

All eyes are on Georgia. Again.

Print

BY NOLAN D. MCCASKILL, ZACH MONTELLARO | 04/03/2021 03:56 PM EDT



Demonstrators take part in a sit-in protest as Gov. Brian Kemp holds a press conference on March 22, 2021. | Alyssa Pointer/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP

ATLANTA — When Joe Biden launched his presidential campaign, he dubbed it the “[battle for the soul of the nation](#).” Locals argue that battle is being waged in Georgia as the rest of the country looks on.

Democrats now control all of Washington, after Biden won Georgia and both Senate seats here flipped in January. But Republicans still run all the levers of state government here, and they’re rallying behind a sweeping new election law that could tilt the political pendulum back in their column in 2022, when nine statewide executive offices and a high-profile Senate race will be on the ballot.

[SB 202](#), signed into law by GOP Gov. Brian Kemp in late March, is either the epitome of voter suppression or the embodiment of election integrity — depending on whom you ask. Biden decried the law as “Jim Crow in the 21st century,” though the final product

didn't restrict voting as much as some of the headline-grabbing early legislative proposals.

The clash over SB 202 is thrusting Georgia back into the national spotlight after a tumultuous year: Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man, was killed by white vigilantes. Rayshard Brooks, another Black man, was shot to death by police. Former President Donald Trump pressured local election officials to overturn his loss here. Then there was the March massacre targeting Asian Americans, and, less than two weeks ago, the arrest of a Black state legislator protesting the new law under the gold dome of Georgia's state capitol.

The fight over the future of elections in Georgia — and, some say, the soul of the nation — is playing out on multiple fronts, materializing as not only a political battle but also a legal battle, a legislative battle and a moral battle. And now, as businesses from Coke to Delta condemn the law, and Republicans [threaten to retaliate by zapping their tax breaks](#), it's become a corporate battle, too.

On Friday, the sports world got involved, when Major League Baseball pulled its All-Star game and the draft out of the state. But not everyone, including Democratic Sen. [Jon Ossoff](#), agrees that boycotts are the answer.

What's happening here is being duplicated across the country — Georgia is among the 47 states where legislators have introduced more than 360 restrictive voting bills, according to a [tally by the Brennan Center for Justice](#) — and elected officials and voters across the country are paying attention.

"We are the test once again for what happens and where this leads us down the road," said Khadijah Abdur-Rahman, a Democratic Fulton County commissioner.

'Mad, angry as hell'

Abdur-Rahman represents the largest district, land-wise, in the county. Her constituents run the gamut from working class, single-parent households and people who need affordable housing assistance, to upper-middle-class Black families. It's a heavily Democratic district, but Republicans comprise about 15 percent of it, including a sprinkling of Black Republicans who the commissioner says believe the law is unnecessary.

On a Sunday afternoon, Abdur-Rahman sat in her downtown Atlanta office, talking to a reporter. On the coat rack hung a pair of purple boxing gloves, a reminder to Abdur-Rahman to never stop fighting for her constituents.

The day before, she was putting that principle to work, rallying outside City Hall, where the top row of steps was barricaded by the Atlanta Police.

Dozens of people were in attendance, wearing face masks and carrying signs that read "Jim Crow 2.0" and "Stop voter suppression," a mix of white, Black and brown protesters. There were young adults and those with silver hair, including an elderly white woman in a wheelchair holding a lengthy sign highlighting the number of Republican state senators (34) and representatives (100) who "voted for white supremacy & fascism."

A DJ set up shop while a seemingly endless roster of speakers let loose for more than two hours.

It was a rally, yes, but it also felt like a combination of church, a protest and a concert. Protesters chanted, "You about to lose yo' job," a pointed message to Kemp, who is up for reelection next year.

Abdur-Rahman took to the stage in the opening minutes of the rally.

"I can go to the ATM machine and use my card after hours, but I gotta vote between banker hours?" she shouted into the microphone. "It doesn't make any sense. So what I say to you is, 'I'm mad, I'm angry as hell, and we are coming together!'"

'It's just trying to make Republicans look bad'

At a barbecue joint in northeast Atlanta, two older white men sat at a table talking about Covid-19, China and congressional Democrats' sweeping election reform bill. People would illegally vote 20 times if voter ID requirements weren't in place, one of the men said, as his companion nodded in agreement.

But when approached by a reporter, their conversation ended abruptly, and they high-tailed it out of the restaurant.

Across the country, Republicans' views on voting have shifted dramatically. A [2018 Pew Research Center survey](#) found that 48 percent of Republicans said everything possible should be done to make it easy to vote. But a [new Pew Research Center survey](#) published last week found that just 28 percent of Republicans felt that way. And more than 6 in 10 Republicans also said changing election rules to

make it easier to register and vote would make elections less secure.

Republicans here say election integrity is a top concern for their constituents in Georgia.

“My constituents wanted it. They did. I hope that helps. Thank you,” sputtered state Rep. Mike Cheokas, a Republican, before hanging up the phone.

Others argue Democrats are stirring the pot to rally their own voters and score political points.

“Nobody’s stopping any Blacks [from voting]. Nobody’s stopping Black churches [from doing Souls to the Polls events],” Kathleen Thorman, chair of the Gordon County Republican Party, told POLITICO.

“Everybody wants everyone to vote that’s a registered voter, that’s a legal voter,” she said. “This attack has no merit. It’s ludicrous. It’s just trying to make Republicans look bad.”

'We didn't get everything that we wanted'

Democrats who weren't in the trenches here wrote off Georgia a long time ago. They didn't see the state as being anywhere within striking distance for them. But after Democrats swept the presidential election and two Senate runoffs, the state has become the center of the political universe in the U.S.

“This is who Georgia is, and we’re gonna continue to push forward and bring the rest of the country along with us,” said Rep. [Nikema Williams](#) (D-Ga.), who represents the late John Lewis’ district in Congress and became the first Black woman elected to lead the state Democratic Party in 2019.

But now, Georgia Democrats’ biggest crusade is against SB 202, which will, among other things, reduce the time frame in which voters can request absentee ballots, requires an ID number or photocopy of an ID to request and return ballots, shortens the runoff period (which subsequently shortens the early voting window) — and prohibits anyone but poll workers from distributing water to voters waiting in line. The law, dubbed the “Election Integrity Act of 2021,” would also give the Republican-controlled state legislature more authority over the State Election Board.

Kemp quickly signed the bill into law on March 25 behind closed doors, flanked by six white men posed next to a [portrait of a slave plantation](#). That image did not go unnoticed.

“It’s certainly symbolic of what he did, trying to take us back to those times on the plantation by signing that legislation,” Rep. [Hank Johnson](#) (D-Ga.) said in an interview. “That’s representational of the Old South. The New South was represented on Nov. 3 and Jan. 5, when we elected President Biden in Georgia and when we elected two United States senators. ... The New South will not be defeated.”

Tensions were further inflamed when Democratic state Rep. Park Cannon, a Black woman, was arrested by white law enforcement officers after knocking on Kemp’s door during the signing.

The entire episode is further galvanizing Black women across the state who have played key roles for years as organizers. In interviews, Black women here argue Republicans backed SB 202 because the state’s younger, increasingly diverse demographic makeup is threatening their hold on power. But rather than change the Republican Party’s policies to attract a diverse coalition of voters, they said, Republicans simply changed the rules under the guise of election integrity.

At the rally outside City Hall, Karli Swift, a Black woman with braids, glasses and a gray shirt emblazoned with Stacey Abrams’ face held aloft a poster with a message printed in big, bold, black letters: “F*ck around & find out — GA Black women,” it read in all-caps. [A photo of her poster later went viral](#).

A couple days later, at a table inside a Black-owned, members-only club called The Gathering Spot, Swift, a corporate lawyer who has worked for Democratic campaigns in the past, talked about what prompted her to show up that day.

“I was mad, tired,” Swift recalled. “It’s a sentiment that I think a lot of Georgians feel. Not even just Georgians.”

Georgia Republicans, she said, “passed a law that’s terrible. At the end of the day, it’s not going to help them get more voters, either, and then they have lit a fire under Democrats in Georgia. It’s like a lose-lose situation. I don’t know what they were thinking.”

'You're not capable of getting out to vote'

Republicans, for their part, insist the previous system was ripe for fraud and lament that the new law doesn't go far enough. (Election officials have said there is no evidence that fraud occurred in the presidential race or Senate runoffs.)

“We didn’t get everything that we wanted, but it’s a really good start,” Jason Thompson, a Republican national committeeman from Georgia, said in an interview. “The trust in our elections system in Georgia was really at an all-time low.”

Kerry Luedke, the chair of the Cherokee County Republican Party, wrote in an email that her party was planning on sending thank-you notes to legislators who supported the bill, along with having a rally and social media campaign “to explain the facts of the legislation.”

“If I was somebody living in the Black community, I would be so insulted that people are basically telling me that I’m not capable of getting out to vote, and I’m not capable of getting an ID to vote. I would be so insulted,” said Thorman, the Gordon County GOP chair.

“[Democrats are] saying: ‘You’re not smart enough, you’re not sharp enough, you’re not capable of getting out to vote,’” Thorman added.

Voting laws have animated voters on both sides of the aisle, albeit for very different reasons. Democrats commend Brad Raffensperger, Georgia’s Republican secretary of state, for standing up to Trump’s attempts to overturn his election loss — but say he’s since caved to members of his party. On the other hand, he’s fallen deeply out of favor with conservatives.

“There’s no way in hell I’d ever vote for him again,” said Pamela Reardon, the co-founder and vice president of Metro Atlanta Republicans. Of Republican Geoff Duncan, she added: “I like to say, ‘Duncan is done.’ He is the lieutenant governor. He’s done.”

‘Democracy is good for business’

It’s unclear what, if any, legal action the Biden administration will take. Biden has said that protecting voting rights was something the Justice Department was examining.

When pressed for more information, the White House referred questions to the DOJ. “We are aware of the law, but [have] no further comment,” a DOJ spokesperson told POLITICO.

Meanwhile, Democrats and voting-rights groups have filed at least three separate lawsuits in federal court, and congressional Democrats are vowing to continue pushing for passage of legislation to expand voting access and address hate crimes. But it’s not clear how the litigation will play out in court. And Congress is unlikely to pass sweeping voting rights legislation without Senate Democrats first nuking the filibuster to allow bills to pass with a simple majority.

Voting rights advocates say they will educate voters on the new law and help them obtain valid ID in case they’re forced to play by Republicans’ new rules in the 2022 midterms — when Kemp, Duncan, Raffensperger and Democratic Sen. [Raphael Warnock](#) will all be on the ballot. And at the same time, activists are pressuring businesses headquartered in the state to come out against SB 202.

Cliff Albright, a co-founder of Black Voters Matter, had a pointed message for the business community: “Democracy is good for business. Voter suppression is not.”

Republicans are threatening to pull the tax credits of corporations that speak out against the new law. But some major corporations are doing just that. In a memo to employees last week, Delta CEO Ed Bastian wrote that “the final bill is unacceptable and does not match Delta’s values.” Alfredo River, president of Coca-Cola’s North America operating unit, in a statement [issued by the company](#), vowed to “continue to work to advance voting rights and access in Georgia and across the country” and acknowledged the company’s “responsibility to protect” and “promote” the right to vote.

Some activists are pushing for a boycott of the state, which has been transformed by the entertainment industry in recent years. But others, from Ossoff to [film mogul Tyler Perry](#), are insisting that a boycott will only hurt Georgians. On Wednesday, Abrams, the former state House minority leader and 2018 gubernatorial candidate who’s almost certain to seek a rematch with Kemp next year, [released a video](#), asking outsiders not to boycott the state.

“Black, Latino, AAPI and Native American voters whose votes are the most suppressed under SB 202, are also the most likely the most to be hurt by potential boycotts in Georgia,” she said in the video. “For our friends across the country, please do not boycott us.”

And on Friday, after news broke that the baseball commissioner was pulling the All-Star Game out of Georgia, [Abrams tweeted](#), “Disappointed [@MLB](#) will move the All-Star Game, but proud of their stance on voting rights.”

‘We are incredibly exhausted’

State Sen. Sheikh Rahman, a Democrat and an immigrant from Bangladesh, represents the most diverse district in the state Senate. His tenure represents many firsts, including the first Asian American state senator, first immigrant state senator and first Muslim legislator in the state.

Rahman said Republicans are scared of people like him. SB 202, he predicted, would “backfire” because Asian American and Pacific Islander voters are “not gonna stay on the sideline.”

Over the final weekend in March, on a cool, gloomy day, local and federal lawmakers — Reps. [Judy Chu](#) (D-Calif.), [Grace Meng](#) (D-N.Y.), [Mark Takano](#) (D-Calif.), [Al Green](#) (D-Texas) and [Andy Kim](#) (D-N.J.) from the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and local Reps. [Carolyn Bourdeaux](#) (D-Ga.) and Williams — took a bus trip mirroring the 27-mile path the alleged shooter, a white man, took to attack three Asian American spas. The suspect killed eight people, including six Asian women. Local law enforcement has not called the killing spree a hate crime.

Elected officials laid fresh flowers outside Gold Spa and Aromatherapy Spa, which sit across the street from each other in Atlanta. The entrance to Gold Spa was overwhelmed with withered flowers. Soggy signs read “Hate is a virus,” and “Stop Asian Hate.”

“For those of us living in Georgia, we’ve been in the spotlight the last year, and we are incredibly exhausted,” state Rep. Bee Nguyen, a Democrat, told POLITICO.

“But all the things that are happening — the voter suppression bill, this shooting and the way that there were attempts to censor the perpetrator and dehumanize the victims, the arrest of Rep. Park Cannon,” Nguyen said, “we are going to remember those things.”

“We are going to use our power to make change,” she continued. “And that change includes going to the ballot box.”

Last Sunday, a similar message seeped into Warnock’s virtual sermon. The freshman senator, who still holds his position as the senior pastor of the famed Ebenezer Baptist Church, stood in the empty sanctuary, preaching about a “governor” in the Bible who was confronted with a decision but failed to listen to a woman about which choice to make.

He never mentioned Kemp’s name, but as he spoke, a photo of the governor signing SB 202 and a video of Cannon’s arrest flashed across the screen.

Warnock told congregants he was talking about politics on a Sunday morning “because your vote is your voice,” and “democracy is the political enactment of a spiritual idea that all of us are children of the living God.”

Voter suppression “is not just a political issue,” Warnock said. “That’s a spiritual issue. That’s a moral issue.”

Zach Montellaro reported from Washington. Josh Gerstein and Sam Mintz contributed to this report.

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