

**The original submission of this paper was written in 2019. This is the revised paper that was edited in ENGRD 349W to be relevant to 2022.*

The Blueing of Georgia

In November of 2019, during what would become one of the most talked about senate races in recent years, I conducted an extensive research project on the shifting demographics and likelihood of the state of Georgia to flip from being a deep red state to being a purple, or even blue state, as a result of the 2020 senate election. We now have the perspective to understand and appreciate the significance of the results of that election: the democrats won both of the Senate seats, after an intense runoff, and voted to help tip the scales for democratic President Joe Biden in the Presidential election. The data gathering that I accomplished in 2019 surrounding the battleground state of Georgia during the months leading up to the election and subsequent analysis explicates how a red state like Georgia could become blue.

In American politics, the term “battleground state” refers to any state that could reasonably be won by either the Democrat or Republican candidate. Many previously Republican voting states have been showing increasing support for Democratic candidates. Until 2020, Georgia’s Senate seats have been held by Republicans since 2005. However, the Republican party’s stronghold on the state has been diminishing rapidly as the Democratic party gains traction. The Democratic party captured at least one of United States Senate seats in the Georgia 2020 election due to the prevailing economic, political, and demographic trends that have been impacting the state for years.

I. The 2016 and 2018 Elections in Georgia

Senator Johnny Isakson, the Republican incumbent candidate, won 54 percent of the vote for his third term in the Georgia 2016 Senate election. He ran against Democrat Jim Barksdale who received 41 percent of the vote in the general election (United States Senate Election in Georgia, 2016). This 2016 race was predicted to be a safe win for the Republican party (Sabato's Crystal Ball, 2016).

Georgia's Republican Governor Brian Kemp, former Secretary of State, won the Georgia midterm gubernatorial election in 2018 with 50.2 percent of the vote, and by only 55,000 more votes. Kemp beat Democrat candidate, Stacy Abrams, who lost with 48.8 percent of the vote. According to *Politico*, Georgia counties with large minority populations mainly voted for Abrams for governor, while counties with less of a minority population reportedly favored Kemp. Additionally, the counties containing more college educated residents favored Abrams, while counties with fewer educated citizens favored Kemp (Georgia Election Results 2018, 2019).

Although Abrams lost the gubernatorial election, the results were impacted by vast voter suppression. While running for governor, Kemp remained in office as Georgia's Secretary of State. In this role, he had the job of overseeing the same election in which he was running in. Kemp strictly enforced an "exact match" policy which would only accept new voter registrations if they matched the information in state voter roll exactly, including hyphens, accents, and typos (Anderson, 2018). According to the *Associated Press*, just days away from the deadline to register for the election, Kemp put about 53,000 voter applications on hold due to exact-match issues. Of these voters put on hold, 70 percent were black, and most likely wouldn't have voted for Kemp due to his racist rhetoric and conservative policy stances. Additionally, long waits at

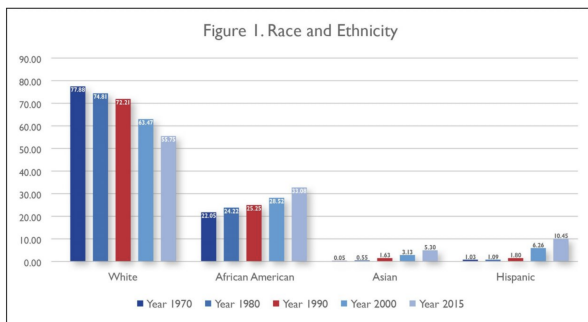
many polling locations and malfunctioning voting machines disproportionately affected non-white voters and prevented them from casting their vote (Kindelan, 2019). Although Abrams conceded following the results of the election, she was vocal about her disdain for the fact that Kemp had unfairly manipulated the results in his favor due to his position (Kindelan, 2019).

Although Republicans won these elections, the voter gap between candidates has narrowed which was observed in the outcome of the 2018 election and Abram’s ability to secure a large proportion of the vote.

II. Trends in Georgia affecting the 2020 election

The close results of the recent 2018 gubernatorial election display that Georgia has become an important battleground state. This is partly due to demographic changes that have been occurring over time in the state. According to *The Washington Examiner* in 2016, about 44 percent of Georgia’s population were members of minority groups, which is 37 percent higher than a decade ago. In Cobb County, GA, the African-American homeownership rate rose while white homeownership fell between 2000-2010, according to census data (Cottman, Goldman,

2016). This graph from Georgia State

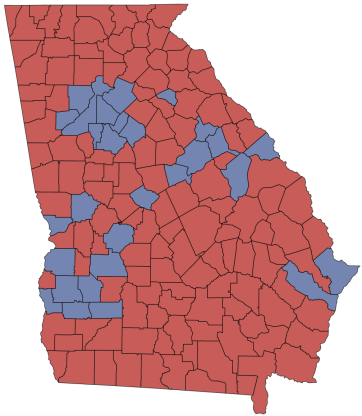
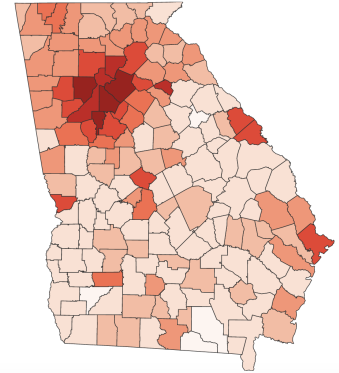


University highlights the change in the racial and ethnicity demographics in the Atlanta metro-area, which in 1970 included 5 counties with a population of 1,387,865. In 2015, the area consisted of 29 counties with a total

population of 5,710,795. The percentage of non-white citizens in the area has drastically

increased, while the percentage of white citizens has decreased over the years (The Changing Face of Atlanta, 2017).

The counties in Georgia that have had the highest density growth since 2010 are the counties located in the metro area. In this map from the *World Population Review*, the counties highlighted with the darkest red have the highest population growth rates. For example, the population of Dekalb County, which is colored in darkest, has grown by 9.25 percent since 2010. Contrastingly, in Echols County, a county colored white, has decreased by a rate of -0.47 percent since 2010 (Georgia Population



2019, 2019). When comparing this map to a map from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* displaying how each Georgia county voted in the 2018 Gubernatorial election, it is clear that the counties with higher population growth rates voted for Abrams over Kemp. For example, in Dekalb County, 83.4 percent of the vote went to Abrams while in Echols County, Abrams received only 11 percent of the vote (DiRico, 2018).

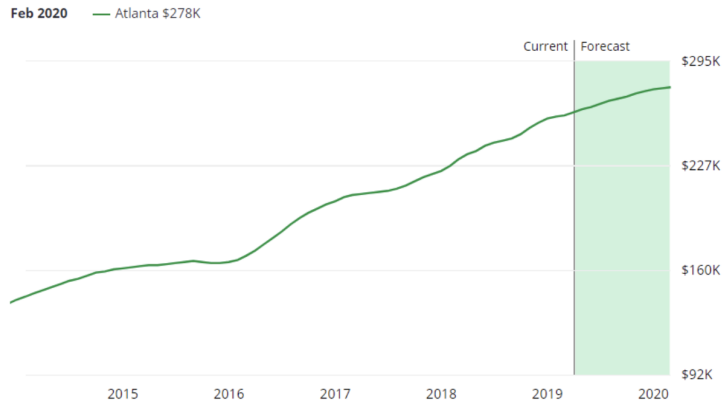
“Rapid population growth and changing demographics in Georgia provide Democrats huge opportunities,” said Lauren Groh-Wargo, Abrams’ former campaign manager. “Each eligible Georgian who moves to Georgia and becomes a voter is more likely to vote Democratic than Republican” (Niesse, 2019). It is likely that due to the increasing population in the counties that tend to vote for Democrat candidates over Republican candidates, Georgia Democratic

candidates received more of the overall vote, especially from the more densely populated counties.

The demographics of a county contribute to the way that county tends to vote. For example, one of the most conservative counties in Georgia is Bremen County, which is 84.4 percent Republican. The 2000 census reported that Bremen citizens were 88.53 percent white. Similarly, Calhoun GA, a county with voters that are about 80 percent Republican, was reported in 2000 to be 77.91 percent white. These are examples of a larger trend in GA, indicating Georgia counties that are predominantly white tend to vote Republican (White, 2019). The counties with higher population growth rates tend to contain a majority of non-white residents. In 2018, Dekalb County consisted of a population that was 29.5 percent white, while Echols County had a population that was 63.9 percent white. However, in 1990 the percentage of whites in Dekalb County was 51.6 percent white, showing a 22.1 percent decrease. By looking at the trends, it is predicted that in 2050, Dekalb County will only be 24.2 percent white (Datar, 2019). Overall, this shows that counties with a high population growth rate are those that tend to vote democratic due to the race and ethnicity of its population. This data indicates that Georgia has voted more democratically and led me to make the prediction that the 2020 Democratic candidates would gain more votes than a Democrat had been able to capture in recent elections.

Georgia's economy has been expanding over time due to an increase in homebuilding, commercial real estate development and defense spending. According to Eric Price, Atlanta Division President of David Weekley Homes, the residential construction industry saw new home starts increased by more than 17 percent in 2017. Price also believes that this growth should continue into the future (Kalmar, 2018). Overall, this positive rate displays a strength in

the Georgia economy, because homeownership is a strong indicator of positive employment and high wages for citizens of the state. Additionally, this graph from Noranda Real Estate shows



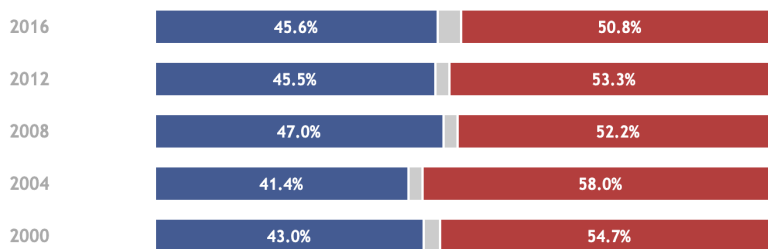
that the median price of homes currently listed in Atlanta has increased steadily. This indicates an increased demand for new home building, resulting in continued economic expansion through 2020 (Santarelli, 2019). Similarly, the

commercial real estate market in Georgia continues to show positive growth by way of higher rental and occupancy rates, resulting in a higher demand for new commercial real estate and office space. According to Doaba Brokers, “commercial real estate in Atlanta is on an upward trend, thanks in part to an increase in trade from the nearest Savannah seaport. As a result, Atlanta is serving as one of the main hubs for new businesses” (Japra, 2019). This trend displays the success of Georgia’s economy in its increasing high paying job opportunities as a result of the increase in the amount of commercial real estate needed to sustain those who need office spaces. Georgia is home to dozens of defense contractors, including Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, who are benefiting from increased defense spending by the Trump administration, which creates a demand for highly skilled workers in higher paying jobs. According to Georgia.org, “[Georgia is] ranked 7th in Department of Defense spending nationwide” (Defense, 2019). Since 2000, the overall defense spending in the state of Georgia has increased from \$3.3 billion to \$5.8 billion in 2018. The overall spending during this time was

\$102 billion (Georgia Defense Contractor Lists, 2018). The economic growth in residential real estate, commercial real estate and defense spending have fueled economic expansion in the state of Georgia. These economic trends were important for the 2020 senate candidates to highlight to help them secure the necessary votes to win the election.

Georgia has become more liberal due to the demographic and economic changes impacting its electorate, which has become more affluent and diverse. As a result, Democrats running in the state have more potential to succeed than in the past, impacting the political trends of the state. Until the 2020 election, the state has voted for Republican senators consistently since 2005. However, in the more recent senate races the gap between candidates of each party has decreased. According to the *New York Times*, in 2010, Georgia voted for Republican, Johnny Isakson who won with 58.3 percent of the vote. However, in the 2016 election, Isakson won with about 54 percent of the votes, showing a four percent decrease in support for Republican candidates (Georgia U.S. Senate Results: Johnny Isakson Wins, 2017). Similar to the Senate elections in GA, before 2020, in the most recent six Presidential elections, Georgia has voted for

RECENT ELECTIONS



the Republican candidate.

However, as displayed in

the results of the Senate

elections, the margins

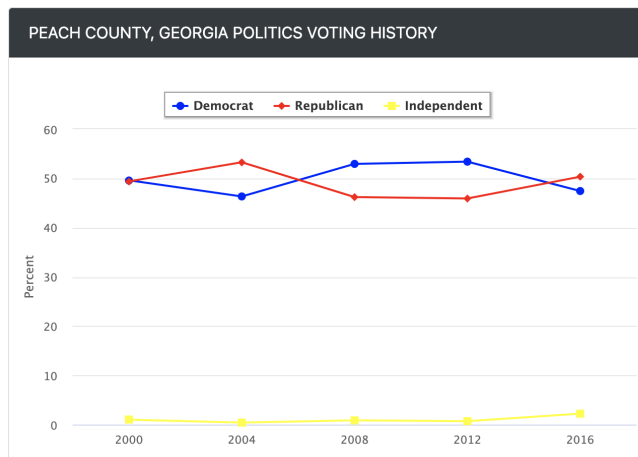
between the Democrat and

Republican candidates have decreased. This graph from *270 To Win*, displays the percentage of votes that have gone to each candidate. The margin between the two candidates in 2000 was about 11.7 percent, while the margin between the two in 2016 was 5.2 percent (Georgia

Presidential Election Voting History, 2019). Although a Democrat had not won the election for many years, the chances of them winning increased leading to 2020 due to the multiple demographic and economic changes in the state. This trend in increasing Democrat support explains why the two Georgia 2020 Senate races were tighter than ever before, both resulting in a run off race.

III. Major political regions in Georgia

It was important for Georgia senate candidates to direct some of their canvassing efforts to the counties that had the potential to go to either party as well as those with large populations. Peach County and Cobb County are two areas of Georgia that can aid Democrats, due to the fact that they can swing in either direction. Peach County is located about one hundred miles south of Atlanta. It's residents are about 50 percent white and 45 percent African American. In the 2016

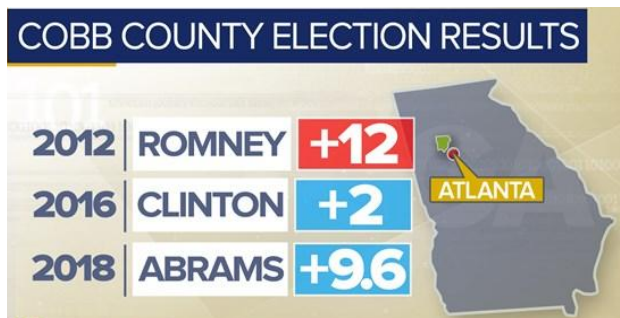


presidential election, 47.4 percent of Peach County voted for a Democrat while 50.3 percent voted for the Republican candidate. Prior to that election, Peach County had voted Democratic since 2008. This data is seen in this graph. Unlike many of the other counties in GA, Peach County has flipped

its vote multiple times (Politics & Voting in Peach County, Georgia, 2018). Additionally, Peach County consists of only about 27,000 people, showing that every vote makes a difference. In the 2018 gubernatorial election, Kemp won 52 percent of the vote beating Abrams by under 500

votes. The county's voting history suggests that future Democrat candidates have the potential to win a large percentage of the Peach County votes (Wilson, 2019).

Cobb County was another area with the potential for a Democratic candidate to attain a high percentage of Democratic votes in the 2020 election based on the results of past elections. In 2012, Republican candidate Mitt Romney won Cobb County by 12 percent. In 2016, Hillary



Clinton won the county by 2 percent. In the 2018 gubernatorial election, Abrams won Cobb County by a nine percent margin (Chinni, 2019). Although Clinton and Abrams didn't win the overall Georgia vote for their elections,

these results show an increasing amount of support for Democratic candidates in Cobb County. However, in 2016 Republican incumbent Isakson won Cobb County with 52.9 percent of the vote, while 41.8 percent of the vote went to Democratic candidate Jim Barksdale (Georgia U.S. Senate Results: Johnny Isakson Wins, 2017). It is important to note that incumbents have an overall advantage in their race due to name recognition and easier access to campaign funds and government resources, which most likely contributed to Isakson's win of the district. In 2020, one of the seats that was up for election was occupied by Senator David Perdue, the incumbent. With that, he had an incumbency advantage, however, the trends occurring in both Peach County and Cobb County still displayed the likelihood of a democrat candidate to receive a high percentage of the votes.

In addition to the counties with the potential to go to either party, one must look at the counties that are the most populated in the state to determine the major political regions of

Georgia. The most populated county in Georgia, based on population, is Fulton County. In 2018 Fulton had a population of 1,050,114 people, making this an important county for candidates to target. When looking at that, it was elementary to predict that Fulton County would go to Democrats in 2020, due to the county's voting history. In 2016, Fulton voted for Clinton by 69.2 percent and for the Senate race the district voted for Barksdale by 55 percent (Georgia Election Results 2016: President Live Map by County, 2016). Another heavily populated Georgia county is Gwinnett, with a population of 918,153 citizens. However, unlike Fulton, Gwinnett could not be guaranteed for either of the parties. In the 2016 presidential election, Gwinnett voted for Clinton with 51 percent of the vote. In the senate election, the county voted for Republican candidate Isakson, with 49.8 percent of the vote (Georgia Election Results 2016: President Live Map by County, 2016). Both Fulton and Gwinnett are important for Georgia senate candidates due to their large populations. Overall, these political regions were important targets for the senate candidates and had the potential to shape the outcome of the election.

IV. Strengths and weaknesses of the potential candidates

There were two seats up for grabs in Georgia's 2020 Senate election. One seat was Senator Johnny Isakson's, who announced his resignation in August 2019. Governor Kemp appointed Kelly Loeffler to fill this seat until the election, and she also ended up running for reelection in the 2020 race.

In addition to Isakson's special election seat, incumbent Republican Senator David Perdue was up for reelection. It was unlikely that a prominent Republican would challenge Perdue for the seat. When this research was conducted in 2019, a few Democrats had announced their campaigns for the seat. It was important for me to consider the strengths and weaknesses of

each of the individual candidates in order to determine which candidate would have the most success against Perdue. One of the candidates that I considered was Former Columbus Mayor Teresa Tomlinson, who was elected to be Columbus' first female mayor in 2010 and served two terms. Unlike other Democratic candidates, Tomlinson was a member of the Republican party until the 1980s, which is when she began to see the difference between her personal ideals and those of the party (Chitwood, 2019). This characteristic was a strength for Tomlinson who hoped to be a progressive candidate that could work with those in the conservative parts of the state and gain the votes of independents. On the other side, Georgia voters who were at the more extreme level of the Democratic party, may not have seen Tomlinson as liberal enough for the party. Another strength of Tomlinson is that she understood how to run government for her constituents and was a mayor of the second largest city in Georgia. Clarkston Mayor Ted Terry was another Democrat running for Perdue's seat. Terry is a progressive Democrat who decriminalized marijuana possession, raised the minimum wage for city employees to \$15 an hour and serves as the director of the Georgia chapter of the Sierra Club in Clarkston. One factor that was both a potential strength and weakness is his age. Terry was 36 years old when my research was conducted, nevertheless, he displayed his commitment to the people and promised to host town hall events and connect with his constituents while working in Washington. This factor had the potential to help him for the voters who wanted a "fresh face" in the seat, with a new perspective (Ted Terry for United States Senate, 2019). However, his age may have steered away voters who wanted to elect someone with greater experience.

Sarah Riggs Amico, a Georgia business executive, also entered the Democratic race for the senate seat. Amico began her run less than a year after she lost the race for Georgia

Lieutenant Governor, and after the business she ran filed for bankruptcy. Amico won more votes than any other Democratic Georgia Lieutenant Governor candidate in history. Her campaign video focused on her Christian beliefs, her executive background and her 2018 bid for office (Bluestein, 2019). On her campaign website, she highlighted that she attended public school and also sent her daughters to public school. This factor could have served as a strength for her to relate to families who are unable to send their children to private schools (Sarah for Georgia 2020, 2019). Another strength of Amico's bid was her marriage to an Italian immigrant, which could have appealed to the democratic base that tends to have a favorable opinion of immigrants. One weakness in her campaign was that her family's trucking company, which she had been running, filed for bankruptcy protection. This was a weakness because it indicated her difficulty in managing financial affairs. People may have found this as a weakness in her abilities to manage the financial issues facing the state. One other candidate for the seat was 2017 congressional candidate Jon Ossoff. Like Terry, Ossoff is young and has been criticized for being inexperienced and not having the credentials to be elected to the Senate. Ossoff received more name recognition than his competitors, due to the 2017 election in which he worked to connect with voters across the state. Additionally, Rep. John Lewis endorsed Ossoff's candidacy, which could have helped him gain even more recognition (Arkin, 2019). According to *The New York Times*, Ossoff is working to distance himself from the National Democratic party and is moving towards the more conservative side of the party (Fausset, Steinhauer, 2017). This could have been seen as a weakness for many democratic voters who were looking for a more progressive candidate. But, it could also have been a strength of his campaign, due to his appeal to the more

conservative democratic voters. Now, in 2021, we know that the candidate who ran, and won, for this seat was Jon Ossoff.

The incumbent Republican candidate was Senator David Perdue who held the seat since 2014. Perdue was a very public defender of President Trump's agenda and has been very close ties with the President. This factor could have served as Perdue's biggest political advantage or could have turned away moderate voters who disliked the former president (Tracking Congress In The Age Of Trump, 2019). Leading up to the 2020 election, Perdue had not been pleasing democrats with his actions. He publically compared Democratic critics of Justice Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to Nazi Brownshirts. However, similar to Trump's actions during the 2016 election, Perdue's rhetoric had the potential to attract many Republican voters. Due to Perdue's strong alliance with Trump, his strongest challengers in the 2020 election were likely to be Mayor Tomlinson and Jon Ossoff. This is because due to their policy stances, both candidates had the ability to reach across to independent voters and even some Republican voters, due to their more moderate positions. Even though the democratic candidates knew that they would have difficulties getting the votes of the more extreme Republicans, compared to Perdue, they were more likely able to attract a large percentage of the electorate.

V. Major issues in Georgia including the economy

To gain support, it was important for the 2020 Georgia senate candidates to address the major issues on the minds of the electorate. According to an October 25th poll from *11Alive*, when asked the question "which one of the following issues matters most to you right now?" a majority of Georgia voters feel that jobs and the economy is the most important issue. Citizens are looking for higher wages and more higher paying jobs (Thomas, 2019). To address this, it

was crucial for the candidates to promise to bring new business into the state or present other ideas such as increasing the minimum wage or lowering corporate taxes.

Another important issue in Georgia is transportation. There is heavy traffic congestion, especially in the Atlanta area, which is home to about 60 percent of Georgia's population. One way for this issue to be resolved is to improve the public transit system. According to the 2016 Metro Atlanta Speaks survey, the support for public transit is strong. 92 percent of respondents said that improving public transit is "very important" or "somewhat important" to metro Atlanta's future (Dixon, 2016). It was important for the candidates to express their ideas on funding the expansion of MARTA so that there are more accessible routes and less traffic congestion. Additionally, candidates could have proposed plans to build more highways throughout the state which would improve infrastructure, create more jobs, and lead to less traffic congestion.

An additional issue that is important to many Georgians is the education system. To attract voters, candidates should have proposed plans to improve the public schools, such as providing funding to hire more teachers, which would reduce class size and improve the overall education experience. Additionally, it would be helpful for the candidates to propose public funding for childcare, to enable young mothers to enter the workforce and contribute to the economic growth of their families.

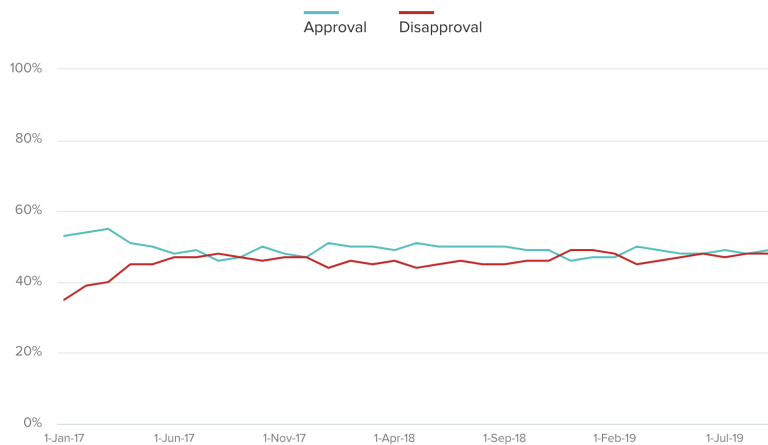
One last significant issue in the state is voter suppression. The voting franchise is a fundamental part of our democratic system. Voter suppression disenfranchises minorities, the poor, and the elderly and it creates an imbalance in the states' electorate that unfairly favors the Republican party. It was essential that the candidates all must address this issue, because it was a

divisive factor in the election of Kemp, and steps must be taken to prevent it from occurring going forward. This could have included enhancements of early voting, regulating social media, introducing electronic voting, establishing more polling locations, and proposing legislation that makes election day a federal holiday.

It was important that all senate candidates, regardless of party affiliation, had a clear, vested interest in improving the economy, transportation, education and voter laws, in order to have a chance at winning the 2020 Senate election in Georgia.

VI. The impact of President Trump and the presidential election on the Georgia Senate election

According to data from *The Morning Consult*, after Donald Trump took office, his net approval in Georgia decreased by 17 percentage points. This graph shows Georgia’s approval and disapproval rates from January 2017 to July 2019. Overall, the disapproval rate has grown while the approval rate has slowly decreased over time (Tracking Trump: The President’s



Standing Across America, 2019). This information is significant because it conveys that a large percentage of Georgia voters were not pleased with the Trump administration and the Republican party in

general, and would not be pleased if Trump won a second term. Because of this, many people were likely to participate in candidate-centered voting. This means that due to their disapproval of the Republican presidential candidate, many voters were likely to vote Democratic straight

down the ballot, in hope of getting rid of the current administration altogether. This is simply because they did not like the current President and his party. This had the potential to have an impact on the 2020 Senate election in a way that favored the democratic candidates.

Furthermore, the candidate's criticism and praise of Trump had the power to attract and detract the votes of the electorate. More specifically, many of the Georgia Senate candidates had voiced their opinions about impeachment. Amico tweeted that she supported the inquiry "given the seriousness of the allegations made against the President." Tomlinson tweeted that "we cheated ourselves" by not starting the impeachment proceedings earlier. Ossoff tweeted that Trump "should be impeached" if the allegations against him are correct (Pramuk, 2019). Contrastingly, Senator Perdue had close relations with the President and always spoke highly of him. Perdue's rhetoric could have turned away many moderate voters who did not approve of Trump. However, he also had the ability to attract voters who agree with his approval of the President. The manner in which the various candidates spoke about the President had the potential to influence the way voters felt about them, due to their personal opinions of the former President and his administration.

VII. Overall prediction of the outcome of the Georgia general election

Due to the current dominant economic, political and demographic trends in the state of GA, the Democratic Party was likely to win at least one of the two open seats in the 2020 senate election. Since the Democratic party was successful in doing so, it was monumental for the state, as well as the country, since Georgia is historically a deep red state.

VIII. Larger Takeaways

Now that it is 2021, why would it be relevant to look at research that was conducted prior to an election in which we already know the results? The type of research that was conducted in this essay, which spans from analyzing demographics within important counties in Georgia to looking at the impact of the President at the time, can be utilized to analyze elections in other states. If we are interested in predicting the results of another election, whether it be a senate, presidential, midterm or general election, this research can be used as a model.

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