

# Why Georgia, Why? Peach State Residents' Perceptions of Voting-Related Improprieties and Their Impact on the 2018 Gubernatorial Election

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*Objective.* In the historic 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, which for the first time featured a black Democratic woman against a white Republican man, we assess opinions toward voting-related concerns and their impact on voters' preferences. *Methods.* We surveyed political behavior with a representative sample of likely Georgia voters to gauge their perceptions of voting-related improprieties and their possible effect on vote choice. *Results.* Our analysis makes it clear that not only did voters divide over election-related concerns, which dominated the narrative of the gubernatorial contest, but opinions on this matter strongly influenced the choice for governor. *Conclusions.* Reflecting a national development, but amplified in Georgia because demographic changes and growing minority participation are increasing competition, election administration has become highly politicized and it was the focal point of the 2018 gubernatorial campaign and the principal short-term factor shaping mass voting behavior.

Voter suppression in the American South is a story as old as the Civil War. Soon after the conflict ended, during Reconstruction ex-Confederate soldiers were marginalized by the practice of requiring a loyalty oath to the Union as a condition of reenfranchisement (Foner, 1988). Learning thoroughly the methods of their northern overseers, when native southern whites finally “redeemed” their state governments, the eventual implementation of an elaborate structure of restrictive voting laws shrunk the southern electorate to the point that most poor whites and the vast majority of blacks did not participate from the early 1900s until well into the 1950s (Burnham, 2010; Key, 1949; Kousser, 1974; Woodward, 2002). This era of the Solid (Democratic) South ended in the wake of the 1960s civil rights movement, which brought forth the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA), with the latter provision spurring massive voter mobilization among blacks and whites in certain southern localities (Bullock and Gaddie, 2009; Davidson and Grofman, 1994; McKee, 2017; Timpone, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

From the mid-1960s up to the new millennium, American politics experienced a lengthy period in which most sections of the United States, including the South, approved of election reforms that, at least at the margins, lowered the costs of voting (Highton and

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<sup>1</sup>In Georgia, between 1964 and 1968, black voting-age registration went from 44 to 56 percent while white voting-age registration pre-VRA (1962–1964) to post-VRA (1966–1967) increased from 63 to 80 percent (McKee, 2017:143–44).

Wolfinger, 1998; Keyssar, 2009; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) (e.g., shortening closing dates for registration prior to Election Day, the national “motor voter” law in 1993, no-excuse absentee voting by mail, early in-person voting). The contentious 2000 presidential election, however, proved a harbinger for a decided partisan tilt toward election administration (Hicks et al., 2015). The controversial *Bush v. Gore* (2000) Supreme Court ruling, which determined the outcome of the 2000 presidential contest, heralded a new era of contentious party politics in which election reforms would take center stage in battles to win not only national majorities in Congress and the White House, but anywhere partisan elections were highly competitive (Hasen, 2012).

This brings us to Georgia, a Deep South state that has been moving in a more competitive, read Democratic direction, since Barack Obama was elected in 2008. The Peach State offers an illuminating case study of the changing South and particularly as manifested in a closely fought 2018 gubernatorial election pitting a Republican white man against a Democratic African-American woman; the descriptive standard bearers of the Deep South’s contemporary major party coalitions (McKee, 2018). In this study, we contextualize and evaluate the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election via three lenses: the historical backdrop of this Deep South state, the contemporary partisan wrangling over restrictive voting reforms (i.e., stricter voter identification [ID] laws), and how these two factors collided to create the distinct political milieu of the 2018 contest.

Republican Brian Kemp, the Secretary of State (2010–2018), defeated Democratic political activist and former state representative (2010–2017) Stacey Abrams with 50.2 percent of the total votes cast to become the new governor of Georgia. This remarkably close contest and the fact that both candidates played key roles in either overseeing the administration of the voting apparatus (Kemp) or mobilizing vast numbers of supporters via registration drives (Abrams) generated considerable concern over questions of fairness and hence the legitimacy of the outcome. We have leveraged a unique survey of likely general election voters to evaluate their preferences in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election. Most importantly, given the contentious context of this contest, our emphasis is placed on gauging opinions toward alleged voting-related improprieties and how these views may have impacted vote choice. But before we turn to an assessment of mass political behavior in the 2018 election, we begin with a trip back in time to briefly contextualize the history of Georgia politics and how it brought us to the current era.

### **Georgia Politics: Then to Now**

Georgia is a Deep South state, one of five, including Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. This southern subregion, mainly because of its much larger percentage of African Americans, has always endured more contentious race relations than its Rim South counterparts consisting of Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (Key, 1949). For most of the Peach State’s post-Civil War history, race has driven the character of its politics and advantaged a one-party Democratic faction of white elites residing primarily in the rural (black-belt) sections of the state (Key, 1949).

Starting with the Reconstruction era (1865–1877), Georgia was perhaps the most militant in its resistance to federal intervention. Indeed, the Peach State was never compliant with northern oversight (Russ, 1935) and twice had to be readmitted to the Union (McKee, 2019:21). Georgia was the first southern state to enact a poll tax in 1871 (Kousser, 1974); long before the elaborate post-Reconstruction implementation of Jim Crow laws (circa 1889–1908; see McKee, 2019:39) ensured a one-party white supremacist

Democratic Solid South (Woodward, 2002). In 1877, the Peach State enacted a cumulative, and hence more punitive, poll tax widely regarded as disfranchising the black population. In the 1880s, turnout in Georgia was under 50 percent while in the rest of the South, which still lacked “effective restrictive legal devices,” turnout was over 65 percent (Kousser, 1974:67).

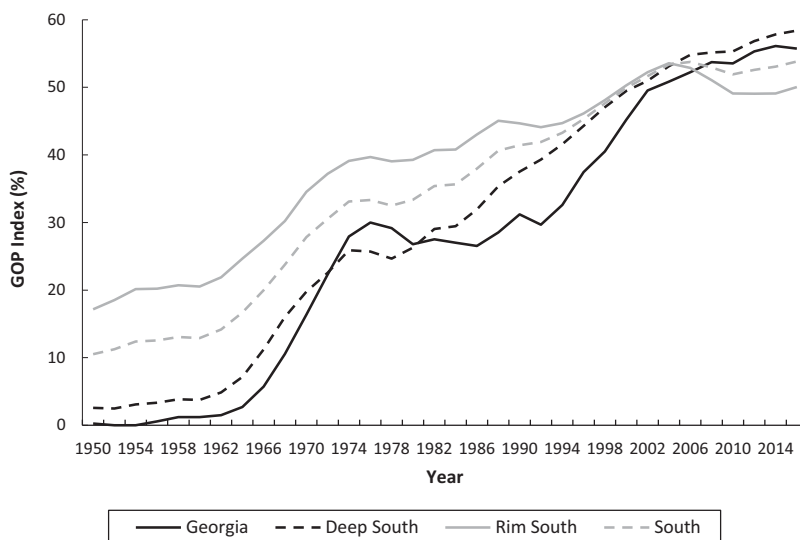
From the late 1800s into the 1950s, Democratic politics was synonymous with Georgia politics. For most of these decades, a bi-factionalism within the party pitted a more formidable rural, “pseudo-Populist” (Key, 1949:116), demagogic group (highlighted by the likes of Tom Watson and Eugene Talmadge) against a relatively progressive urban opposition (e.g., Ellis Arnall). The urban faction was institutionally disadvantaged by the County-Unit System, employed for most statewide and even congressional, Democratic primary contests (Buchanan, 1997; Key, 1949). This arrangement produced substantial malapportionment because rural counties had comparatively more unit votes than the smaller number of more populous urban counties. Like the Electoral College, the campaign strategy was the same, heavily contest the most competitive counties (states) and sometimes the popular vote loser was the victor (e.g., Eugene Talmadge in the 1946 Democratic gubernatorial primary) because unit votes (electoral votes) privileged candidates who garnered support from rural residents.

There were two revolutions in the 1960s, one concerning civil rights and the other reapportionment (Cox and Katz, 2002). These two extremely electorally disruptive developments were tightly linked. As African Americans fought and won concessions for equal rights under the law, Georgia’s Democratic monopoly was broken up by abolition of the County-Unit System (*Gray v. Sanders*, 1963) and enforcement of the one-person, one-vote principle (see *Wesberry v. Sanders*, 1964; *Reynolds v. Sims*, 1964) in district-based elections (i.e., U.S. House and state legislative races). As a consequence, in the 1970s, the Grand Old Party (GOP) was gaining strength in Georgia’s rapidly growing suburbs (Fenno, 2000). The one-sided Democratic affiliation of Georgia’s burgeoning black electorate directly contributed to GOP growth as white elites appropriated the erstwhile moribund Republican Party as the vehicle for maintaining political power (Hood, Kidd, and Morris, 2012). Nonetheless, Georgia Democrats held the upper hand via biracial coalitions up through the 1980s (Lamis, 1988). But Republican ascendancy took off in the 1990s in part because majority-minority redistricting undermined the Democrats’ biracial coalitions (Black and Black, 2002) as the Department of Justice insisted that the Peach State (under Section 5 Preclearance Voting Rights Act enforcement) draw three majority black congressional districts for the 1992 elections (Bullock, 2010). Consider that before the 1992 election, Republican Newt Gingrich was the only Republican in Georgia’s 10-member U.S. House delegation, but by 1995 (with a party switch by future Governor Nathan Deal), the 11-member Peach State delegation consisted of three black Democrats and eight white Republicans (McKee, 2010).

By the 1990s, whites in rural sections of Georgia were strongly realigning in favor of the Republican Party (Bullock and Gaddie, 2013) and long-running cultural battles like the one waged over the Confederate battle flag (Huffmon, Knotts, and McKee, 2017–2018; Hutchings, Walton, and Benjamin, 2010) ultimately benefited the GOP, since its almost exclusively white coalition had become the new home of racial conservatives (Valentino and Sears, 2005). In 2002, Sonny Perdue became the first Georgia Republican governor since Reconstruction and rural whites were a key contributor to his victory (Hayes and McKee, 2004). Republican electoral success in the new millennium has been impressive up and down the ballot, with the GOP consistently winning the majority (and lately all) of statewide contests and holding majorities in the Georgia Senate since 2002 and in the Georgia House since 2004.

FIGURE 1

Index of Republican Electoral Strength in the South, 1950–2016



NOTES: Shown is David's Index (see David, 1972) Composite B (votes for governor, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House) for Republican electoral strength. We have applied a 10-year moving average to smooth out any short-term spikes in the data series.

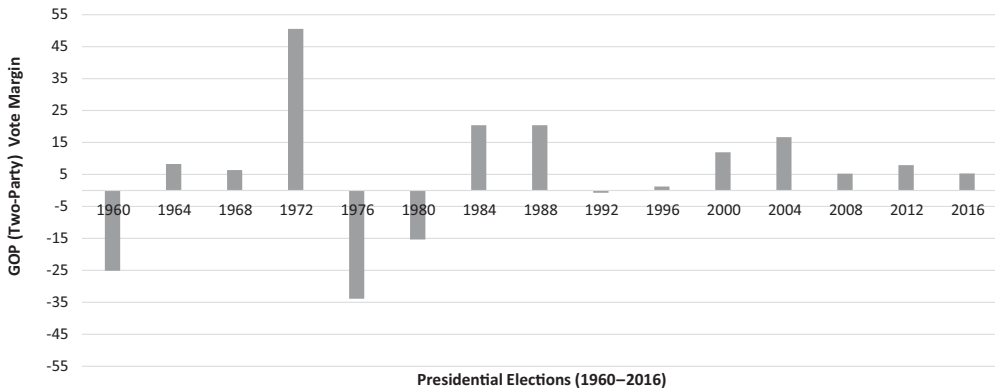
We conclude this brief synopsis of Georgia politics with two telling figures that speak to long-term partisan changes in the Peach State. First, Figure 1 displays Republican electoral strength based on a composite index of the party's performance weighted equally (in thirds) for gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House elections (see David, 1972). We present these data from 1950 to 2016 for the South, Rim South, Deep South (including Georgia), and Georgia. Several things stick out in Figure 1. From the 1950s to early the 1970s, the Deep South, and especially Georgia, had an electorally weak (but strengthening) Republican Party compared to the Rim South. Interestingly, the rise of Democratic native son Jimmy Carter from 1974 to 1980 is the only period in which the GOP index was higher in Georgia than the Deep South as a whole. Thereafter, Georgia plays catch up with the rest of the South until the historic 2008 election of Democrat Barack Obama, when its GOP index finally exceeds that of the Rim South. Notice, however, that since 2008, Deep South Republicanism grows ever stronger while it levels off in Georgia.

In Figure 2, we present the Republican margin of the two-party (popular) presidential vote in Georgia (GOP percentage minus Democratic percentage) from 1960 to 2016. The presidential vote is the most salient indicator of change in signaling the direction of party politics (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). With this in mind, we begin with 1960 to show that the Peach State went decidedly for New England Democrat John Kennedy but then trended Republican for the next three contests in which the "Southern Strategy" (Phillips, 1969) of courting racially conservative white voters paid electoral dividends.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Georgia embraced its native son, Democrat Jimmy Carter, in 1976 and was

<sup>2</sup>Barry Goldwater was the first Republican to win Georgia's popular presidential vote (Democrats prevailed even in the Reconstruction elections of 1868, 1872, and 1876) and the first non-Democrat to do so since Whig nominee Zachary Taylor in 1848.

FIGURE 2

Presidential Popular Two-Party Vote Margin (Republican Minus Democratic) in Georgia, 1960–2016



NOTES: Data are from Dave Leip's *Atlas of Presidential Elections* (<https://uselectionatlas.org/>). Values are computed as the Republican percentage of the presidential vote minus the Democratic percentage and therefore positive values mean a higher Republican vote, whereas negative values mean a higher Democratic vote.

the only southern state to stick with him in 1980. Only fellow Democratic southerner Bill Clinton has managed to carry Georgia since 1980 (in 1992). But we consider the emergence of Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 to be a true turning point in Georgia politics. In the previous two elections, 2000 and 2004, Republican George W. Bush won the Peach State by double digits. In contrast, Georgia presidential elections have been notably more competitive since. A major reason for this development is because of changing demography and minority voter mobilization in favor of Democrats. It is this political reality that leads us to the next section, which outlines efforts by Georgia Republicans to maintain power via election administration.

### The New Millennium and the Republican Push for Restrictive Voting Reforms

Cobb County, located northwest of Atlanta's beltway, provides an excellent vignette for comprehending the remarkable demographic changes overtaking the Peach State. Comparisons between 1990 and 2016 reveal notable transformations to this rapidly growing and diversifying county.<sup>3</sup> Over this quarter-century, Cobb's population increased 63 percent, African Americans went from 10 to 27 percent, Latinos from 2 to 13 percent, while the share of non-Hispanic whites plummeted from 88 to 61 percent. At the same time, graduate degree holders (25 years or older) increased from 9 to 15 percent and residents born in Georgia declined from 46 to 38 percent. Politically, these changes benefit Democrats. In 1996, the two-party presidential vote went 61 to 39 percent in favor of Republican Bob Dole over Democrat Bill Clinton. Twenty years later, Democrat Hillary Clinton bested Republican Donald Trump 51 to 49 percent. In 2014, Republican Governor Nathan Deal defeated Democrat Jason Carter (Jimmy Carter's grandson) 57 to 43 percent in Cobb

<sup>3</sup>Comparing 1990 decennial census data with 2012–2016 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) estimates.

County. In 2018, Cobb County went 55 to 45 percent in favor of Democrat Stacey Abrams over Republican Brian Kemp. Perhaps most interesting is that from 1992 to 1998, Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich represented most of Cobb County and in 2018 the best cognate of his district (changed through redistricting), the current Georgia District 6, was won by African-American Lucy McBath—the only majority white district (70 percent) in Georgia represented by a Democrat.<sup>4</sup>

Statewide, over the same period of time (1990–2016), Georgia's black population went from 27 to 31 percent (third highest in the South) and Latinos increased from 2 to 9 percent (third highest in the South), whereas the non-Hispanic white population dropped from 71 to 60 percent. The share of Georgia natives declined from 64 to 55 percent, the percent urban increased from 63 to 75 percent (2010 census: fourth highest in the South), and based on 2012 (ACS) data, 30 percent of northern in-migrants came from the “deep blue” Northeast (fifth highest in the South; see McKee and Teigen, 2016:229). Based on these metrics, Georgia is looking *less* Deep South and *more* Rim South (McKee and Springer, 2015) and the currently dominant Georgia GOP has a big problem on its hands. Compositional changes to the Georgia electorate clearly advantage the Democratic opposition, and like so many other states (southern and northern) that are experiencing real or impending competition, if Republicans control the political system, then they have busily proposed/enacted restrictive voting reforms as a means to at least slow the Democratic advance (Levitt, 2012; McKee, 2019).

Control of election administration, particularly in the new millennium, a time of historically competitive two-party competition (Shafer, 2016), has increasingly been recognized and deployed as a means to seek electoral advantage. For sure, gerrymandering is a time-honored American tradition (Engstrom, 2013), and bipartisan in the sense that both parties use this tactic if they have the opportunity (McGann et al., 2016).<sup>5</sup> But more recently, restrictive voting measures have come to the fore.

Most salient and divisive among them has been the push for stricter voter ID as a requirement for in-person voting. It is not our purpose to litigate whether this reform actually curtails the electorate in a manner that disadvantages the Democratic Party (on this debate, see the recent exchange between Hajnal, Kuk, and Lagevardi, 2018 and Grimmer et al., 2018 in *The Journal of Politics*). Rather, what we know for certain is that tightening voter ID at the polls is one of the most partisan-polarized reforms in American politics. Further, there is little doubt Republican officials view this measure as a way to gain electoral advantage (Keyssar, 2009) and this is the principal reason their Democratic counterparts overwhelmingly oppose stricter voter ID. Finally, the stark elite partisan divide on this issue has resonated, registered, and filtered down to the mass public (see Gronke et al., 2018), with rank-and-file Republicans receiving the GOP's message that stricter voter ID is needed to combat possible voter fraud (von Spakovsky, 2012), while many Democratic voters are cognizant of their party's talking point that the reform is nothing more than a naked partisan ploy (Levitt, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>In the 2018 midterms, Georgia Democrats netted three seats in the state Senate and 12 in the state House, making the upper chamber 63 percent Republican and the lower chamber 59 percent Republican (National Conference of State Legislatures website: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/partisan-composition.aspx>). Democrats came within 420 votes of unseating Republican Congressman Rob Woodall in the rapidly changing District 7.

<sup>5</sup>Following the lead of Texas Republicans (McKee and Shaw, 2005), when they took control of redistricting after the 2004 elections, Georgia Republicans “redistricted” their congressional map for the 2006 midterms (Hood and McKee, 2009). Likewise, when Georgia Democrats were in charge for the 2002 elections, they implemented a partisan gerrymander for the state Senate, which was later overturned in *Georgia v. Ashcroft* (2003) (see Gaddie and Bullock, 2006).

In 2005, along with Indiana the Peach State was the first to pass a strict photo ID law (Hicks, McKee, and Smith, 2016). Even at this early date (since then, over 40 states have entertained voter ID laws; see Barreto et al., 2018), partisan lawmakers were deeply divided over this reform. In Georgia's large General Assembly ( $N = 56$  senators,  $N = 180$  representatives), among those casting a vote, 95 percent of House Democrats voted no and 98 percent of House Republicans voted yes; in the state Senate, 100 percent of Democrats voted no and 94 percent of Republicans voted yes (Hicks, McKee, and Smith, 2016:Table A1).<sup>6</sup> After the 2010 Republican wave election, many state legislatures in swing states flipped in favor of GOP majorities and a raft of new voter ID legislation was proposed with impressive partisan polarization in the votes cast for and against (see McKee, 2015). In the South, from 2011 to 2013, seven states took up stricter voter ID legislation (AL, AR, NC, SC, TN, TX, and VA), "summing all of these votes by party . . . 98 percent of GOP lawmakers voted yes for a stricter voter ID provision while 98 percent of their Democratic counterparts voted no" (McKee, 2019:310).

Republican majorities make it difficult to overturn restrictive voting reforms like voter ID laws, which invariably get challenged in the courts, increasingly the Democrats' only hope for recourse. From the vantage of Democrats, compounding their problem was the recent *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) U.S. Supreme Court ruling, which rendered null and void Section 5 Preclearance under the Voting Rights Act. The absence of Section 5 enforcement in Georgia is particularly worrisome to Democrats because the GOP majority no longer is required to get approval from the federal government in making changes to its voting/elections apparatus (e.g., for redistricting, altering voting precincts, administering voter registration, etc.). Amidst this highly charged partisan backdrop, events leading up to the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election and those unfolding during the campaign itself meant that perceptions of voting-related improprieties would take center stage.

## Turnout in Georgia

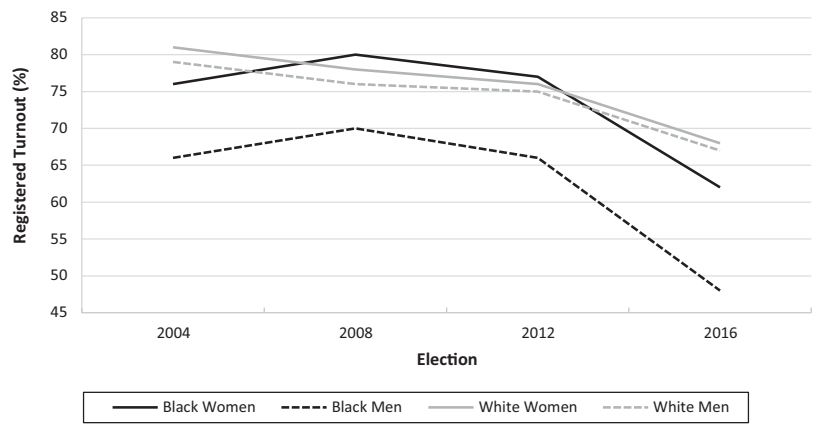
Despite no presidential campaign presence in Georgia in the 2008 election (Huang and Shaw, 2009), there was a palpable "Obama effect" manifest in black mobilization (see McKee, Hood, and Hill, 2012). Figures 3 and 4 display registered turnout in Georgia according to race and gender in presidential (2004–2016) and midterm (2006–2018) elections, respectively. Both figures start with the most immediate election (presidential and midterm) prior to Obama's 2008 candidacy. Between 2004 and 2008, turnout among black women and men jumped 4 (percentage) points and concomitantly dropped 3 points among white women and men. In the two Obama elections of 2008 and 2012, black women were the most participatory segment of the Peach State electorate. In contrast, their black male peers were the least participatory of these four groups. Turnout plunged in the 2016 presidential election, as the two most unpopular major party nominees dampened participation across the board.

Interestingly, in the first Obama midterm of 2010, characterized by the president as a "shellacking" (a 63 Democratic House seat-loss; Jacobson and Carson, 2016), compared to 2006, participation increased among all four groups and the rate of increase was higher among African Americans, with black women increasing their turnout the most: an impressive 10 points (45–55 percent). Participation dropped substantially among all four groups

<sup>6</sup>Not a single Indiana Democrat voted yes on strict photo ID, whereas every Republican did (Hicks, McKee, and Smith, 2016:Table A1).

FIGURE 3

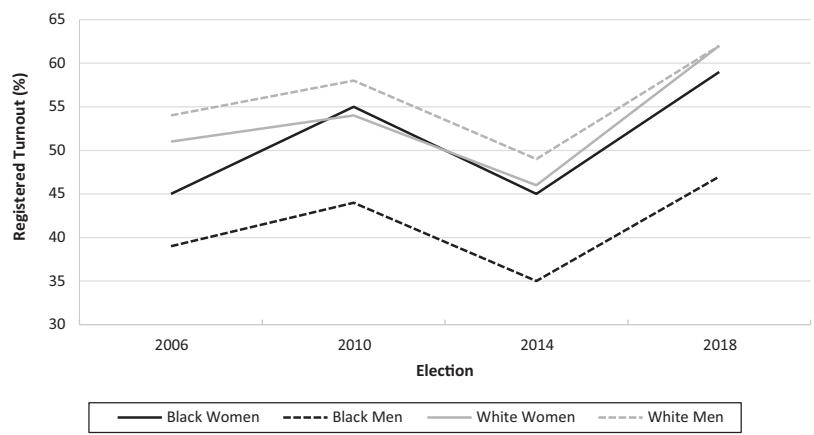
Registered Turnout by Race and Gender in Georgia Presidential Elections



NOTES: Data only include active registrants and are the official numbers archived by the Georgia Secretary of State: ([http://sos.ga.gov/index.php/Elections/voter\\_turn\\_out\\_by\\_demographics](http://sos.ga.gov/index.php/Elections/voter_turn_out_by_demographics)).

FIGURE 4

Registered Turnout by Race and Gender in Georgia Midterm Elections



NOTES: Data only include active registrants and are the official numbers archived by the Georgia Secretary of State: ([http://sos.ga.gov/index.php/Elections/voter\\_turn\\_out\\_by\\_demographics](http://sos.ga.gov/index.php/Elections/voter_turn_out_by_demographics)).

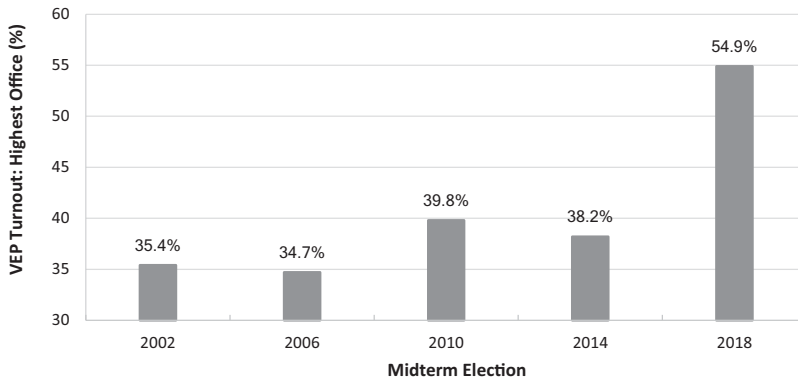
in 2014 and then registered a modern midterm surge in 2018.<sup>7</sup> Turnout rocketed up to 62 percent for white women and men, while black women were not far behind at 59 percent and black men again trailed, but nonetheless increased their participation to 47 percent (from 35 percent in 2014).

<sup>7</sup>One has to go back to 1912 (50.4 percent) to find a higher national midterm turnout than 2018 (50.1 percent) based on Michael P. McDonald's voting eligible population (VEP) numbers (<http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>).



FIGURE 5

## Voting Eligible Turnout in Georgia Midterm Elections, 2002–2018



NOTES: Data show turnout for the highest office (e.g., governor) based on Georgia's voting-eligible population (VEP). All data were compiled, computed, and made available at Michael P. McDonald's U.S. Elections Project website: (<http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>).

Overall, based on the VEP, starting with the 2002 midterm, 2018 turnout was easily a contemporary high, far outpacing all previous years. As displayed in Figure 5, in the first two midterms of the new millennium (2002 and 2006), VEP turnout in Georgia was in the mid-30s. In the next two contests (2010 and 2014), Georgia VEP turnout registered in the high-30s. Then, in 2018, the Peach State's VEP midterm turnout vaults to the mid-50s (54.9 percent). In sum, there is a palpable trend of increasing participation in midterm years when Georgia holds its gubernatorial election.

### The Historic 2018 Georgia Gubernatorial Election

We have chronicled turnout patterns in contemporary Georgia elections because this is the appropriate backdrop in which to assess the dynamics of the 2018 gubernatorial contest. Indeed, in a closed-door Republican meeting held in the summer of 2018, GOP gubernatorial nominee Brian Kemp, Georgia's Secretary of State since 2010, let those in attendance know that "[t]he Democrats are working hard. There have been these stories about them . . . registering all these minority voters that are out there . . . If they can do that, they can win these elections in November" (Joseph, 2018). Kemp's Democratic opponent, Stacey Abrams, a former Georgia General Assembly House Minority Leader, cut her teeth leading minority voter registration drives (the New Georgia Project) dating back to 2014.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the Secretary of State, responsible for election administration, sought the governorship against an opponent highly familiar with and harshly critical of his oversight of election administration.

Indeed, given Georgia's history of voter suppression coupled with the controversy surrounding Republican control of election administration in more recent years, it was a

<sup>8</sup>This information on Stacey Abrams is taken directly from her website: (<https://staceyabrams.com/meet-stacey/>).

foregone conclusion that the 2018 governor's race would be historically contentious.<sup>9</sup> Further, the possibility of America's first black woman winning a gubernatorial election, and her obvious stark visual contrast with a white male opponent, was an irresistible media story, and a reflection of the contemporary faces of the Deep South's major party coalitions. To be sure, both gubernatorial nominees had policies to push and the partisan divide was exacerbated by the fact that Kemp was backed by President Trump (including at the GOP primary stage) while Abrams clearly aligned with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the issue of voting-related improprieties dominated the headlines because it was obvious that the election would come down to which side was more capable of mobilizing its supporters.

Specifically, there were at least three voting-related issues that became highly salient and resonated with voters in the 2018 election: (1) Georgia's "use it, or lose it" voting law, (2) the "exact match" legislation passed a year prior to the election, and (3) the vulnerability of Georgia's voter registration database. Ironically, the authority to purge inactive voters (after six years of not voting) from the registration rolls was passed in 1997, when Democrats had majority control of the General Assembly along with the governorship. Nevertheless, only more recently, under GOP majorities, has the state been aggressive in enforcing this so-called use it, or lose it law. An analysis estimates that since 2012, 1.4 million voters have been removed from Georgia's registration system and most because of inactivity (Judd, 2018a).

Second, making national news was that over 50,000 Georgians had their registration eligibility flagged for not complying with the "exact match" law, which means the name of a registrant must match an official form of identification (e.g., driver's license, Social Security number; see Niesse, 2018). What made this news was the fact that minorities were disproportionately more likely to have their registration out of compliance with this law (80 percent of the total), with African-American registrants comprising 70 percent of those failing to pass the exact match standard (Good, 2018). The law was made effective on July 1, 2017 and, like stricter voter ID, the legislation was passed in remarkably polarized fashion: in both chambers only one Republican voted *against* passage (a state senator) and only three Democrats voted in *favor* (all state representatives).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, for the last few years there have been issues regarding the security of Georgia's voter registration database. Within the context of the 2018 election, accusations swirled around the ease with which the system could be hacked and Democratic complaints that Kemp refused to take any steps to make the system more secure. Days before the election, Kemp accused Democrats of hacking the system while Democrats, and Abrams in particular, said Kemp "cooked up the charge . . . and he recognizes that if he got caught two days before the election having exposed so many Georgians, he would lose" (Associated Press, 2018; also see Judd, 2018b).

<sup>9</sup>The 2018 contest will go down in the annals along with the "Three Governors Controversy" of 1946 (Bullock, Buchanan, and Gaddie, 2015) and the 1966 contest in which the Republican won the popular vote but, falling short of a majority, lost the governorship when the Democratic-controlled Georgia General Assembly chose the Democrat Lester Maddox (Bullock and Hood, 2015).

<sup>10</sup>Trump's endorsement was likely pivotal in Kemp winning the GOP nomination over Lieutenant Governor Casey Cagle. On her way to winning the Democratic nomination, Abrams defeated former state representative Stacey Evans, a white woman, which further speaks to the changing locus of political power in the modern Democratic Party in a Deep South state.

<sup>11</sup>The voting summary on the legislation (House Bill 268) can be found here: (<http://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/en-US/Display/20172018/HB/268>). Among all Republicans voting yea or nay (both Senate and House), 99 percent voted yes (134 of 135) and among all Democrats voting yea or nay, 95 percent voted no (61 of 64).

In sum, the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election was mainly fought over issues related to allegations of voting improprieties, with the Democrat Stacey Abrams assuming the mantle of voter access and leveling accusations of voter suppression, while the Republican Brian Kemp defended his role of election overseer in defense of ballot integrity amidst possible incidents of voter fraud. It is within this highly divisive political milieu that we constructed four questions that captured the leading sentiments of likely Georgia voters regarding their perceptions of voting-related improprieties in the 2018 gubernatorial election.

## Data and Methods

To evaluate opinions toward voting-related concerns and their effects on vote choice in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, we surveyed over 1,000 ( $N = 1,091$ ) likely voters in the period leading up to Election Day (October 21–30, 2018).<sup>12</sup> Our sample is representative of the Peach State's 2018 midterm electorate on the basis of race, gender, and age (see the Supplementary Appendix for additional details).<sup>13</sup>

Of primary interest was survey respondents' answers to the following four questions (frequency distributions in brackets), which directly tap into perceptions of voting-related improprieties germane to the campaign rhetoric hanging over the 2018 governor's contest:

Do you think it is *very likely*, *likely*, *not very likely*, or *not likely at all* each of the following will happen during this year's midterm election in Georgia?

1. Many votes will actually not be counted (19, 28, 35, 18 percent).
2. Someone will tamper with Georgia's voting system (18, 28, 38, 15 percent).
3. Many people will show up to vote and be told they are not eligible (20, 32, 35, 13 percent).
4. There will be voter fraud, that is, people who are not eligible will vote (16, 34, 32, 18 percent).

With this four-option ordinal scale, in the analysis that follows, we coded responses according to our theoretical expectations. Specifically, we coded the responses to reflect our expectations regarding the partisan divide over each question. Hypothesizing Democrats exhibit the greatest likelihood of choosing the "very likely" response for the first three questions, we coded these responses from 0 to 3 with 0 = *not likely at all*, 1 = *not very likely*, 2 = *likely*, and 3 = *very likely*. For shorthand, the variable labels for the first three questions are as follows: (1) "Votes Not Counted," (2) "Not Eligible," (3) "Tampering." Regarding the fourth question on the issue of voter fraud, we rely on what we know about the national partisan framing of this issue—that Republicans are more likely to perceive widespread evidence of electoral fraud (Gronke et al., 2019). To keep the coding consistent with Democrats more inclined to offer a "very likely" response, the voter fraud variable is 0 = *very likely*, 1 = *likely*, 2 = *not very likely*, and 3 = *not likely at all*. This variable is labeled "No Fraud," and like the other three, there are notable partisan splits on this question: 67.2

<sup>12</sup>The survey was administered by the School of Public and International Affairs Research Center at the University of Georgia. Our preelection poll surveyed respondents at a time when early voting was underway and therefore the survey instrument was designed (via a branching question) to capture the opinions of those who either stated they already voted or that they intended to vote. The entire survey instrument will be made available upon request. Likely voters were respondents who had voted in the 2018 May primaries and/or the 2016 general election, who indicated they were currently registered to vote in Georgia, and were *definitely* or *probably* going to vote in the 2018 November election.

<sup>13</sup>The AAPOR response rates were 4.43 percent (RR1) and 4.87 percent (RR3).

percent of Republicans viewed voter fraud as *very likely* or *likely*, whereas 66.7 percent of Democrats considered this malfeasance *not very likely* or *not likely at all*.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial election, the first two aforementioned questions, which we labeled "Votes Not Counted" and "Tampering," are arguably much more specific to this contest because of Kemp's capacity as Secretary of State and suspicions surrounding the possibility of him being less than an honest broker of the election apparatus while seeking the governorship. The question of eligibility (Not Eligible) is perhaps best contextualized in both national and state perspectives because, nationally, Democrats advocate for greater voter access, while in Georgia, Secretary Kemp invested considerable resources in removing inactive voters from the registration rolls. As discussed, voter fraud (No Fraud) is nationally viewed by Republicans as more than a hypothetical, whereas Democrats perceive it as a rarity (in other words, *very likely* no fraud). But within the context of Georgia politics, because of the profiles of the major party nominees, a Republican Secretary of State and a Democratic political activist (leading voter registration drives), perceptions of voter fraud may be different for other voter characteristics, principally race and gender. We expect divisions over voting-related concerns to be significant with respect to party, race, and gender, since these are cardinal characteristics shaping southern politics and influencing public opinion.

In the empirical analysis that follows, our objective is first to assess opinions toward these voting-related issues outlined above. We employ ordered probit regression since each of our four dependent variables ("Votes Not Counted," "Tampering," "Not Eligible," and "No Fraud") are coded 0, 1, 2, 3. Second, we are then interested in seeing what effect, if any, these perceptions of voting-related concerns had on gubernatorial vote choice. In other words, in our assessment of vote choice we include what were the dependent variables in the first analysis as explanatory variables. Thus, we anticipate that opinions toward possible voting-related improprieties directly influenced one's vote for governor. Finally, in estimating both opinions toward voting-related improprieties and vote choice, we have included one additional model based on an additive index we labeled "VRC Index." VRC stands for voting-related concerns. This index sums the responses to the four voting-related questions and therefore its low value equals 0 (responses coded 0 on all four questions) and its high value equals 12 (responses coded 3 on all four questions). Hence, scaling the VRC Index in this fashion allows us to run an OLS regression when this measure serves as the dependent variable for assessing opinions toward voting-related improprieties. With regard to evaluating vote choice (1 = vote for Stacey Abrams, 0 = vote for Brian Kemp or Libertarian candidate Ted Metz), the VRC Index becomes the primary independent variable of interest (see the Supplementary Appendix for detailed information on variable coding).

## Results

All the models we present in this section include covariates for *party affiliation* (Democrat, independent, and Republican as omitted category), *race* (black, other, and white as omitted category), *gender* (female, with male as omitted category), *age groups* (18–29, 30–44,

<sup>14</sup>For "Votes Not Counted," 72.9 percent of Democrats considered this *very likely* or *likely*, while 76.9 percent of Republicans found this *not very likely* or *not likely at all*. For "Not Eligible," 79.0 percent of Democrats considered this *very likely* or *likely* while 73.5 percent of Republicans found this *not very likely* or *not likely at all*. For "Tampering," 68.9 percent of Democrats considered this *very likely* or *likely*, while 72.2 percent of Republicans found this *not very likely* or *not likely at all*.

45–64, with 65 and above as omitted category), *ideology* (six-point scale: strong liberal to strong conservative), *education* (five-point scale: high school or less to graduate study), *income* (six-point scale: from under \$25,000 to over \$150,000), and *density* (number of inhabitants per square mile of land area in each Georgia county). The Supplementary Appendix provides the detailed coding for each of these variables.

Table 1 displays the results for the five models examining perceptions of voting-related improprieties in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election. We will emphasize the effects of party, race, and gender in these models. As expected, in every instance, compared to Republicans, Democrats are significantly more likely to perceive a higher incidence of: votes not being counted, tampering, voters being deemed ineligible; and a lower likelihood of voter fraud. Not surprisingly, in the last model with the VRC Index as the dependent variable, compared to Republicans, Democrats register much higher on this index of voting-related concerns.

Similar to the partisan disparity in opinions regarding voting-related improprieties (Democrats vs. Republicans), the differences with respect to race and gender comport with our expectations in every model except for the one gauging perceptions of fraud. In this case, contrary to the partisan dynamic, whites and males expect there to be a lower incidence of voter fraud vis-à-vis blacks and females. This runs counter to the national partisan framing of the fraud narrative and we suspect the reason for this is directly attributable to Kemp serving as the Georgia Secretary of State, which prompted African Americans and women to view fraud as more likely because the Republican gubernatorial candidate was not to be trusted.

To get a better sense of the relative differences toward opinions on voting-related concerns, in Table 2 we show predicted probabilities according to *party affiliation* (Democrat vs. Republican), *race* (black vs. white), and *gender* (female vs. male). The probability differences among Democrats and Republicans are greatest with respect to the issues of voter eligibility and fraud, and thus align with the nationally-driven rhetoric regarding these concerns. Interestingly, in the case of race, the differences are largest for the two issues that are most immediate to the context of Georgia's gubernatorial election: the possibility of not all votes being counted and the possibility of tampering. For both issues, African Americans are notably more likely to think these voting-related improprieties may have occurred. Finally, the gender gap on voting-related concerns is markedly smaller than that for partisan and racial differences, not once nearing double digits.

Turning to vote choice in the gubernatorial election, we present two models in Table 3. The first model includes what were the dependent variables in the previous analysis as the key explanatory variables for estimating vote choice. In the second model, the VRC Index is the primary variable of interest for evaluating vote choice. Starting with the first model, after controlling for a host of variables related to voter preferences, we find that opinions toward tampering, voter eligibility, and fraud all significantly and positively influence the likelihood of voting for the Democrat Stacey Abrams. Stated somewhat differently, respondents who thought it more likely that tampering occurred and voters were denied access to the franchise, while also thinking fraud was not a very likely occurrence, were much more likely to support Abrams.

In the second model, the VRC Index registers a highly significant and positive effect on the likelihood of voting Democratic in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election. That is, respondents registering higher on this index of voting-related concerns were much more likely to vote for Abrams. We make this relationship more decipherable in Figure 6, which plots the probability of casting a vote for Abrams on the *y*-axis according to the respondent's placement on the VRC Index, which is plotted from 0 to 12 on the *x*-axis. As displayed,

TABLE 1  
Factors Influencing Voting-Related Concerns in the 2018 Gubernatorial Election

	Is it Very Likely that Each of the Following Will Happen During This Year's Midterm Election in Georgia?				VRC Index
	Votes Not Counted	Tampering	Not Eligible	No Fraud	
Democrat	0.579 (0.151)***	0.437 (0.142)**	0.835 (0.132)***	0.789 (0.119)***	2.112 (0.295)***
Independent	0.200 (0.162)	0.006 (0.108)	0.433 (0.157)**	0.454 (0.130)***	0.879 (0.286)**
Black	0.635 (0.116)***	0.598 (0.116)***	0.399 (0.101)***	-0.290 (0.105)**	0.977 (0.225)***
Other	0.434 (0.186)*	0.538 (0.200)**	0.318 (0.160)*	-0.302 (0.175)	0.849 (0.333)*
Female	0.167 (0.070)*	0.255 (0.072)***	0.199 (0.068)**	-0.197 (0.081)*	0.304 (0.116)*
Ages 18-29	-0.602 (0.221)**	0.059 (0.157)	-0.024 (0.167)	-0.023 (0.144)	-0.487 (0.272)
Ages 30-44	-0.075 (0.131)	-0.034 (0.099)	-0.062 (0.131)	-0.100 (0.103)	-0.810 (0.215)
Ages 45-64	-0.175 (0.065)**	0.008 (0.078)	-0.108 (0.084)	0.108 (0.076)	-0.128 (0.105)
Ideology	-0.094 (0.038)*	-0.092 (0.036)*	-0.094 (0.037)*	-0.094 (0.052)	-0.300 (0.069)***
Education	-0.055 (0.024)*	-0.040 (0.028)	-0.059 (0.025)*	0.055 (0.030)	-0.089 (0.048)
Income	-0.031 (0.019)*	-0.006 (0.015)	-0.022 (0.015)	0.007 (0.019)	-0.022 (0.027)
Density	$3.68 \times 10^{-6}$ (0.00003)	-0.0001 (0.0000)**	-0.00004 (0.00004)	0.00007 (0.00004)	$-2.76 \times 10^{-6}$ (0.00006)
Constant					6.010 (0.539)***
Pseudo $R^2/R^2$	0.109	0.085	0.117	0.067	0.437
N	957	961	951	973	880

NOTES: First four models are ordered probit regressions and the last model is an OLS regression. In the probit models the dependent variable is coded: 0 = *not likely at all*, 1 = *not very likely*, 2 = *likely*, 3 = *very likely* (reverse-coded for "No Fraud" model). VRC = voting-related concerns, and the dependent variable is an additive index coded from 0 to 12. Robust SEs are in parentheses and clustered on the county. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

TABLE 2

Predicted Probabilities of a Voting-Related Concern Being Very Likely According to Party, Race, and Gender

Very Likely . . .	Votes Not Counted	Tampering	Not Eligible	No Fraud
Democrat	0.226	0.206	0.263	0.259
Republican	0.099	0.110	0.076	0.078
difference	0.127	0.096	0.187	0.181
Black	0.265	0.251	0.226	0.119
White	0.114	0.109	0.136	0.178
difference	0.151	0.142	0.090	−0.059
Female	0.177	0.177	0.185	0.137
Male	0.143	0.124	0.144	0.179
difference	0.034	0.053	0.041	−0.042

NOTES: Predicted probabilities generated using the observed values approach (see Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013). Recall that in the case of “No Fraud,” the predicted probabilities are actually registering the likelihood that a respondent chooses the option *not likely at all* with respect to the incidence of voter fraud occurring.

TABLE 3

Influence of Voting-Related Concerns on 2018 Gubernatorial Vote Choice

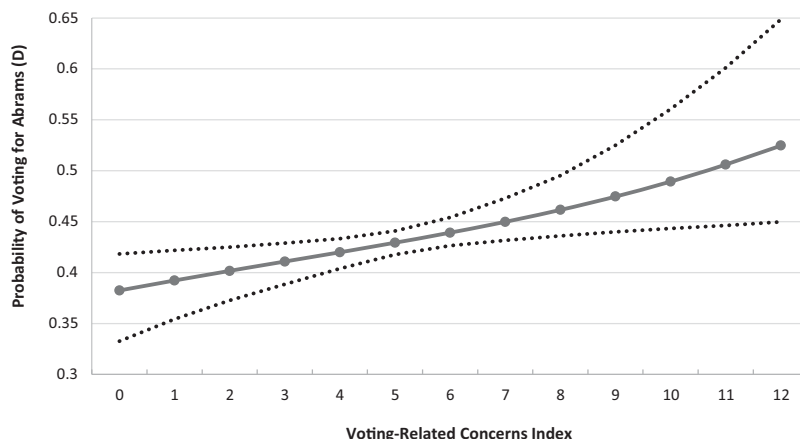
	1 = Abrams, 0 = Kemp/Metz	1 = Abrams, 0 = Kemp/Metz
Votes not counted	−0.070 (0.156)	—
Tampering	0.342 (0.115)**	—
Not eligible	0.333 (0.153)*	—
No fraud	0.469 (0.110)***	—
Voting-related concerns index	—	0.169 (0.061)**
Democrat	3.622 (0.397)***	3.630 (0.389)***
Independent	1.475 (0.370)***	1.517 (0.357)***
Black	1.919 (0.376)***	1.848 (0.335)***
Other	0.981 (0.438)*	0.908 (0.401)*
Female	0.087 (0.258)	0.046 (0.249)
Ages 18–29	0.361 (0.325)	0.568 (0.360)
Ages 30–44	−0.568 (0.314)	−0.479 (0.347)
Ages 45–64	−0.210 (0.255)	−0.128 (0.258)
Ideology	−0.523 (0.110)***	−0.540 (0.101)***
Education	0.155 (0.077)*	0.167 (0.081)*
Income	0.051 (0.068)	0.071 (0.066)
Density	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Constant	−2.240 (0.743)**	−1.688 (0.712)*
Pseudo $R^2$	0.889	0.885
N	852	852

NOTES: Models are probit regressions and the dependent variable is coded 1 = vote for Abrams and 0 = vote for Kemp/Metz. The voting-related concerns index is an additive index coded from 0 to 12. Robust SEs are in parentheses and clustered on the county. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

after controlling for all of the other covariates in the second model in Table 3 (based on the observed values approach, see Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013), the probability of voting for Abrams based on the VRC Index ranges from a low of 0.38 (at 0 on the index) to a high of 0.52 (at 12 on the index).

FIGURE 6

### Voting-Related Concerns and the 2018 Georgia Gubernatorial Vote



NOTES: Predicted probabilities were derived from the second model in Table 3 and computed using the observed values approach (Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013). Dotted lines are the upper and lower bounds at the 95 percent confidence level.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have surveyed the political history of a rapidly changing southern state whose latest transformations auger a tilt back in favor of the Democratic Party (Bullock, 2017). We contend that current demographic trends and a fairly recent (since 2008) but sustainable increase in minority mobilization has prompted Georgia's Republican majority to increasingly turn to election administration as one possible means to counter Democratic advances. Georgia's shift toward the Democratic Party and the GOP's response to this development produced a historic gubernatorial election in 2018, which heavily centered on allegations of voting-related improprieties. Importantly, this controversy was framed by the national parties' competing narratives of "protecting ballot integrity" (Republicans' position) versus "increasing voter access" (Democrats' stance).<sup>15</sup> Framed in this way, our empirical analysis shows that (likely) voters polarized in their perceptions of voting-related improprieties in alignment with their partisan proclivities and their views on this issue directly influenced their preferences for governor. In the immediate context of the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election, the relationship between the issue of voting-related improprieties and vote choice was enhanced by the fact that the Republican candidate refused to recuse himself as the sitting Secretary of State (with authority over Georgia's election administration), while his Democratic opponent had risen to prominence through her success in mobilizing minority registration.

<sup>15</sup>A question on the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election exit poll ( $N = 2,943$ ) nicely captures the partisan split over potential voting-related improprieties. It asks, "Which concerns you more? Some people will": (1) *Cast illegitimate votes* (42 percent chose this option) or (2) *Be prevented from voting* (51 percent chose this option). The vote went 82 to 16 percent in favor of the Republican Kemp for respondents choosing the first option, a proxy for ensuring ballot integrity. In contrast, the vote cleaved 76 to 22 for the Democrat Abrams among respondents selecting the second option, which relates to voter access. All of the results of the exit poll can be found at: <https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/exit-polls/georgia>.



The nation's first African-American president galvanized Georgia's black electorate in 2008 (McKee, Hood, and Hill, 2012), and since then the Peach State has remained electorally competitive even though Obama and his respective GOP opponents treated Georgia as a "blackout"/"base" Republican state (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2007; Shaw, 2006) in 2008 and 2012 (also the case in 2016). A decade hence, midterm turnout reached modern highs and a charismatic Democratic African-American woman came within a whisker of taking the 2018 gubernatorial contest to a runoff. In the process, Abrams's candidacy captured the attention of Oprah Winfrey and yes, Barack Obama, who campaigned on her behalf because it appeared that a Democratic victory was finally possible. Stacey Abrams may have come up short, but Democratic gains materialized down Georgia's ballot in U.S. House and state legislative elections. Relatively recent demographically-driven political developments have increasingly distanced Georgia from its more Republican Deep South neighbors. As a consequence, one can anticipate that for the first time since 1996, the Peach State will be a vigorously contested prize in the 2020 presidential election and it will also likely feature a contentious and competitive U.S. Senate race. Beyond 2020, ongoing compositional changes to Georgia's electorate are expected to be countered with increasing concern on the part of the extant GOP majority because this development is clearly providing a path for a Democratic comeback.

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## **Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.