

# What Pre-Trump Georgia Could Tell Us About Post-Trump Georgia



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2020 was the year that Georgia turned Blue.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris won Georgia's electoral college votes as Democrats for the first time since Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 1992. Clinton's victory came at a time in which Democrats had only won two of the last seven presidential contests in the state (both times by favorite son Jimmy Carter), but also when all statewide offices were held by Democrats, and the U.S. House delegation and both chambers of the state legislature were majority Democratic. In short, the Democratic Party was alive and well and accustomed to winning in the state.

The changes that would occur during Clinton's presidency and the rise of Georgia's own Newt Gingrich to the House speakership ushered in two decades of decimation of Democratic power in Georgia, as white moderates and conservatives shed their Democratic roots and started voting Republican down-ballot, too. Democrats lost the U.S. House delegation majority in 1994, and the Governorship in 2002. Republicans captured both U.S. Senate seats and both chambers of the state legislature by the 2004 elections. The 2010 midterms were the final death knell, when Democrats lost their last three statewide offices. At that point, it seemed Democrats could only win elections and votes in urban Atlanta and its heavily Black southern suburbs, the Black Belt from Columbus to Augusta, urban Savannah, and college town Athens.

But Donald Trump changed all that—at least temporarily.

In 2016, Trump lost Atlanta's northern suburbs of Cobb and Gwinett counties by small single digit margins. These were the quintessential ruby red Reagan-Bush affluent white suburbs that even Carter and Clinton failed to carry in their 1980 and 1992 victories respectively. What fueled this shift is at least two-fold: both of these counties have become much more racially diverse in just the past decade, and in the Trump era, college-educated voters are fleeing the Republican Party. Since 2010, Cobb County has gone from being 42% people of color to 49%, while Gwinett has gone from 56% to 65%. Likewise, Cobb has a higher percentage of college graduates than any other county in Georgia, and Gwinett is not far behind.

These changes reverberated even more after four years of Trump in the White House. While Hillary Clinton won these two counties narrowly, Biden ended up carrying Cobb by 14 points and Gwinett by 18 points on his way to victory. And Senate candidate Jon Ossoff did almost as well, carrying Cobb by 11 points and Gwinett by 16 points.

Many including [Center for Politics](#) have written definitive reports on comparing Biden's performance to Ossoff's showing. But we wanted to compare the Ossoff/Perdue election to the one that preceded it six years prior between Michelle Nunn and Perdue. This is to serve as a guide between the last statewide federal election in Georgia before Trump's 2016 rise and the 2021 runoff which will arguably be the first post-Trump federal election in America's new Biden era. Another reason these two elections are worth comparing is that turnout will rest somewhere between the two with early voting for the 2021 runoff already surpassing total 2014 turnout but lagging behind 2020 early voting numbers.

While this analysis will focus mainly on the races featuring Perdue, we believe it will be applicable to both Ossoff and Senate running mate Raphael Warnock. The Warnock / Kelly Loeffler race is unique as Loeffler is an appointed incumbent with no prior electoral history

and the Warnock/Loeffler election featured multiple Republicans and multiple Democrats.

and the November 2020 election featured multiple Republicans and multiple Democrats.

Therefore, our question is based on the trends across cycles in the state, whether Ossoff and Warnock can inspire the type of turnout and win the margins with swing voters necessary to continue a potential shift in Georgia's politics.

## **A Tale of Two Senate Races**

The 2014 Senate contest in Georgia was a race between Georgia royalty after incumbent Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss retired. Both David Perdue and Michelle Nunn were seeking office for the first time, but both were related to popular Georgia politicians.

David Perdue is the cousin of former Governor Sonny Perdue, who served as Governor from 2003 to 2011. What made Sonny so special was that he was the first Republican Governor in Georgia since Reconstruction. Sonny's 2002 victory started what currently stands at five straight gubernatorial victories for the Republicans. He would go on to serve as Donald Trump's only Secretary of Agriculture, starting in 2017.

David Perdue benefitted from a perfect storm to go from relative political unknown to Republican nominee. His opponents were U.S. Representatives Paul Broun, Phil Gingrey, and Jack Kingston, and former secretary of state Karen Handel. In a way, Perdue served as a bridge between the Tea Party and Trumpism. He was a political outsider as the only major candidate not having held major political office at a time when the Tea Party made government experience and longevity a negative. However, he still benefitted from his popular last name. Perdue had accumulated quite a bit of wealth as the former CEO of both Dollar General and Reebok, giving him a story to tell as an outsider businessman who was the only one in the primary who knew how to meet a payroll and deal with government regulation. Perdue received no notable in-state endorsements, save for cousin Sonny, and no conservative national organization endorsements either. He finished first anyway and made his way to the primary runoff against Kingston, where he won thanks to commanding victories in the Atlanta metro area.

On the Democratic side, Michelle Nunn was the daughter of former Senator Sam Nunn, who had held this exact Senate seat from 1972 to 1997. Like Perdue, Nunn had never run for office before 2014. Instead, her background was in nonprofits, serving as the CEO of Points of Light, a charitable organization founded by former President George H.W. Bush to encourage volunteerism. Nunn was heavily recruited to run and had her primary cleared of any serious competition. She was part of a concerted effort to recruit the progeny of famous Georgia Democrats to run for statewide office that year. The Democratic nominee for Governor on the same ballot was state senator Jason Carter, the grandson of President Jimmy Carter.

Democrats were hoping these famous names would help turn back the red tide that had submerged the state.

The general election was hotly contested, with significant spending from both sides. In the end, Perdue won relatively comfortably. He secured 1,358,088 votes for 52.89% of the vote. Nunn won 1,160,811 votes for 45.21% of the vote. The Libertarian nominee won 48,862 votes for 1.90% of the vote. In all, 2,567,761 people voted.

## 2014 General Election – Statewide Results

	Libertarian	Turnout
8,811 (45.21%)	48,862 (1.90%)	2,567,761

Flash forward to 2020. This time, incumbent Senator Perdue was uncontested for the Republican nomination, while Ossoff won a crucial knockout win in the regular primary with 53% of the vote against a couple of other major candidates. Ossoff was able to clear the 50% necessary to avoid a primary runoff by scoring big wins in metro Atlanta, where he had high name recognition thanks to his high profile but ultimately unsuccessful 2017 race for Congress.

In the November general election, Perdue finished in first place, but this time he failed to crack 50%, which meant the contest would head to a January runoff. Perdue received 2,462,617 votes for 49.73% of the vote. Ossoff received 2,374,519 votes for 47.95% of the vote, and the Libertarian nominee received 115,039 votes for 2.32% of the vote. In all, 4,952,175 people voted.

## 2020 General Election – Statewide Results

ff	Libertarian	Turnout
2,374,519 (47.95%)	115,039 (2.32%)	4,952,175

Ossoff managed to cut Perdue's lead from 197,277 in 2014 to just 88,098, even while Republican nominees in nearby states like North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee all basically doubled their party's raw vote victories from 2014 to 2020 thanks to the higher turnout. (This is true even in South Carolina where Jaime Harrison turned in the smallest percentage loss for a U.S. Senate candidate in that state in over a decade.) What happened in Georgia was something special.

But for Ossoff to win in the January special election, he will need to double down on the successes that helped him cut Perdue's advantage by half. Here's a deeper dive at what that might look like.

# 1. Metro Atlanta delivered big totals for Ossoff.

In both 2014 and 2020, the Atlanta metropolitan area cast 59.1% of Georgia's total votes in its Senate contests. In 2014, Nunn barely won metro Atlanta, by 21,622 votes out of 1,518,386 cast. But in 2020, Ossoff won it by 380,256 votes out of 2,929,281. That means Ossoff's net vote win out of metro Atlanta was more than 17 times larger than Nunn's.

## Metro Atlanta Margins, 2014 and 2020

Nunn	Ossoff
+21,622	+380,256
49.77% to 48.34%	55.30% to 42.31%

Ossoff pulled this off by improving in the metro core, and in both the southern suburbs (which have been historically Democratic) and the northern suburbs (which have been more Republican until Trump's presidency). Ossoff also got a higher share of the vote in the conservative Atlanta exurbs than Nunn, but due to higher turnout, Perdue netted more raw votes there in 2020 than in 2014. This is a key thing that is often overlooked in higher turnout elections: improvement in a candidate's share of vote in an area can be a pyrrhic victory as their opponent may still gain more raw votes towards their statewide total.

## Urban Atlanta

Fulton county contains about 90% of the city of Atlanta, and Atlanta makes up about half of Fulton's total population. Fulton is plurality Black and generally booming. It is exactly the type of place one would expect to be the backbone of any Democratic coalition in the state. In 2014, Fulton cast 10% of Georgia's votes. In 2020, that increased slightly to 11%.

In 2014, Nunn received 173,523 votes to Perdue's 90,427 for a raw vote win of 83,096. This was a 65% to 34% win for Nunn in the county. Due to higher turnout *and* better margins, Ossoff dwarfed that performance in 2020. He won 363,269 votes to Perdue's 146,466 for a raw vote win of 216,803. Ossoff improved to a 70% to 28% victory in the county.

## Urban Atlanta Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
173,523 (65%)	83,096
363,269 (70%)	216,803

## Southern Atlanta Suburbs

The Atlanta metro has several key southern suburbs which have become reliably Democratic in the era of Republican one-party dominance. The two largest are DeKalb, which contains parts of Atlanta itself, and Clayton counties. These two counties are majority Black, and both have voted for basically every Democrat appearing on their ballots for the past few decades.

Then there are Douglas, Rockdale, Newton, and Henry counties. Each are around half white and half people of color at this point. Douglas, Rockdale, and Newton have been relatively Democratic since 2008. Henry showed signs it was moving Democratic in 2014, when after having voted for Romney in 2012, it voted for both Nunn and Carter. In 2014, these southern suburbs cast 17% of Georgia's votes. In 2020, that proportion slid down slightly to 15%.

In 2014, Nunn won these counties with 299,945 votes to Perdue's 124,911, which was good for a 70% to 29% win. In 2020, Ossoff won them with 565,427 votes to Perdue's 185,312. That was a significant improvement to a 74% to 24% margin. All told, Nunn received a net 175,034 votes out of these suburbs in 2014, but Ossoff net gained 380,115, more than double Nunn's total.

### Southern Atlanta Suburbs Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
299,945 (70%)	175,034
565,427 (74%)	380,115

## Northern Atlanta Suburbs

As described above, Cobb and Gwinnett counties are rapidly diversifying and well-educated, and they have shifted hard to Democrats in the last four years. These are the areas that delivered the party two new House seats, held by Lucy McBath and Carolyn Bourdeaux. In both 2014 and 2020, these northern suburbs cast 16% of Georgia's votes.

In 2014, Perdue bested Nunn in the northern Atlanta suburbs by a 226,042 to 177,788 margin or 55% to 43%. This result was flipped on its head in 2020 with Ossoff prevailing 444,402 votes to 336,412 votes or a 55% to 42% victory. But while Perdue received a net gain of 48,254 votes from his win here in 2014, Ossoff won these suburbs by nearly an identical percentage but a 107,990 raw vote margin because of higher turnout.

### Northern Atlanta Suburbs Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
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Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
177,788 (43%)	-48,254
444,402 (55%)	107,990

This was by far the most critical part of Ossoff's overperformance. If Ossoff had only improved his percentage of the vote in line with his gains in the rest of metro Atlanta from Fulton to the exurbs, he would have ended up losing the contest by more than 50,000 votes more than Nunn did, because of the increased turnout. All his gains elsewhere would have just been treading water against Perdue's rural gains, which will be discussed at greater length below. But Ossoff did about a dozen points better in much of this area, compared to gains of about five points in the rest of metro Atlanta. If one place changed Perdue's fortunes this time around, it was here.

## Atlanta Exurbs

The combination of the 20 other counties in the official Atlanta metropolitan area could be described as exurban, stretching between metro Atlanta and rural northern Georgia. For the most part, these counties are heavily white and have average income and educational demographics. These are Republican strongholds, but unlike the rural counties, these did move a bit to the left in 2020. These exurban counties cast 16% of Georgia's votes in 2014 and a slightly higher 17% in 2020.

In 2014, Perdue won these counties 72% to 26%, but Ossoff improved upon Nunn's performance by losing them 29% to 68%. Perdue netted 188,254 votes in these counties in 2014 thanks to winning them 292,623 to 104,369 over Nunn. Yet while Ossoff did better than Nunn percentagewise, Perdue increased his net gain to 324,652 votes on the back of a 571,315 to 246,633 vote win in 2020.

## Atlanta Exurbs Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Perdue Vote Advantage
104,369 (26%)	188,254
246,633 (29%)	324,652

But Ossoff's improvement did matter. In 2014, Perdue's net win out of the Atlanta exurbs was the largest of any of the four subregions described above. But in 2020, Ossoff's net win in the southern Atlanta suburbs gave him a larger net gain than the Atlanta exurbs delivered for Perdue, as Ossoff did better percentagewise in both places.

Overall, the entire Atlanta metro region, regardless of whether it was urban, suburban, or

exurban, shifted towards Ossoff and the Democrats during the Trump era.

## 2. Black Belt turnout was up, but the Trump effect was limited.

The biggest takeaway from looking at Black Belt counties is that this area has historically been about 3-2 Democratic, and 2020 brought increased turnout. But the votes gained were in line with prior voting patterns, meaning they mattered, but the impact on net vote totals was severely muted compared to metro Atlanta.

Generally speaking, Ossoff did much better than Nunn in the urban cores of Augusta, Columbus, and Macon, but he also did worse in the more rural counties that stretch across the Black Belt: the 23 counties that work their way from the Alabama border to the South Carolina border, which have a significant number of Black residents. While some of the cities are doing well here, population is stagnant in the more rural counties.

Nunn won all 23 of these counties in 2014, but Ossoff only carried 16 of them in 2020. Ossoff generally did better in the western part of the state, which is part of the district held by Sanford Bishop, a moderate Black Democrat known for doing unusually well with some of his white constituents. It is possible that Bishop's reputation and organization is helping keep the western part of the Black Belt stronger for Democrats than the eastern part. All that being said, Ossoff still net gained 79,340 votes out of the Black Belt in 2020 compared to Nunn's net win of 43,952 votes in 2014, due to higher turnout.

### Black Belt Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
129,462 (59%)	43,952
219,937 (60%)	79,340

Percentage-wise, Ossoff won the Black Belt 60% to 38%, basically identical to Nunn's 59% to 39% win. This is a far cry from his five point or more improvement in performance across metro Atlanta. Compared to metro Atlanta and the rural white counties, the Black Belt has been seemingly less politically impacted by the Trump era. Even though turnout was up, its share of statewide vote actually went down. The Black Belt cast 8% of Georgia's votes in 2014, but that slid to just 7% in 2020. Turnout in this area will be crucial to a winning Democratic coalition in the runoff.

## 3. White rural Georgia loved the last four years.



As Georgia was shifting to become a purple state that Democrats could and did win statewide during the Trump era, the white rural parts of Georgia were not having any of it. These are the 104 counties that are not part of metro Atlanta or any other significant metro area and do not have a sizable Black population. These counties cast 28% of Georgia's votes in 2014 and slightly increased to 29% in 2020.

They gave Perdue a 68% to 30% victory in 2014 and a 69% to 28% win in 2020. This might not sound like a lot, but when Perdue overall moved from a 53% to 45% victory to a contest where he is held under 50%, seeing a part of the state shifting towards him is very notable. In 2014, Perdue net gained 280,990 votes from these areas, winning them 496,371 to 215,381. But because of increased turnout in 2020 and slightly better performance, Perdue won a net gain of 595,045 votes over Ossoff.

## White Rural Georgia Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Perdue Vote Advantage
215,381 (30%)	280,990
411,661 (28%)	595,045

These areas are what has historically erased Democratic wins throughout metro Atlanta and the Black Belt in statewide totals. In the runoff, Democrats must hope for no further slide in support as well as low turnout in these areas. If they don't turn out in the same strength as metro Atlanta, it would be a big boon for Ossoff and Warnock's chances.

## 4. Other Bits and Pieces

There are two other areas worth mentioning due to their importance in a Democratic coalition: Savannah and Athens. These areas are mathematically less important than metro Atlanta, the Black Belt, and white rural Georgia, but they are still critical to a Democratic victory statewide.

### Urban Savannah-Hinesville

Chatham and Liberty counties in the southeast part of the state have historically been Democratic thanks to having a larger Black population and being the urban economic and cultural core of the region. But while the economy is diversified including shipping and manufacturing, Savannah's tourism industry has been hit heavy by the COVID-19 pandemic. They cast 3% of Georgia's votes in both 2014 and 2020.

In 2014, Nunn won these counties 55% to 43%, and Ossoff had a notable improvement, winning 58% to 40%. This gain approached levels seen in parts of metro Atlanta. That means that while Nunn net gained 9,732 votes thanks to a 43,556 to 33,824 victory, Ossoff ended up winning a net 27,880 because he won 88,611 to 60,731.

## Urban Savannah-Hinesville Results, 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
43,556 (55%)	9,732
88,611 (58%)	27,880

When trying to win a runoff where a Democratic victory would almost certainly be narrow, an area like Savannah not turning out or sliding to pre-Trump levels of support could possibly doom a Democrat even if they got a great result out of metro Atlanta.

## Athens (UGA)

The other area worth mentioning is Clarke County, which contains the city of Athens and the University of Georgia. As one would expect for a college town, this county is extremely Democratic—and it saw high turnout in November. Of course, with a runoff occurring during the winter break, Democrats could be concerned with the fact that many students may be away from campus on Election Day. It goes without saying that Clarke is more than just UGA students, but in a tight race, Democrats will likely need to rely on college students voting by mail to win.

Clarke cast 1% of Georgia's ballots in both 2014 and 2020. Nunn won this county 65% to 33%, while Ossoff improved to a 68% to 30% win in 2020, a gain similar to parts of metro Atlanta. In 2014, that margin produced an 8,407 net vote gain for Nunn in her 16,787 to 8,380 win over Perdue. Like in Savannah, Ossoff more than doubled that net gain to 19,471 thanks to winning it 34,549 to 15,078.

## Athens (UGA), 2014 and 2020

Democrat	Dem Vote Advantage
16,787 (65%)	8,407
34,549 (68%)	19,471

# Conclusion

If Ossoff and Warnock win the runoff, it could resemble Biden's narrow eleven thousand vote win in the state meaning any group of voters could be credited as the group that puts them over the top. The groups doing outreach to the underserved growing Hispanic and Asian communities will equal the margin of victory. The wide swaths of college whites switching allegiances away from the party of Bush to Biden because of disdain for Trumpism will equal the margin of victory. The remaining white rural Democrats who held on to the party of Jimmy Carter will equal the margin of victory. Undoubtedly, Black voters' loyalty to the party of Lyndon Johnson since the 1960s served yet again as the party's bedrock of support in the state, the foundation upon which victory was built.

All that being said, Ossoff and Warnock have four main goals heading into the runoff.

- Bet big on metro Atlanta, especially the northern suburbs of Cobb and Gwinett, to deliver huge victories as Democrats convince suburban voters the party is their new home and Trumpism is here to stay in the GOP.
- Convince the Black Belt to show up and persuade them that Democrats care about creating opportunities in these communities.
- Hope rural white Georgia doesn't seek revenge for Trump's loss.
- Don't fumble in Athens with college turnout and make sure tourism-heavy Savannah knows they have a plan for post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

If they do these things, they might just prove Biden's victory wasn't a fluke, and Georgia really did turn Blue.

## TOPICS