

Majority Makers: Georgia's 6th Congressional District



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In the aftermath of the 2020 election, everyone wants to get to the bottom of why Democrats overperformed in some places and lost ground in others. To shed some light on that question, we are launching a multi-part series zeroing in on Congressional districts that have flipped since 2016. Some flipped in 2018 and have remained in Democrats' column, some just flipped for the first time in 2020, and others flipped to Democrats in 2018 and back again to Republicans in November. Looking closer at these districts may give us some clues about who gave Democrats their majority and what they should prioritize to deliver on their promises and build on their strengths in the midterms.

Georgia's 6th Congressional District (GA-06), the first case study in this series, is a suburban district encompassing many of the northern Atlanta suburbs. Recent results here illustrate the rise of the suburbs as an indispensable part of Democrats' coalition, including the 2018 midterms, 2020 general election and January Georgia Senate runoff election. Future profiles will highlight different

kinds of districts and different key voter groups as Democrats pivot from campaigning to governing and seek to understand who delivered their victories, and where they have room to grow.

District Overview

The election results in GA-06 the past two election cycles represent one part of a sea change in American politics since Donald Trump was elected in 2016: inner-ring suburbs of large metro areas have become Democratic strongholds that are delivering victories. The district spans the economically thriving northern Atlanta suburbs, including parts of eastern Cobb County, northern Fulton County, and northern DeKalb County. Cities located in the district include Roswell and Marietta.

This district was a Republican stronghold for decades and was held by Republican Representatives from 1979 to 2018, including Newt Gingrich from 1979-1999. At the top of the ticket, Republicans carried the district by over 20 points from 2000 to 2012. In the 2008 Democratic wave election, John McCain carried the district by 25 points. But 2016 represented a turning point in the district, as Trump carried it by just over a point. In 2018, Democrat Lucy McBath unseated Republican incumbent Karen Handel, flipping the district, and Stacey Abrams carried the district narrowly. In 2020, Joe Biden carried the district by a whopping 11 points, representing a 13-point swing since 2016, and McBath won her reelection by nearly 10 points after a narrow win in 2018. In the 2020 Georgia runoff election, Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff each won the district by seven and five points, respectively, somewhat underperforming Biden.

So, what happened in GA-06? How did it move from a one-time Republican stronghold into a swing district, and then shift again, into a district Biden won by a sizeable margin? How did it change so dramatically, so quickly? Was the district's transformation all about Trump, or is it a true Democratic district now? What has happened in American politics to transform the political map, and what does this mean for the future of the Democratic and Republican parties?

Changes in this district's voting patterns highlight Democrats' new strength with wealthier and college-educated voters, as well as their enduring strength with Black and Asian voters. The district's election results represent an important new trend: Democratic dominance in inner-ring suburbs outside big metro areas, which combined with strength in the urban cores, delivered Democrats the White House in 2020.

Demographics

The demographic makeup of GA-06 stands out in several key ways. The district is more diverse than the country as a whole because of sizable Black and Asian American populations. It is much wealthier than the country as a whole, with a median household income exceeding \$100,000 and a median home value of more than \$400,000, almost double the national average. The most eye-

popping number is the district's proportion of college-educated voters; 67% have a college degree, compared to 25% nationwide.

While Republicans did make some gains with non-white voters across the country in 2020, the diversity in this district benefited Democrats. The district is more African American than the country as a whole, but much less Hispanic, meaning that Trump's substantial gains with Hispanic voters did not have a meaningful effect here. It is also more Asian American than the country as a whole. Asian Americans voted at much higher rates this year, and while Trump made significant gains with Vietnamese voters in 2020, in the Atlanta area there are more Indian American and Korean American voters, followed by Vietnamese and Chinese Americans.

The district's racial diversity, wealth and higher education makes it a perfect representation of the types of places that swung towards Democrats during the Trump era. While non-white voters have long been core to Democrats' coalition, wealthy and college-educated voters have trended dramatically towards them. Nationally, college-educated voters favored Biden by 12 points, while John Kerry lost this group by six points in 2004. Historically, affluent voters have favored Republicans, but Democrats tied with Republicans among voters with a household income of over \$200,000 in 2020.

Georgia's 6th District Demographics and Statistics

	District	National
Non-Hispanic White	69.4%	76.3%
Black/African American	14.7%	13.4%
Hispanic	5.0%	18.5%
Asian	7.7%	5.9%
Median Age	39.2	38.2
Median household income	\$100,110	\$61,937
Economic Sensitivity 70+*	15.4%	31.9%
Median home value	\$416,500	\$229,700
% likely college grads**	67.2%	24.8%
Persons with language other than English spoken at home	24.9%	21.9%
Foreign-born population	20.4%	13.7%

Source: American Community Survey 2019 1-Year Estimates and Catalyst national database of voters and voting-age persons.
Notes: **The Democratic data firm Catalyst constructed a model using dozens of survey questions reflecting different kinds of socioeconomic stress. According to Catalyst “people with scores above 80 are 2-3 times more likely to be delinquent on debts or to be unable to handle an unexpected expense.” **Based on Catalyst Educational Attainment model. Those with scores of 50+ are considered likely to have a college degree.



Past Election Results

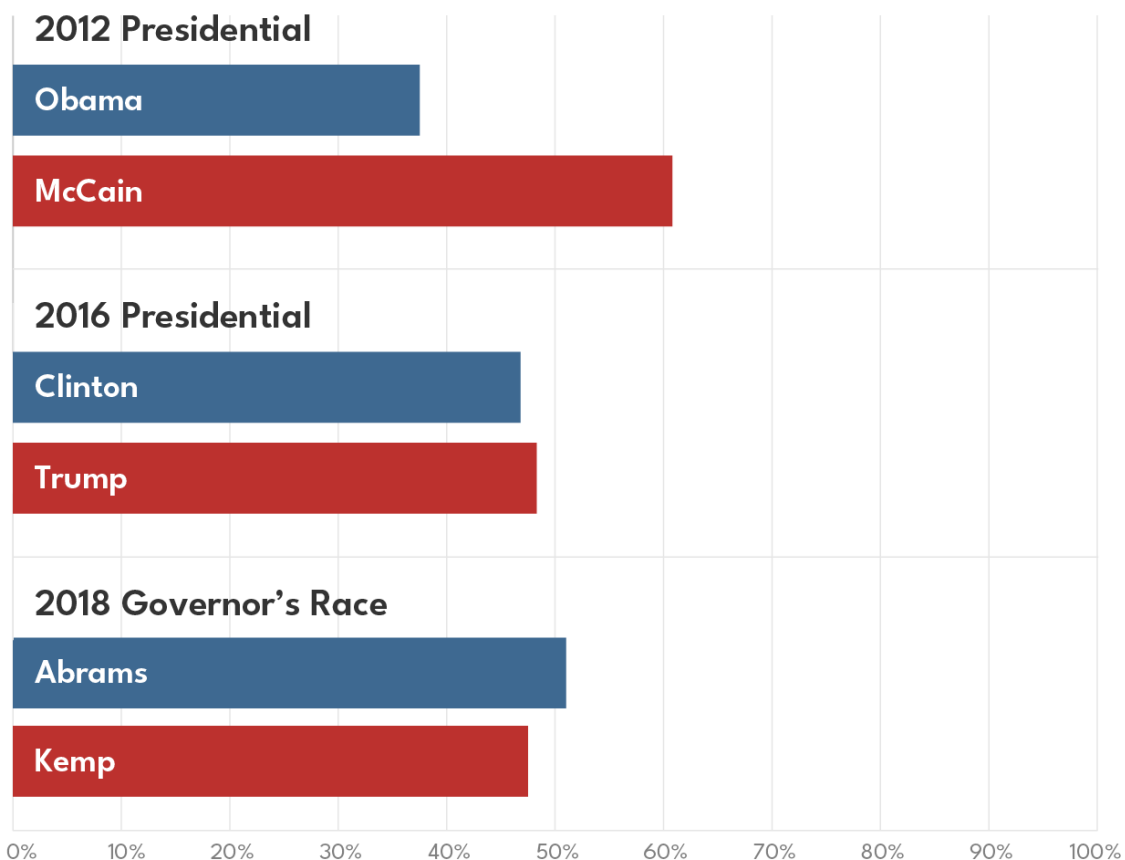
How did GA-06 move from a one-time Republican stronghold into a swing district, and then shift again into a district Biden won by a sizeable margin? The district swung dramatically in the Trump era after favoring Republicans for decades. Not only was it a Republican stronghold, but it was also famous for producing prominent, staunch-conservative Republican leaders including Newt Gingrich and Senator Johnny Isakson. Because of the district’s history, the GOP was caught flat-footed by its transformation; in 2017 Trump appointed the district’s Republican congressman Tom Price to be HHS secretary, assuming the district would remain in Republican hands. While Republican Karen Handel did win the 2017 special election in the district, the margin was quite narrow, and she was unseated only a year later when McBath flipped the district. The district has continued supporting Democrats up and down the ballot since then.

A key ingredient in the swing in GA-06 has been the transformation of Cobb County. While Fulton and DeKalb counties are traditionally Democratic, before 2016 Cobb County was the deep-red part of the district, won by Republicans in every presidential election from 1976 to 2012. In the 2017 special election, Democrat Jon Ossoff lost Cobb County by 16 points, and while Clinton won the whole county in 2016, she lost the part of Cobb County included in the district by 15 points. In 2018, McBeth still lost Cobb County by 11 points even while winning districtwide. While these are still wide margins of victory for Republicans, by contrast, in 2012 Obama lost the portion of Cobb County included in the 6th district by 35 points. Cobb County voting Republican by narrower margins made it possible for Democrats to start winning Georgia's 6th by narrow margins.

Below are election results in GA-06 from the 2012 presidential race, when John McCain swamped Barack Obama, to 2018, as Democrats began winning the district.



Past Election Results in Georgia's 6th District



Source: Georgia Secretary of State.

2020 Election Results

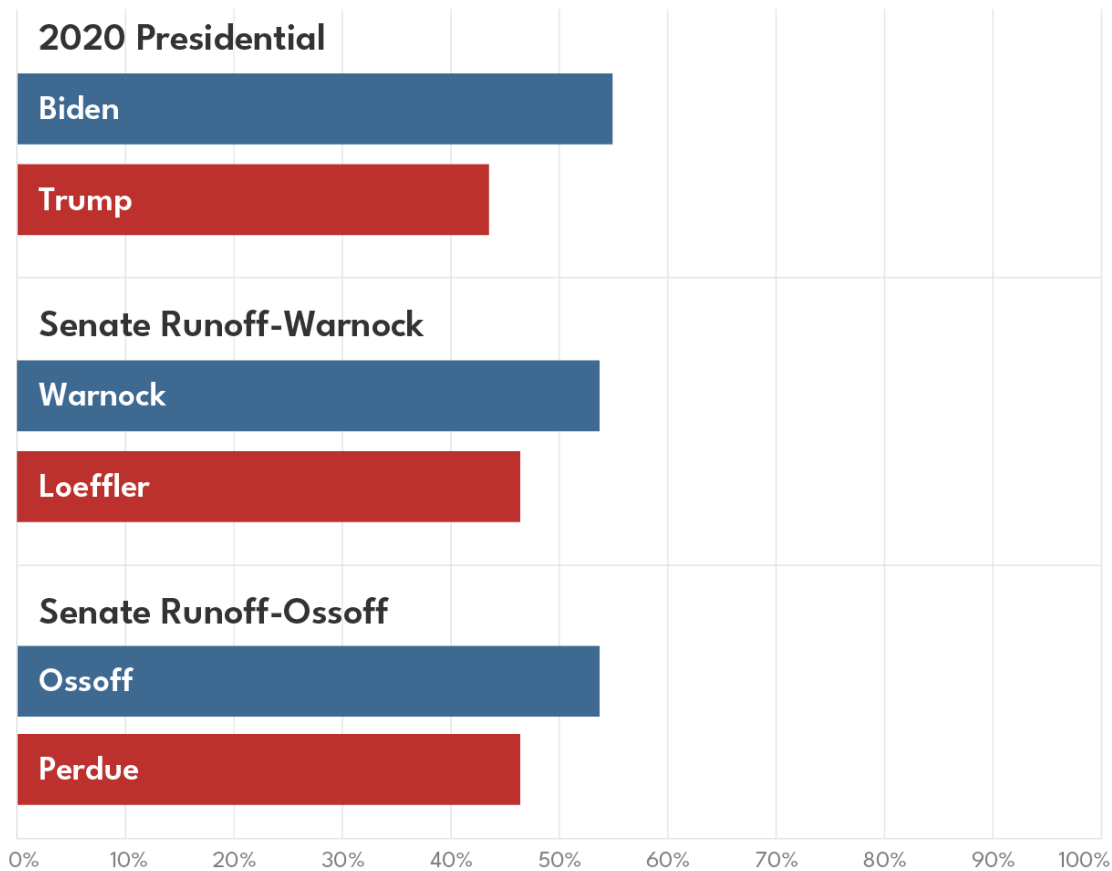
In the 2020 general election, while some districts that flipped to Democrats in 2018 flipped back to Republicans with Trump at the top of the ticket, GA-06 became even more solidly Democratic. In the 2020 runoffs, Democrats' won the district again, though by somewhat diminished margins. Democrats' large victory in November and subsequent slippage in support in the runoff raises the question; was the change in voting patterns in GA-06 all about Trump, or could the district have transformed for good?

Results both at the top of the ticket and down-ballot indicate that the district favoring Biden, Warnock, Ossoff and McBath was not pure rejection of Trump but rather was likely part of a transformation in the party coalitions to make GA-06 a future blue district. McBath won her reelection by nearly 10 percentage points (35,000 votes) after winning by merely a point (3,200 votes) in 2018, in a rematch against former Congresswoman Karen Handel. While Hillary Clinton lost the district by 1.5 points, Biden won by 11.

As to what made the district shift so dramatically, it was again Cobb County, no longer the deep red county of elections past. This year, Biden lost the portion of Cobb County in Georgia's 6th by less than one percentage point. McBath lost the county by 3 points, much narrower than her 11-point loss in 2018 in Cobb County. Meanwhile, Cobb County voters rejected longtime county Sheriff Neil Warren, a staunch conservative and immigration hardliner. In his place, they elected Police Maj. Craig Owens, who will become the county's first ever African American sheriff. The shifts in Cobb County's voting down-ballot suggest that more and more voters here are voting straight-ticket Democratic—not just rejecting Trump.

The Georgia runoff Senate elections paint a slightly more complicated story in Cobb County. Warnock and Ossoff lost Cobb County by 5 and 6 points, respectively – still narrow enough margins to carry the 6th district, but somewhat bucking Cobb County's recent trend toward Democrats. These narrow margins in Cobb County remained more than enough for both Democratic candidates to win the 6th district, indicating that even without Trump at the top of the ticket, the district has become favorable towards Democrats. The reversion in the county towards Republicans however suggests that Cobb is a true swing county that Democrats need to watch.

2020 Presidential and Senate Runoffs in Georgia's 6th District



Source: Georgia Secretary of State.

Qualitative Analysis: Local News and Campaigns

Local news in GA-06 gives some idea of top priorities in the district, and what issues catalyzed the district's changes. Local coverage can help us get at *why* the district's voters began supporting Democrats for the first time in the past few election cycles. What's happened in American politics to transform the political map, and what does this mean for the future of the Democratic and Republican parties?

Some of McBath's stances might have been risky in a different swing district; she did not shy away, for example, from strong support of gun regulation, ending systemic racism, and preserving access to abortion. When attacked for these beliefs, McBath doubled down rather than hedging or avoiding the issues, and voters rewarded her authenticity rather than abandoning their support.

In an [interview](#) with the Atlanta Monthly, McBath outlined her ideas for her second term before her reelection. The second term priorities she campaigned on included economic relief from the

pandemic, securing healthcare for those with preexisting conditions, and sensible gun laws. While the first two issues are typical for Democrats in Congress today, McBath's continued focus on gun violence is telling. McBath ran for office because her son was murdered. McBath's willingness to emphasize the need for new gun laws as a central plank of her campaign indicates that the district is more comfortable and perhaps even progressive on some social issues than the more rural swing districts that decided the majority in the past. The NRA invested heavily in the race, funding attack ads against McBath, and the fact that those attacks did not land in this district is telling.

McBath also spoke about systemic racism and talked about the need for legislation to increase transparency in police departments as well as securing funding and training. And she highlighted a commission that she had led to study racial disparities faced by African American men and boys.

An interesting flashpoint in the campaign occurred during the racial justice protest marches in the district after George Floyd's murder. Handel attacked McBath for appearing in a march that included people disparaging the police, but McBath pointed out that it was in fact a unity march that included the Roswell police chief. While in some districts, the Black Lives Matter protests may have boxed in Democratic candidates, the fact that McBath was easily able to dismiss Handel's attacks on the subject speaks to the nature of the district and its openness to reform. And while McBath's statements about systemic racism were not radical in any way, they did indicate a changing tide in American suburbs.

McBath's personal story came into play again during the debate over Black Lives Matter as well. Handel ran racially tinged ads claiming McBath wanted to defund the police, and McBath took an unusual step of facing those attacks head on by talking about the murder of her son. She said she did not need a lecture from Karen Handel on criminals because she lost her son to one, and that she would fight to keep the community safe. According to those close to the campaign, McBath's internal polling initially had her with a slight lead on the trait "will protect the safety of our community" before these ads ran. After this exchange on community safety, McBath pulled ahead to a 14-point lead on this trait. This back and forth and the district's response to it suggests that the district was not highly susceptible to fear-mongering around crime and safety—and also that McBath benefited from addressing the attacks head on with a personal and genuine response.

McBath also talked in her Atlanta Monthly interview about climate change, expressing support for the Paris Climate Accords, protecting national parks and increasing investments in sustainable energy.

In their October debate ahead of the Congressional election, McBath and Handel traded jabs about abortion and funding for Planned Parenthood. McBath attacked Handel for working to cut funding for cancer screenings by Planned Parenthood, while Handel responded by highlighting her own staunch opposition to abortion. McBath did not balk at the issue, stating "voters cannot trust you to stand up for a woman's right to choose, Ms. Handel."

McBath’s ability to win by nearly 10 points against a well-known and funded Republican candidate, while openly speaking about gun laws, systemic racism, climate change, and abortion speaks to the unique political climate in these changing, inner-ring suburbs. In the swing districts that used to define a winning Democratic coalition, candidates felt the need to steer clear of social issues. In this district, voters are clearly supportive of or at least open to moderate and progressive views on these issues, creating greater alignment on them within today’s Democratic Party.

Conclusion

The national political evolution over the past four years has been led in large part by dramatic changes in inner-ring suburbs. Nowhere are those changes more apparent than in GA-06, which went from a longtime Republican stronghold to a solidly Democratic district. Whether the district remains in Democrats’ column with Trump no longer in office will tell us a great deal about the party coalitions into the future and determine whether the last four years represented a true sea change in the suburbs or a four-year blip. Judging by Democrats’ down-ballot successes in GA-06, we may have seen a true transformation of a district in four short years.

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