerrymandered by the Republican controlled legislature to help Republicans maintain control of the sixth. The district has been represented by hard line Republican conservatives beginning in 1978 including Newt Gingrich, Bob Barr, Tom Price, and Karen Handel. This Georgia district has been flipped by Democrat Lucy McBath and the results may be a harbinger of elections to come in Georgia.

**Georgia 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional General Election: November 2018**

<b>County</b>	<b>McBath (D)</b>	<b>Handel (R)</b>
<b>Cobb</b>	40,807	51,297
<b>DeKalb</b>	43,573	29,155
<b>Fulton</b>	75,759	76,423
<b>Total</b>	160,139	156,875

Source: [www.sos.ga.gov](http://www.sos.ga.gov)

McBath won 50.51% of the overall vote for the 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. What is more telling is that she won 44.31% of the votes in Cobb and 49.78% of the votes in Fulton. Her winning percent in Dekalb was 59%. This is of note because both the Cobb and Fulton parts of the district are demographically white but have changed demographically to a younger and more educated populace. The below is a compilation demographic information for Cobb County, DeKalb County, and Fulton County for 2017 and 2018.

### Georgia 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional Demographics

<b>County</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>African American Population</b>	<b>Asian Population</b>	<b>High School Diploma</b>	<b>Bachelor's Degree or higher</b>	<b>Average Annual Income</b>
<b>Cobb</b>	63%	28.4%	5.5%	91.2%	45.5%	\$72,004
<b>DeKalb</b>	33%	54%	5%	88.5%	40.9%	\$61,105
<b>Fulton</b>	45.8%	44.6%	7.2%	91.7%	50.2%	\$61,336

Source: [www.sos.ga.gov](http://www.sos.ga.gov)

Overall, the outcome of the 2018 mid-term election netted three state Democratic senators and 11 state Democratic house seats in the Georgia General Assembly.<sup>6</sup> These netted seats were in Metropolitan Atlanta, specifically Cobb, Dekalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett counties where republicans were the incumbents.

The political signs point to a new, different reality about the politics in Georgia beginning with the Obama campaign, to the Clinton campaign, and more recently to the Abrams campaign. The decline of the victory gaps between Republican candidates and Democratic candidates continue to close allowing for a constructive discussion of the realities of the politics in Georgia. One of the reasons for this shift in politics is the change in demographics in Metropolitan Atlanta moving toward democratic candidates and away from republican candidates. Abrams presented herself as progressive enough and not too liberal that allowed for Georgia voters to be willing to vote for a democratic candidate. McBath has a similar ideology as Abrams which allowed for McBath to be successful in a suburban area, with less rural voters than Abrams had to compete

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<sup>6</sup> [sos.ga.gov](http://sos.ga.gov)

for. The upcoming 2020 election will be another test or sign of Georgia voters' willingness and voting capacity to move forward toward being a more competitive political state.