

The Impact of Black Voter Turnout in Georgia Elections

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The black voter has been habitually disenfranchised from when they were considered 3/5 of an American citizen in 1789 to the 2020 election, especially in the deep south states like Georgia. There is a sense of voter fatigue when each election cycle – almost 200 years after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution – the vote of the black citizen is purged, not encouraged, or simply misled. However, in recent years, Georgia, a historically red state in the deep south, has been a point of hope in the fight for the black franchise, and the 2020 general election proved to be a turning point for the state. When political analysts look at the 2020 election cycle in Georgia, it is crucial to note the demographic that determined the election and how they got there. In this paper, I will try to understand the cause for turning Georgia blue in such a divisive presidential election and how the history of the suppressed black vote led us to this almost incredible moment in political history, as Georgia has never presented itself to be a swing state in recent history until now. Will this moment in history provide an example for the rest of the deep south, in states like Texas and South Carolina with high black populations to overcome the grip of the G.O.P. on the electoral processes? To energize the black voters in southern states like Georgia is to turn them blue – the power of the black electorate was underestimated until this current political moment in Georgia which can amount to an substantial increase in the political efficacy of black people in the rest of the southern states.

The history of African American disenfranchisement begins far before emancipation, however for the sake of the topic, my research was limited to the Era of Disenfranchisement (1888 – 1908) to the present. Despite the Fifteenth Amendment protecting the right to vote of the African American male for years prior, there were legal measures that southern states employed to limit the black vote and constrain their political efficacy, which historian Michael Perman described as “ruthless acts of political surgery” in an attempt to “[remove] large numbers of its

eligible voters,” in a peer-reviewed analysis “The African American Electorate: A Statistical History” (Deskins et al. 324). These methods consisted of not only vote manipulation by intimidation tactics of the Democratic party but also vote elimination which were made unconstitutional with additional amendments in the following century. However, the Era of Disenfranchisement and the methods of black voter suppression made by the Democratic party “legally and effectively implemented permanent non-voting as a feature and characteristic of African American citizenry in the South” which carried through the future generations of black Americans to present day (Deskins et al. 324). By the forced hand of the political institutions at the time (all white men), a cultural shift occurred in black communities that is defined by voting fatigue and feeling like there is little agency in their political participation, leading to less political participation in the form of the franchise. This unfortunately crippled the black voice in American politics to the present day.

Later in the century, President Lyndon B. Johnson answered the decades-long call of black leadership groups such as the NAACP and the SCLC to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which allowed “three subsequent Democratic Party presidential nominees, James ‘Jimmy’ Carter, William J. ‘Bill’ Clinton, and Barack H. Obama, to win the White House” (Deskins et al. 608). While this action did not completely eliminate voter suppression of the black electorate, it was a step in the right direction with a clear impact on winning three blue presidential elections. This is the case in Georgia as well, clearly marking the black electorate in Georgia as crucial in deciding democratic presidents. “There is no question about how the African American electorate in both Sumter County and Georgia voted for Carter in both his gubernatorial and presidential races” which was after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed alleviating some of the suppression seen in the Era of Disenfranchisement (Deskins et al. 608). The black voter,

given more political agency in the franchise, delivers blue elections, but the franchise for African Americans has not been completely liberated.

However, the problem of a subdued black voter was not completely solved with the introduction of a new voting barrier to black Americans in the form of felon and ex-felon disenfranchisement, most relevant in southern states. This become controversial in the highly contested 2000 elections in Florida, with over 31% of disenfranchised population in Florida are African American (Deskins et al. 653). Since the conception of the United States, the institutions in power have created measures to link criminalization to black communities – the Slave Codes, the Black Codes, Segregation, the War on Drugs – “each system has been a way of generating convicts, felons, and ex-felons in the African American community” (Deskins et el. 653). This paired with the disenfranchisement of felons and ex-felons equates to an even larger barrier to counting black votes. According to the 2010 census, African Americans made up 40.1% of the disenfranchised population, while only making up 20.1% of the population in the south. This is a striking difference that highlights the disproportionate effect that felon and ex-felon disenfranchisement has on the black electorate. The black voter for centuries has been suppressed and their voice extinguished from the narrative of American politics, and there was a need in 2018 and a need in this recent 2020 election for this cycle to end.

The 2018 election in Georgia saw a new form of aggressive voter suppression – purging voters from the rolls. Ahead of Brian Kemp’s (Georgia’s secretary of state) run for governor of the state, in a single day in 2017, over half a million people which equates to eight percent of registered voters were purged from the registration without their knowing (Caputo et al.). For 107,000 of those purged from the rolls, the event was “triggered” because “they had decided not to vote in prior elections” which is a “highly controversial — yet legal — tactic” to control the

election (Caputo et al.). In this election, Kemp was running against candidate Stacey Abrams, who, if she had won, would be the first African American female governor in the United States. This raises the stakes of this “use it or lose it” policy, taking into consideration the increased black and other minority votes, who are more likely to be infrequent voters (Caputo et al.). This became a situation of voter suppression of the black electorate once again.

"So you think we should just leave people alone in perpetuity? I mean, what happens if they move to another state? People all the time move to another state, and they don't tell us and end up getting on the voter rolls in two different states. We've had the same person voting twice in two different states in presidential elections. So there's a reason you keep the voter rolls current and up to date," Kemp said in argument of the policy (Caputo et al.).

Abrams, in response to her loss of the governor race and the news of this new voter suppression, established campaigns to increase voter turnout of African Americans in the state through the program called Fair Fight. The organization “engages in voter mobilization and education activities” and “combat[s] voter suppression in Georgia and nationally,” according to their mission statement (FairFight.com). Abrams used this program to turnout 1.2 million African American voters in Georgia as of 2019, as she stated in a TED Talk “3 questions to ask yourself about everything you do” (Abrams 2019). Abrams “wanted to open those gates wide for everyone in Georgia because that is our state, and this is our nation, and we all belong here” after the challenges she faced regarding voter suppression, purging, and poll mismanaging in the 2018 election (Abrams 2019). Through just months of energizing the black vote, Abrams carried 48.8% of the vote share in the 2018 gubernatorial race, creating an incredibly narrow margin of 57,000 votes short of Kemp (New York Times 2018). In the limited time that the campaign had

before the election, Fair Fight was able to almost turn the state gubernatorial race blue through the power of the black electorate. However, Fair Fight's fight to bring forward black votes in a flawed election system in Georgia was not dimmed by the loss of Abrams, rather amplified to see where the black voters in the state could lead in the 2020 election.

With the results of the 2020 election underway, it has become clear that Biden won not only the popular vote but the projected electoral college vote as well. Starting with the state's primary elections on June 9, 2020, the democratic party was looking in good shape for the general election in the fall. 59.3% voted as Democrats and 35.9% as Republican out of 750,000 first-time voters, and of the first-time voters, 49% were black, according to BetterGeorgia.org, which lead the state to be considered as a toss-up state by the Cook Political Report, changing its status from May to June (Scott 2020). However, the means for voter suppression still existed despite Fair Fights efforts. Abrams described the mishandling of machinery and voting procedures of the state.

“It’s all about what *you* didn’t do. And in the United States, we’ve taken this for granted, we’ve never questioned: Why would that be the responsibility, of every person, to know all the rules—especially if you cross a state line, and the rules are now completely different? In almost every other industrial democracy, these rules don’t exist. This was designed to push people out of the system. And it works. And this is why voter suppression in the 21st century is so insidious. It’s all about ‘I made a mistake, I didn’t know, I should have done,’ instead of ‘This is absurd and why is it my job?’” Abrams said.

Yet, with all of the challenges and hurdles, the results from increased black voter turnout in the 2020 primary in the state created a blue wave of voters that lead to the state's changed status as a battleground state in the November election.

After low turnout among black voters in 2016, comparatively to the 2008 and 2012 elections of Barack Obama, "in an election (2020) marked by a big rise in turnout, Black turnout increased, too," according to the New York Times, and subsequently turned the state's 16 electoral college winner-takes-all votes blue (Figure 1). However, this seemingly present victory for Fair Fight is shrouded by increased voter turnout among other demographics in the traditionally red state. The black share of the electorate slightly declined in the 2020 election, despite the increase in black voter turnout (New York Times). As one can see in Figure 2, the black vote share of registered voters decreased slightly from 2018 to 2020, when the black share of all voters made a sharp decline from 2018 to 2020 resulting from increased overall voter turnout. Despite this challenge, increased black voter turnout in this election helped the state turn blue and elect a democratic president.

The results of the research into how an energized black electorate can change the political outcome of a state seemingly so republican have yielded interesting and useful results. Other than the peer-reviewed journal discussing the history and implications of the disenfranchisement of black voters, the majority of my sources were current events and news articles because this current election crisis is so new that there was not many scholarly journals dedicated to it. I also included interviews from Abrams herself to really understand the motivation behind the massive undertaking she is involved in and to make sure that I was getting the information from a primary source and not just commentary. After hearing from black friends that it was their first time voting in the state of South Carolina, and they felt a fatigue already from their believe that

their vote would not go very far in this 2020 election, I was determined to find out as much as I could about the black voter in the South, which is why I chose to do this research. With the runoff elections in Georgia ahead, an increased vote share of black voters in the state could hand democrats the Senate, with both of the state's seats up in the air. From the elections in 2018 to 2020, political analysts have seen the shift – in the behavior of black voters in Georgia, in how voters view the electoral institutions, and in how these shifts can dictate the election. If a change in vote share and the political nature of a state can occur with campaigns to increase black voter turnout in Georgia, the possibility for this to occur in other states with increasing black populations like Texas or South Carolina is high. There is a chance for these results to be extrapolated to cover a range of republican strongholds in the south and turn them blue just as was done in Georgia.

Figure 1

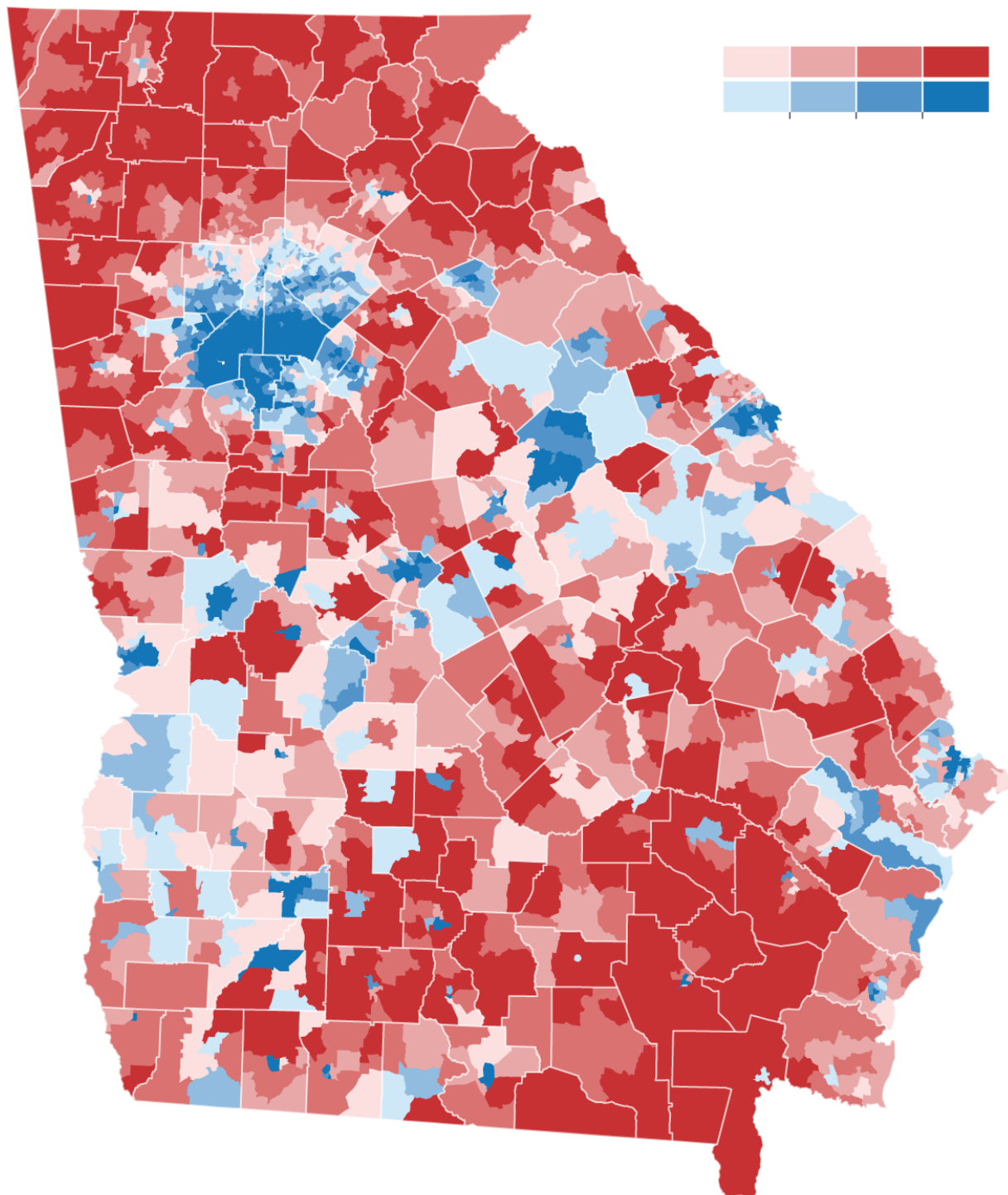
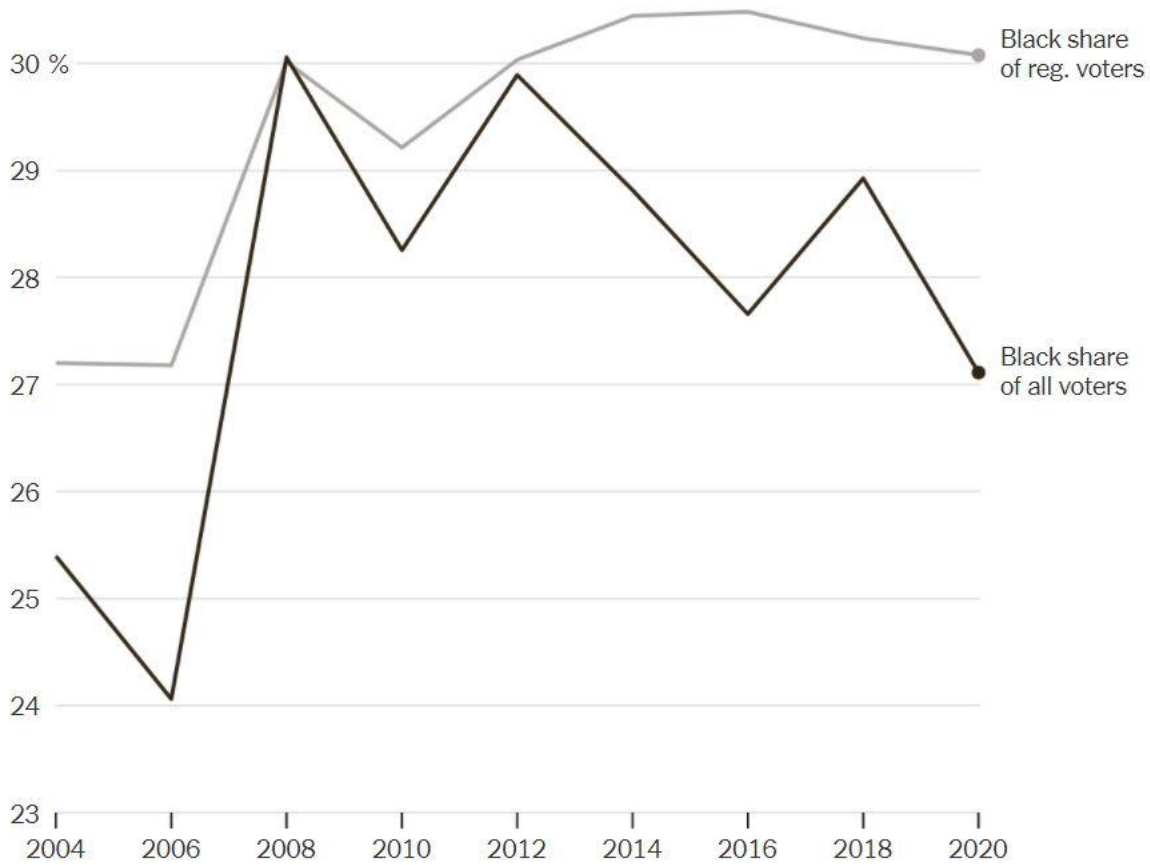


Figure 2

The Black share of the electorate fell in Georgia

Turnout increased among Black voters, but less than among some other groups

Black share of the electorate and registered voters in Georgia, 2004-2020



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