

Date: August 12, 2020
To: Professor James Quirk, GOVT-322
From: Pierson Brown
Re: The South is Not a Lost Cause: How Georgia's Changing Political Opinions Defy Southern Stereotypes.

Does Georgia reflect the US South's willingness to rectify its divisive past? Since the end of the American Civil War in 1865, states that seceded the Union to join the Confederacy have latched onto their failed war efforts. Georgia and other states across the South began building monuments to honor Confederate generals and perpetuating the Lost Cause, arguing that the war was over states' rights rather than slavery, as soon as 1866. Organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy played a major role in spreading this message and are still active today.

As calls to remove memorials, flags, and other Confederate relics rise, there is a visible shift in Georgia politics. Georgians, especially those in the Black community, are fighting for equity across the state. Suburban counties surrounding Atlanta, the state capital, are flipping seats in favor of Democrats. These positions have been held by Republicans since the election of President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s. Despite the common stereotypes of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other blatant discrimination, the South is changing its stance. By resisting falling prey to generalizations, Georgia is setting the stage for the South to shift away from its conservative past.

While Georgia is beginning to move into a new political phase, it does not mean that conservative viewpoints have gone away. Consistent pushback has been seen from voters across the state, most notably with the 2018 Gubernatorial election between Republican Brian Kemp and Democrat Stacey Abrams. Governor Kemp managed to secure the position with only about 55,000 votes, keeping Abrams from becoming the first Black woman governor in the US. Many other local, state, and federal elections in Georgia are being decided by smaller margins, revealing a deep divide. Resistance to change is nothing new for a state that has honored failed war efforts for nearly two centuries. Georgia's role in the 2020 presidential election will provide more perspective into the state's changing views.

The South is not a monolith. Just as each US region has diverse views, it is important to recognize the danger of overgeneralization. Georgia is just one example of how the South is more than a conservative safe haven and changes can take place. Whether or not 2020 will be the year that change is solidified will be determined for the state soon.

The South is America's scapegoat. Most US citizens, when met with criticisms of their country, are quick to blame every systemic issue on Southerners. They describe the culture as "redneck," originally a derogatory term for poor Southern farmers from around the 1850s, but since the 1900s it has been reclaimed as a point of Southern pride.¹ This is a way to associate the South with racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ingrained problems that have plagued the country since its beginnings. In reality, these issues are imbued into all American life, not just in a few states. However, these ingrained flaws appear more blatant across the South than in other regions. Republican-majority states are often given these stereotypes by those with a Democratic majority, allowing other regions to ignore their passive perpetuations of systemic issues. The question then becomes, what happens when a state begins to change its ways?

Stereotypes of the South are a consistent part of the United States' cultural landscape. Like any generalization, they can often become harmful and even cause people to embody them. One study published in *Self and Identity*, reveals that threat-based stereotypes can reinforce negative outcomes. The article shows that Southerners who are met with negative stereotypes about low intelligence, a common bias against the region, perform worse on tests than those that do not hear them or are not from the area.² Other biases include that the slow Southern drawl contributes to a lazy demeanor both in work and education. Adam Edgerton put it best in his Op-Ed, saying, "In the well-educated Northern imagination, the rural South is a vast, forbidding wasteland of poverty, prejudice, and despair."³ Despite the many great minds that come from the South, generalizations of racism, low intelligence, and "backwards" thinking can harm both Southerners and other regions as they discount the region's ability to perform, succeed, and change. It is important to recognize that, despite stereotypes, the South is not a monolith of ideas and opinions.

Looking to Georgia as a case study, it is evident that states do have the potential to change. Currently, Georgia is defying the Southern stereotypes and shifting more and more towards a Democratic majority, making it a battleground state for the 2020 presidential election. When the stereotype begins to fail, what happens to the past? Many Southern states, Georgia included, have strong ties to Confederate history; they argue for the Lost Cause, which says that

¹ Young, Robin. "'Rednecks For Black Lives' Urges Southerners To Fight For Racial Justice," WBUR, July 29, 2020.

https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/07/27/rednecks-for-black-lives?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_term=nprnews&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr

² Jason K. Clark, Cassie A. Eno, and Rosanna E. Guadagno, "Southern Discomfort: The Effects of Stereotype Threat on the Intellectual Performance of US Southerners." *Self and Identity* 10, no.2 (May 2010): 248-262.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15298861003771080>

³ Edgerton, Adam K. "What's Wrong With Being From The South? Just Ask an Academic in the North." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 25, 2018.

<https://www-chronicle-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/article/whats-wrong-with-being-from-the-south-just-ask-an-academic-in-the-north/>

the Civil War was fought over states' rights instead of slavery. Many still hold this belief, but current events have led to efforts to recognize the connections to slavery and racism and rectify the South's history. As Georgia begins to shift its political stance, it is also important to note how thoughts of the past change along with it.

The mythical and infamous Lost Cause of the Confederacy began soon after the end of the Civil War in 1865. As Jennifer Gross, assistant history professor at Jacksonville State University, discussed in *Women on Their Own*, its development was not from the efforts of Confederate veterans, but of the soldiers' widows. United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and other women-led memorial organizations formed as early as 1866 with the goal to honor their deceased husbands and maintain their memory. Their main priorities included fundraising for proper burials of soldiers and building monuments to honor soldiers and generals.⁴ These efforts took place across the South, even leading to the creation of Confederate Memorial Day. In Georgia, women pushing for this holiday argued that, "not only would this recognition [...] serve to preserve the 'lost cause' of their men's economic and political position [...] it would also serve to console the widow and orphan, who could look to few other comforts in this world."⁵ As the women worked to preserve the memory of the Confederacy, they became revered as "true Southern women," leading to the stereotype of a proper Southern lady still seen today.⁶

The UDC remains strong throughout the South, even as other organizations have faded away. In an Op-Ed for the *Washington Post*, Maryville College Professor Daniel L. Fountain recalls being inducted into the Children of the Confederacy, an auxiliary of the UDC, before being baptized in his family church.⁷ By existing for over a century, the organization was able to coat the history of the South in a golden light, filling the minds of Southerners with ideas of honor and valour rather than abuse and slavery. Fountain recalls that, in his meetings, "Slavery, if discussed at all, was vehemently denied as having played any role in secession. Race was also avoided." Instead, these organizations focus on using coded language and indoctrination to subtly imbue the Lost Cause into the lives of Southerners.⁸ Their impact remains powerful, but as more states move to remove these statues and the Confederate flag, their relevance is slowly crumbling.

⁴ Gross, Jennifer L. "The United Daughters of the Confederacy, Confederate Widows, and the Lost Cause." In *Women on their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, ed. Rudolph Bell and Virginia Yans (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2008), 180-200.

⁵ Gross, "The United Daughters" in *Women on Their Own*, 180-200.

⁶ Gross, "The United Daughters" in *Women on Their Own*, 180-200.

⁷ Fountain, Daniel L. "Why Young Southerners still get Indoctrinated in the Lost Cause." *The Washington Post*, May 16,

2019. <https://www-washingtonpost-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/outlook/2019/05/16/why-young-southerners-still-get-indoctrinated-lost-cause/ok/2019/05/16/why-young-southerners-still-get-indoctrinated-lost-cause/>

⁸ Fountain, "Why."

In recent history, Georgia has continued to preserve the memory of the Confederacy. It was not until 1956 that the Confederate Battle Flag became incorporated into the Georgia state flag, just two years after the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* that required public schools to racially integrate.⁹ The Georgia Senate's official history of this adoption mentions connections to the Dixiecrats – Southern Democrats who left the party when it began to support the Civil Rights Movement – and the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan. Right after that recognition, they quickly attempted to erase the relationship, saying, “it is important to remember that in spite of these other uses, there remained displays of the battle flag as homage to the Confederate dead, with no racist overtones.”¹⁰ The current state flag was finally adopted in 2003 to remove the battle flag, but still has ties to the Confederacy as it is based on the original national flag of the Confederacy.¹¹ By refusing to fully remove references to the Civil War from Georgia's state flag, the state's leadership has shown it is not willing to acknowledge the racial effects of the war. Instead, they continue to hold onto pride from the failed war effort centuries later.

Despite the state leaders' decisions, Georgia residents are pushing consistently for change. Some efforts are met with action, but others are met with resistance that now becomes news across the country. The calls to remove Confederate statues and memorials are growing louder across the state, led by the Black community. The monument that is fueling the greatest argument is Stone Mountain, a famous granite mountainside carved similarly to Mount Rushmore, featuring General Robert E. Lee, General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, and President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis. Often called the “Granddaddy of Confederate Monuments,” Stone Mountain has been the location for many protests throughout the Black Lives Matter movement, with the NAACP of Georgia marching and protesting annually for the past five years and a black militia group, Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC) drawing national attention during a July 4th protest this year.¹² While other, smaller monuments may be an easier fight, Stone Mountain is gaining attention on a national scale as more of Georgia's citizens demand racial equality. In response to protests, Georgia's House of Representatives has begun pushing for House Bill 1212, which would “ban Confederate monuments from public property except in Civil War battlefields and museums.”¹³ This would remove a statue of John Brown Gordon, known as a Confederate war commander and Ku Klux Klan leader, currently outside the Georgia State Capitol building. Introduced in June, this bill has been read twice, but

⁹ Azarian, Alexander J. and Eden Fesshazion. “The State Flag of Georgia: The 1956 Change In Its Historical Context.” The Georgia State Senate Research Office, Atlanta, August 2000.

¹⁰ Azarian, Alexander J. and Eden Fesshazion. “The State Flag of Georgia: The 1956 Change In Its Historical Context.” The Georgia State Senate Research Office, Atlanta, August 2000.

¹¹ Jackson, Ed and Reid McCallister. “Current Georgia State Flag.” GeorgiaInfo: An Online Georgia Almanac. Last modified October 2018. <https://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/flags/category/georgia-state/current-georgia-state-flag>

¹² Lawson, “Georgia Activists.”

¹³ Pozen, “Georgia Bill.”

no other action has occurred since.¹⁴ The debate continues as to whether or not these monuments are a necessary part of history or celebrating Georgia's painful, racially divided past.

While the public fight over Confederate history continues to grow, the most notable shift in Georgia is at the polls. The 2018 Gubernatorial election between Democrat Stacey Abrams and Republican Brian Kemp led to nationwide attention as Governor Kemp's win was secured with just about 55,000 votes.¹⁵ Immediately after Kemp's victory, Abrams and others made statements declaring that Kemp used voter suppression techniques to win the election. One main claim was that Kemp kept his role as secretary of state until after the election had been held.¹⁶ This gave him full control of polling stations, absentee ballots, and other voting methods while running in the election. Beforehand, Kemp purged voting rolls and increased rules for registering, which Democrats said allowed him to rig the election in his favor, calling him "the secretary of suppression".¹⁷ Although conflict of interest was evident, the Georgia governor was able to keep his position, celebrating his campaign that ran on his support of President Trump and goal to "round up criminal illegals" in his pickup truck.¹⁸

The close fight between Kemp and Abrams shows that Georgia's voters are shifting their political opinions. Abrams would have been the first black female governor in United States history, setting the stage for a more diverse political arena. The 2020 presidential election has added pressure to Georgia's changing politics, with many saying that the state could be a new battleground state. Current polls conducted August 2nd show the two nearly tied: Biden is leading with 46% and Trump with 45%, numbers that have stayed close since March.¹⁹ Since Georgia has been a traditionally Republican state for many years, this shift echoes the entire country's growing polarization as Republicans and Democrats move more to either extreme.

In response to party divides, waves of protests and social media posts have consistently argued for the country to have a new view of the traditionally conservative state. "Rednecks for Black Lives," is one slogan gaining popularity across the South. Beth Howard, organizing director of Southern community and advocacy group Southern Crossroads, has been working for

¹⁴ H.B. 1212, Sess. of 2019-2020 (Georgia 2020), <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/en-US/display/20192020/HB/1212>

¹⁵ Blinder, Alan and Richard Fausset. "Stacey Abrams Ends Fight for Georgia Governor With Harsh Words for Her Rival," *New York Times*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/elections/georgia-governor-race-kemp-abrams.html?auth=login-google>

¹⁶ Blinder, "Stacey Abrams."

¹⁷ Blinder, Alan and Patricia Mazzei. "What Happens When Politicians Who Oversee Elections are Also the Candidates?" *New York Times*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/us/florida-georgia-scott-kemp.html>

¹⁸ Blinder, "Stacey Abrams"

¹⁹ FiveThirtyEight. "Latest Polls: Georgia." Last modified August 4, 2020. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/georgia/>

change across the South. Her platform is based off of the belief that “society taught poor white people to divert blame onto people of color for their struggles instead of the real culprits - money-hungry billionaires, politicians, and big businesses.”²⁰ As the movement grows, more people are recognizing the true message of Black Lives Matter. Greg Reese, a man from Campton, Kentucky, has been using “Rednecks for Black Lives” to educate members of his community. He sees it as “a wonderful way to get people around here to support the movement” because “a lot of people are ignorant about what it really means and think it’s a negative thing and against whites.” Now, this slogan and accompanying logo are what he calls a “new Southern Pride flag” representing “the South awakening” to social issues and change.²¹

All of this is not to say that everyone across Georgia is changing. For example, in June, Georgia passed a new hate crimes bill that adds legal penalties for any crime “motivated by a victim’s race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender or disability,” a large step in response to Black Lives Matter and the killing of Black jogger Ahmaud Arbery by armed white men in the state.²² Alongside this bill, however, the state also passed a law protecting first responders, like police officers, from “bias motivated intimidation,” when an attempt to add police officers as a protected class failed to make it onto the final hate crimes legislation.²³ This essentially prevents citizens from criticizing the police force and other first responders who frequently exhibit negative biases against people of color, especially Black people. In an attempt to maintain a moderate stance on Black Lives Matter, Governor Kemp managed to negate a vital part of the hate crimes law, alienating himself from Georgia’s Black population.

As Georgia becomes increasingly divided in local, state, and national elections, it is important to recognize where the conservative sentiments all began. Following the Civil War, Georgians were outraged at how quickly their comfortable way of life began to change. However, the state is full of diversity and the diversity of political opinions has only recently begun to reflect that. Rural areas are still heavily conservative, but suburban areas that were areas of white flight out of Atlanta are seeing a shift. Counties like Cobb, Gwinnett, and DeKalb that have voted Republican since Jimmy Carter’s presidency are flipping their seats in favor of Democrats.²⁴ Both sides credit the Democrats’ get-out-the-vote efforts of door to door

²⁰ Young, “Rednecks.”

²¹ Young, “Rednecks.”

²² Hauck, Grace. “Georgia Governor Signs Hate Crime Law in Wake of Ahmaud Arbery Shooting.” *USA Today*, June 26, 2020.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/06/26/georgia-governor-signs-hate-crime-law-following-ahmaud-arbery-shooting/3266901001/>

²³ Hauck, “Georgia Governor.”

²⁴ Bluestein, Greg. “A Blue ‘Tsunami’ in Atlanta’s Suburbs Reshapes Georgia Politics.” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 11, 2018.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/blue-tsunami-atlanta-suburbs-reshapes-georgia-politics/2q19OSD5w2v06TEWndEDZP/>

campaigning for creating this change, showing the power of grassroots campaigning.²⁵ As Atlanta and the suburbs continue to grow and diversify, both parties have a lot of work to do to appeal to voters. This affirms that despite the cultural and political influence of the Lost Cause, Georgians are itching for change.

The results from the 2020 presidential and senatorial elections will show whether or not Democrats will lead that effort or if Republicans will maintain their stronghold on the state. While politics are a great way to track the changing views in Georgia, the South is not a monolith. As Edgerton said, the region is not a place to “escape,” but a place to appreciate and understand.²⁶ Stereotyping the South impedes progress and ignores the benefits of the region’s diverse culture. As with any US region, Southerners do not hold the same opinions, despite what news coverage may suggest. Georgia is just one example of the complexity found across America. By looking just beyond the surface, it is clear that the state is much more than a lost cause.

²⁵ Bluestein, “A Blue.”

²⁶ Edgerton, “What’s Wrong.”