

STATES IN PLAY: PART 1

In Georgia, Politics Moves Past Just Black and White

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG SEPT. 18, 2014

LAWRENCEVILLE, Ga. — A gated community of regal brick homes with impeccable landscaping and \$450,000 price tags might seem an unlikely place for a voter-registration drive. The neighborhood, with its swimming pool and tennis courts, evokes stability and a sense of having arrived.

But when Maria Palacios, 24, a part-time canvasser for a Latino rights advocacy group, knocked on doors on a sweltering summer afternoon, she was greeted by those who had never cast ballots, immigrants like herself — newcomers from Korea, Vietnam, India, Pakistan and Mexico, all faces of a changing Georgia.

“There are a lot of people here from Mexico like us,” said Hector Velazco, an information technology consultant, telling Ms. Palacios that he and his wife are awaiting naturalization so they can vote. “It’s not only workers to mow the grass.”

This is the new Georgia, a state whose transformed economy has spawned a population boom and demographic shifts that are slowly altering its politics. With African-Americans coming in large numbers from other states, and emerging immigrant communities like this one in Lawrenceville, Georgia is less white and less rural than it was a decade ago.

Yet for all the changes and what they may portend, Georgia’s politics — including a closely watched Senate race between the Democrat Michelle Nunn and the Republican David Perdue — are today playing out largely on the familiar terrain of black and white.

Black Democrats have long held power in Atlanta, but in the state legislature

Republicans — who are nearly all white — outnumber Democrats two to one. Political debates center on issues like curbing illegal immigration and expanding gun rights. And many of Georgia's new immigrants do not or cannot vote. If Democrats are to win statewide in November, they must increase turnout among minorities, especially blacks, and bring back moderate whites, especially women.

“Georgia is a conservative state — it was a conservative state when the Democrats were in control,” said Senator Johnny Isakson, a Republican who has been in public office nearly 40 years. “That Georgia is all of a sudden changing to be a different state, I think, is a myth. Georgia is continuing to be what it has been, which is a growth state with a diverse economy and a diverse population.”

Democrats, though, see a different future. “Georgia is next in line as a battleground state,” said Jason Carter, the Democratic nominee for governor (and a grandson of former President Jimmy Carter). “People may disagree about whether it's red or blue. But everybody agrees that it's changing.”

In 1980, Georgia was what Mathew Hauer, a demographer at the University of Georgia, calls “a black-and-white state.” Whites were 72 percent of the population and blacks, 26 percent. Now, Georgia's population has more than doubled, to nearly 10 million. By last year, the state was 55 percent white, 31 percent black, 9 percent Latino (up from 1 percent in 1980) and nearly 4 percent Asian.

The growth has shifted the population north, to the counties that ring Atlanta, like Gwinnett, a pocket of multiculturalism, where Lawrenceville is the county seat. In nearby Duluth, business leaders embrace diversity as “an asset” in attracting international companies, said Joe Allen, who runs a public-private partnership to promote economic development.

“Our motto is: ‘A world of places in one place,’” Mr. Allen said.

On Gwinnett's main thoroughfare, Pleasant Hill Road, a giant Asian market, Assi Plaza, occupies a former Walmart; on Saturday mornings, it bustles with shoppers, picking over lychee, Korean melon and 10 varieties of shrimp, as tilapia swim in a tank. Honor boxes carry four different Korean-language newspapers.

Down the road at the Santa Fe Mall, a former outlet center converted into a Hispanic market, retailers sell bright-colored cowboy boots and frilly quinceañera gowns. A Spanish-language radio station broadcasts from here; its Mexican-born general manager, Franco Vera, moved to Georgia from Chicago.

“I love Georgia,” Mr. Vera declared. Asked why, he searched for words to convey its energy and growth. “It's the boom!”

That boom has its roots in what Rajeev Dhawan, an economic forecaster at

Georgia State University, calls “the three Ts” — transportation, tourism and telecommunications — industries that he said were “turbocharged” in the 1990s and still drive the state’s economy, somewhat more slowly, today.

Those industries were hit hard by the dot-com bust and the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and home construction — which kept Georgia humming through the early 2000s — was crippled by the recession. Unemployment is now 7.8 percent, the second highest in the nation, behind Mississippi. Yet after a slow recovery, economists say, Georgia is bouncing back; the state added 83,400 jobs last year.

Georgia’s universities — including its historically black colleges — have helped draw newcomers from out of state, nourishing Atlanta’s thriving black professional and political class. “We call it the black Mecca,” said Rodney Sampson, a founder of Opportunity Hub, where minority- and women-owned companies share office space.

As Democrats and their allies work furiously to register new voters, Republicans, aware that their future hinges on broadening their base beyond whites, have hired a minority engagement director, Leo Smith. He recently helped students at historically black Morehouse College restart a Republican club. He views his work as “a long-term investment.”

Traveling the state in this midterm election season, it is possible to see the pull and tug over which way Georgia will go. Its population may be shifting faster than its politics.

“Demographically, Georgia is changing,” said State Representative B.J. Pak, a Korean-born lawyer, Gwinnett County Republican and the sole Asian-American in the legislature. “Politically, it’s changing. But not as fast as people think.”

A Center of Change

Dot Padgett, 87, and a lifelong Democrat, stepped onto the front porch of her century-old home in the Atlanta suburb of Douglasville, carrying sweet tea in tall glasses and sugar wafers on a silver tray. She sat down in a white painted rocker to talk about how her native Georgia has changed.

In 1976, Mrs. Padgett helped lead the volunteer “Peanut Brigade” that ushered Jimmy Carter to the White House, then worked in Washington as his deputy chief of protocol. That was when Georgia was solidly Democratic, before whites and conservatives, alarmed at what they saw as the party’s liberal tilt on cultural issues, fled to the Republican Party.

Mrs. Padgett never left. She calls herself “a Democrat who will vote Republican,”

in the mold of Zell Miller, the former governor and senator who backed George W. Bush for president. “He really told the truth as much as anybody,” she said, “about how the Democratic Party had drifted from what it was.”

So when Mr. Perdue and Mr. Isakson came to a little plaza in downtown Douglasville, Mrs. Padgett dashed over to give the senator a quick peck on the cheek, but slipped out before Mr. Perdue arrived. She backs Ms. Nunn — partly out of loyalty to Ms. Nunn’s father, Sam, a centrist Democrat who served in the Senate from 1973 to 1997. “I think there’s a little conservative streak in her also,” Mrs. Padgett said.

As to whether she voted for President Obama, she leaned back in her rocker, arched her eyebrows and reiterated her own words.

“I am a Democrat,” she said coyly, “who will vote Republican.”

Douglasville and its surrounding county, Douglas, are part of the housing boom that has remade the metro region. Two decades ago, downtown Douglasville was surrounded by farmland.

Today commercial parks dot the landscape, home to companies like Subaru and Google, which built a data center here in 2003, adding 350 jobs. A firm tied to Tyler Perry, the black actor and filmmaker whose studios are in Atlanta, has bought 1,300 acres of land. New housing developments, well-tended communities with names like Tributary and Palmer Falls, are filled with young black professionals.

Douglas County’s black population rose more than 200 percent from 2000 to 2010; its Democratic Party is experiencing a revival. More than a decade ago, white Republicans held all five seats on the County Commission; today there are three white Republicans and two black Democrats. Mitt Romney won Georgia in 2012 with 53 percent of the vote, but Mr. Obama won Douglas County.

Among the newcomers is Dalia Racine, an African-American prosecutor running for county district attorney. She was born in New York, attended high school in Virginia, college in Florida, law school in Atlanta. She and her husband moved to Douglasville, in search of a bigger home in which to raise a family, when they discovered they were having twins.

A friend recently hosted a house party for her; a diverse, though mostly African-American, crowd attended, nibbling on wrap sandwiches, sweets and fruit.

“Highly qualified, professional candidates like myself — we’re able to throw our hats in the ring right now,” Ms. Racine said. “The voters are aware of it. The media’s aware of it. Republicans are aware of it.”

Black and White

A marble obelisk with a soldier on top — a monument to Confederate veterans — greets visitors to Waycross, on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp. If Atlanta, four hours north, is the new Georgia, Waycross is steeped in the old.

On a recent morning, a small crowd of several dozen Democratic enthusiasts, mostly blacks, gathered in an old railway depot, where their Senate nominee, Ms. Nunn, was to speak. Among the first in line was Johnny Lee Roper, 77, who serves on the City Council in nearby Douglas, dressed in olive green suit, suspenders and black straw hat.

“All us people of color believe that Michelle is going to be our liberator,” he said.

Ms. Nunn’s appearance in this city of roughly 14,000 people was a reminder that she needs every black vote she can get — and of how race still governs politics in much of Georgia. The handful of whites in the crowd included a woman who gave her name only as Glenda; she did not want her Republican neighbors to learn she was there.

She is worried about the economy, she said; she gave up her job as a medical office manager when her mother was ill and gets by cleaning houses. A campaign worker asked her to take a lawn sign; she resisted. As a Democrat, she said, “I’m shunned enough.”

The newspaper in Waycross, The Journal-Herald, has been in the family of Jack Williams III, its current editor, for a century, ever since his grandfather bought it. The first Jack Williams was a staunch Democrat and member of the Georgia legislature; his grandson is a conservative Republican.

Seated at his paper-strewn wooden desk, Mr. Williams echoed Republicans across Georgia. He is worried about the rising federal debt, angry over the Obama administration’s failure to secure “our porous border to the south” and feels that a vote for Ms. Nunn would be a vote to keep Harry Reid, the Senate Democratic leader, in power.

“I think the Democrats are taking us the wrong way,” Mr. Williams said, “and most of my readers — with the exception of my black readers — feel that way.”

Broadening Perspectives

On the wall of her cluttered office across the street from the state capitol, Stacey Y. Abrams, the Democratic leader of the Georgia House, keeps two giant maps of Georgia’s legislative districts. In each district held by a Democrat, she has posted a tiny black-and-white photo of the lawmaker.

There are 180 districts, but just 60 photos, most clustered around Atlanta. All

told, not counting a black Republican recently defeated in a primary, there are 51 minorities in the Georgia House; 49 are Democrats.

“Our caucus is 80 percent African-American; the Republican caucus is 98 percent white,” she said. “That’s not a sustainable model.”

A Yale Law School graduate and part-time romance novelist, Ms. Abrams — the first African-American party leader in the Georgia House and the first female leader in either chamber — wants to change that. The New Georgia Project, which she founded, is working to register minorities, 18-to-29-year-olds and unmarried women, groups she estimates make up 62 percent of the state’s voting-age population.

The effort, though officially nonpartisan, is controversial; Georgia’s secretary of state, Brian Kemp, a Republican, is investigating the project, alleging fraud; project leaders accuse Mr. Kemp of voter suppression and a “witch hunt.”

Conservatives dominate policy making in Georgia. Same-sex marriage is banned and the state was among the first to require voters to present photo identification. Georgia has one of the nation’s strictest immigration laws, modeled after Arizona’s bill allowing law enforcement to ask about immigration status. This year, Georgia greatly expanded gun rights.

Yet there are hints that the conversation in Georgia is taking on a different tone.

Immigration rights advocates have taken heart in the words of State Senator Tommie Williams, a tree farmer and former member of the Republican leadership, who favors passing a state version of the Dream Act to help young people brought here illegally by their parents gain a path to legal residency.

And Representative Pak, the Korean-American Republican — who voted with his party on the Arizona-style immigration bill — helped block a measure to require English-only drivers’ tests. He says Republicans can succeed in embracing immigrants, and prides himself on broadening their perspective.

“We were at a caucus meeting, and nobody was raising this issue about how this will impact first-generation immigrants,” Mr. Pak said of the English-only bill. “And afterward, a lot of the caucus members were like, ‘You know what? I didn’t even really think about that I’m glad you said that.’ And I was able to put an amendment on that killed the bill.”

Immigration and the Vote

Latinos in Georgia, as in much of the country, are the fastest growing minority.

“The Latino vote continues to grow,” Jerry Gonzalez declared, over lunch at a

Caribbean restaurant in Lawrenceville. “It’s grown from 10,000 in 2003 to well over 220,000 right now — that’s estimated. There’s over 80,000 Latinos that are eligible, not yet registered.” An estimated 600,000 eligible blacks are also unregistered. “So what we are doing today,” he said, “is really important.”

Mr. Gonzalez, a founder of the nonpartisan Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, was giving a pep talk to Ms. Palacios and about a dozen other mostly young canvassers. His group is running voter registration drives each weekend, and is heavily focused on Gwinnett.

Its aim, beyond bolstering Latino voting power, is to build support for a bipartisan immigration overhaul, stalled in Washington. For Ms. Palacios, that is personal.

Her parents, as California migrant workers, brought her to the United States illegally when she was 2 months old; the family later settled in Georgia, where many Latinos work in poultry processing plants. When she graduated from high school, Ms. Palacios applied to college; lacking papers, she was required to pay out-of-state tuition. So she followed her parents’ path, weighing chicken tenders on an assembly line.

Eventually she returned to Mexico, paid the United States government a fine and came back to Georgia legally. Today she is a senior and debate champion at the University of North Georgia who dreams of becoming an immigration rights lawyer and seeking public office. “Had I been born here,” she said, “I’d be looking to run for president.”

But Ms. Palacios is not yet a citizen. And so, like many new Georgians, there is one thing she still cannot do: vote.

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