

Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

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Georgia Senate: Republicans Try to Take Back Ground

By Jacob Rubashkin

A decade ago, Jon Ossoff was a documentary filmmaker tweeting links to his BBC projects and tagging airlines in public posts to get help with booking issues. Today he is the senior senator from Georgia and the top target for Senate Republicans looking to deny Democrats any path back to the majority.

Ossoff's rapid rise still grates on Georgia Republicans, who grouse about the "accidental senator." But they take him far more seriously now than in 2020, when he won an upset victory over a former Fortune 500 CEO and incumbent senator.

At the start of the 2026 cycle, Republicans were hopeful that the popular outgoing Gov. Brian Kemp would challenge Ossoff and immediately put him on his back foot. But Kemp passed on a bid and the GOP has been left to sort out an unsettled primary, while Ossoff, already a strong fundraiser, stockpiles for the general election.

Democrats have a narrow road to the Senate majority that involves flipping four out of six seats in Maine, North Carolina, Ohio, Alaska, Texas and Iowa. But it also involves holding onto all of their own seats, including Georgia, one of two states won by Trump that Democrats are defending this cycle.

The Lay of the Land

Donald Trump's 2-point win in Georgia in 2024, 50-48 percent, was an important moral victory for the former president, who insisted without evidence that he had won the state in 2020 (when he lost by 0.2 percent to Joe Biden).

But it did not fully mask the underlying leftward trajectory of the Peach State, which has shifted from an R+12.6 Baseline in 2014 to an R+4.1 Baseline in 2025. Even as Georgia swung back to Trump, it voted just 1.7 points to the right of the national popular vote, compared to 2020, when it voted 4.3 points to the right.

Democrats continue to be buoyed by improvements in the well-off, educated and diversifying suburbs surrounding Atlanta, where Kamala Harris performed significantly better in counties such as Paulding, Fayette, Henry, and Spalding. In Fayette County, a fast-growing suburb south of Atlanta that George W. Bush won by 41 points in 2000, Harris came up just 3 points short of Trump. And while improvements across the rest of the state powered Trump to victory in 2024, continued Democratic growth in Atlanta keeps the state competitive and at the center of the battleground.

Republicans currently control all state-level offices after a strong 2022 midterm showing, led by Gov. Kemp's 53-46 percent win at the top of

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2026 Senate Ratings

Toss-up (3)

MI Open (Peters, D)

Ossoff (D-Ga.)

NC Open (Tillis, R)

Tilt Democratic (1)

NH Open (Shaheen, D)

Tilt Republican (1)

Collins (R-Maine)

Lean Democratic

Lean Republican (2)

Husted (R-Ohio)

Sullivan (R-Ak.)

Likely Democratic (1)

MN Open (Smith, DFL)

Likely Republican (2)

IA Open (Ernst, R)

Coryn (R-Texas)

Solid Democratic (9)

IL Open (Durbin, D)

Booker (D-N.J.)

Coons (D-Del.)

Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)

Lujan (D-N.M.)

Markey (D-Mass.)

Merkley (D-Ore.)

Reed (D-R.I.)

Warner (D-Va.)

Solid Republican (16)

AL Open (Tuberville, R)

KY Open (McConnell, R)

WY Open (Lummis, R)

Capito (R-W.V.)

Cassidy (R-Lou.)

Cotton (R-Ark.)

Daines (R-Mont.)

Graham (R-S.C.)

Hagerty (R-Tenn.)

Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)

Marshall (R-Kan.)

Moody (R-Fl.)

Mullin (R-Okla.)

Ricketts (R-Neb.)

Risch (R-Idaho)

Rounds (R-S.D.)

Takeovers in *italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

CALENDAR

Feb. 8	Super Bowl LX
March 3	Texas, North Carolina, Arkansas Primaries
March 10	Mississippi Primaries
March 17	Illinois Primaries

Report Shorts

California Governor. San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan jumped into the crowded field that already includes eight notable Democrats, including Rep. Eric Swalwell, former Rep. Katie Porter, former HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigossa, billionaire Tom Steyer and more. There are also two Republicans running, Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco and Fox News host Steve Hilton — raising the remote but frightening possibility for Democrats that they actually get locked out of the general election entirely with the two Republicans finishing in the top slots in the all-party primary. Solid Democratic.

California's 13th District. The Republican field narrowed as Ceres Mayor Javier Lopez dropped out of the race and endorsed former Stockton Mayor Kevin Lincoln. GOP business consultant Vin Kruttiventi, who received 32 percent in 2024 against Democratic Rep. Eric Swalwell, is running as well. But Lincoln is the preferred candidate of Republicans in Washington after losing by 3.5 points to Democratic Rep. Josh Harder last cycle. The top Republican this time will face Democratic Rep. Adam Gray in a newly-drawn seat with a 7-point Baseline Democratic advantage. That's competitive but better than Gray's current seat, which is one of the most evenly-divided in the country. Tilt Democratic

Florida Senate. Retired Army Lt. Col. Alex Vindman announced his challenge to appointed GOP Sen. Ashley Moody. Vindman, whose twin brother Eugene represents Virginia's 7th District, gained national attention when he testified on Capitol Hill during the first impeachment trial of President Donald Trump about his call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Moody was appointed to GOP Sen. Marco Rubio's seat when he left to join the administration and is running to fill the remainder of the term. She hasn't been elected to the seat in her own right, but had \$5 million in her campaign account at the end of the year. Democrats are not looking to get into another expensive statewide race in Florida after decades of disappointment. But if the cycle deteriorates much further against the Republicans in power, then Democrats might have to take another look. Solid Republican.

Florida's 16th District. First elected in 2006, 74-year-old Republican Congressman Vern Buchanan announced he will not seek re-election. Republicans have a 17-point Baseline advantage in the Bradenton-area seat that sits south of Tampa, so the biggest fight will

2026 Governor Ratings

Toss-up (4D)	
KS Open (Kelly, D)	WI Open (Evers, D)
MI Open (Whitmer, D)	Hobbs (D-Ariz.)
Tilt Democratic	Tilt Republican (2R)
	GA Open (Kemp, R)
	Lombardo (R-Nev.)
Lean Democratic	Lean Republican
Likely Democratic (5D)	Likely Republican (1R)
ME Open (Mills, D)	IA Open (Reynolds, R)
NM Open (Lujan-Grisham, D)	
MN Open (Walz, DFL)	
Hochul (D-N.Y.)	
Shapiro (D-Penn.)	
Solid Democratic (9D)	Solid Republican (15R)
CA Open (Newsom, D)	AK Open (Dunleavy, R)
CO Open (Polis, D)	AL Open (Ivey, R)
Green (D-Hawaii)	FL Open (DeSantis, R)
Healey (D-Mass.)	OH Open (DeWine, R)
Kotek (D-Ore.)	OK Open (Stitt, R)
Lamont (D-Ct.)	SC Open (McMaster, R)
McKee (D-R.I.)	TN Open (Lee, R)
Moore (D-Md.)	WY Open (Gordon, R)
Pritzker (D-Ill.)	Abbott (R-Texas)
	Ayotte (R-N.H.)
	Huckabee Sanders (R-Ark.)
	Little (R-Idaho)
	Pillen (R-Neb.)
	Rhoden (R-S.D.)
	Scott (R-Vt.)

Takeovers in Italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, * moved benefiting Republicans

likely be in the GOP primary. The field might stay fluid until after the state legislature redraws the congressional map during an April special session at the direction of GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis. Solid Republican.

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Georgia Governor. Billionaire health care CEO Rick Jackson jumped into the race with an initial pledge to spend \$50 million of his own money. That shakes up the GOP primary fight between state Attorney General Chris Carr and Lt. Gov. Burt Jones, who was endorsed by President Trump. Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger is also running but will have trouble gaining traction after publicly refusing to help Trump overturn the 2020 results. Democrats have a competitive primary as well between former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, former state Sen. Jason Esteves, state Rep. Derrick Jackson, former GOP Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan and others. Tilt Republican.

Georgia's 11th District. Six-term GOP Rep. Barry Loudermilk, 62, announced he will not seek re-election. His seat includes Marietta and some northwest Atlanta suburbs and extends into more rural territory toward Chattanooga. According to Baseline, Republicans have a 29-point advantage, so it should not be within reach for Democrats, even in a poor cycle for the GOP. Solid Republican.

Iowa's 1st District. Democrat Taylor Wettach ended his bid for Congress and is running for state auditor instead. Former state Rep. Christina Bohannon has always been the frontrunner as she tries to overcome losses in 2022 and 2024 for the seat. GOP Rep. Marinnette Miller-Meeks is one of the most vulnerable incumbents, and her fundraising is finally starting to match the seriousness of her race. Toss-up.

Iowa's 2nd District. GOP state Rep. Shannon Lundgren ended her bid for Congress and is running for re-election instead. That leaves state Sen. Charlie McClintock and former state Rep. Joe Mitchell fighting for the Republican nomination in the race to replace GOP Rep. Ashley Hinson, who is running for the Senate. State Rep. Lindsay James is the Democratic frontrunner, although four others are in the race. Likely Republican.

Iowa's 3rd District. State Rep. Jennifer Konfrst dropped out of the race, paving the way for state Senator Sarah Trone Garriott to win the Democratic nomination without a bruising primary. The Des Moines and southwest Iowa seat is represented by Republican Congressman Zach Nunn, and the race could become a much bigger headache for Republicans if the cycle doesn't improve. Lean Republican.

Maryland Redistricting. Democrats in the Maryland House passed a new map that would give Democrats an opportunity to defeat Rep. Andy Harris, the only Republican member of the state's congressional delegation. But it's far from clear that the map will pass the state Senate.

Minnesota Governor. DFL Sen. Amy Klobuchar announced she's running for governor in the race to succeed DFL Gov. Tim Walz,

who is not seeking a third term. Klobuchar is not up for re-election this year, so if she wins, Klobuchar will get to appoint her successor and then there will be a subsequent special election.

Nebraska's 2nd District. State Sen. Brett Lindstrom dropped out of the GOP primary leaving Omaha City Councilman Brinker Harding as the only notable candidate running for the Republican nomination to succeed retiring Rep. Don Bacon. The Democratic primary remains crowded in what should be one of Democrats' best pickup opportunities this fall. Tilt Democratic.

New Jersey's 12th District. Princeton professor Sam Wang, known in the political world for his work on redistricting and gerrymandering, plans to become a candidate himself. He's jumped into the crowded race to succeed Democratic Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman that already includes at least 15 other Democrats. According to Baseline, Democrats have a 25-point advantage, so the primary will be the most important race. Solid Democratic.

Oregon Governor. Former Portland Trailblazers center Chris Dudley jumped into what is becoming a crowded GOP race for the right to take on Democratic Gov. Tina Kotek. Dudley came within about 2 points of winning in 2010, in a great Republican cycle, but could have a more difficult time this year, if he wins the GOP nomination. Dudley also happens to be one of the worst free throw shooters in NBA history. Solid Democratic.

Texas' 18th District. Democrat Christian Menefee defeated Democrat Amanda Edwards 68-32 percent in Saturday's runoff in the Houston-area seat. Menefee was sworn in on Monday, narrowing



Courtesy Menefee Campaign

Christian Menefee

Republicans' majority in the House to 218-214 with two vacant GOP seats and one vacant Democratic seat. Texas' 18th has been open since Democratic Rep. Sylvester Turner died on March 5, 2025.

But now Menefee, Edwards and Rep. Al Green face off in

the March 3 Democratic primary because the new, Republican-drawn congressional map eliminated some Democratic districts.

West Virginia's 2nd District Correction. The Jan. 22 issue cited an inaccurate report that former West Virginia men's basketball head coach Bob Huggins intended to challenge Rep. Riley Moore in the GOP primary. The coach has not made demonstrable steps toward a run. Solid Republican.

Wisconsin Governor. Washington County Executive Josh Schoemann dropped out of the Republican race after President Donald Trump endorsed Rep. Tom Tiffany, who is now the prohibitive frontrunner for the GOP nomination. Democrats have a crowded and competitive primary that includes 2022 Senate nominee/former Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes, Lt. Gov. Sara Rodriguez, former state cabinet secretary Joel Brennan, state Sen. Kelda Roys, Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley and others. Toss-up.



Inside Elections Podcast

Episode 64: Nathan, Jacob and Ryan Faircloth of the Star Tribune discuss the ICE surge in the Twin Cities and the impact on Minnesota's key elections.

Episode 63: Nathan, Jacob and Jonathan Martin of Politico offer their bold House, Senate, governor and presidential predictions for 2026 and beyond.

Pennsylvania 8: Paiging the Incumbent

By Jacob Rubashkin

When Pennsylvania Democrat Matt Cartwright finally lost in 2024, some in his party began to write off his Northeast Pennsylvania district as gone for good. For a decade, Cartwright had defied gravity: a University of Pennsylvania and London School of Economics-educated lawyer and member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus who won six terms in an increasingly Republican region.

But after Cartwright fell to local businessman Rob Bresnahan, a fresh face half his age, national and Pennsylvania Democrats turned their focus to other House races in the Keystone State and beyond.

All that has changed in the past year, as the political environment, a strong challenger, and Bresnahan's own missteps have turned the race into a top-tier matchup in one of the country's 10 most evenly-divided districts, according to Inside Elections' Baseline.

The Lay of the Land

The 8th District sits in Pennsylvania's northeast corner, bordering New Jersey to the southeast and New York to the northeast. It includes all of Lackawanna, Wayne and Pike counties, as well as parts of Luzerne and Monroe counties.

The 8th is predominantly non-Hispanic white (72 percent), with a Hispanic population (16 percent) largely concentrated in Monroe County and in the city of Hazelton in Luzerne County. Roughly 6 percent of residents are Black.

The median household income is just above \$61,000 a year, lower than the nationwide median of \$78,000. Just 27 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree, compared to 37 percent nationwide. And with a median age of 43 years old, the district skews older than the country as a whole (39 years old).

The 8th is one of many white working class districts that have swung against Democrats since the days of President Barack Obama, who would have carried the seat under its current lines by solid 15 and 13-point margins in 2008 and 2012.

In 2016, Donald Trump would have won the 8th by 8 points, even as all four other statewide GOP candidates lost it. In 2018, all three Democratic candidates carried the 8th handily. But two years later, Trump won the district against Scranton's native son Joe Biden by 3 points, and this time, the GOP statewide candidates for auditor and treasurer also won the seat, a sign of continuing GOP improvement downballot.

The 2022 midterm cycle was better for Democrats, as Josh Shapiro won the district in the gubernatorial race by 9 points and John Fetterman carried it by a much narrower margin in the Senate race.

But by 2024, the district saw a complete wipeout for the Democrats. Not only did Trump win at the top of the ticket by 9 points, 54-45 percent, but so did all five other Republicans on the ballot. The closest race was for the House seat itself, which Bresnahan won by 1.6 percentage points. Overall, Republicans have a narrow, 49.2-48.6 percent Baseline advantage — a reversal from Democrats' 3.9-point advantage in 2022.

Luzerne and Lackawanna each cast roughly a third of the district's votes. Lackawanna, home to Scranton, is the most Democratic part of the district, while Luzerne, home to Wilkes-Barre, leans Republican. The rest of the vote is divided between Monroe County, which leans Democratic, and Wayne and Pike, which are the most rural parts of the district and vote heavily Republican.

The Republican Incumbent

Bresnahan, 35, is the scion of a prominent construction family in Northeast Pennsylvania. A Luzerne County native, Bresnahan graduated from the University of Scranton in 2012 and took control of his family's electrical contracting company, Kuharchik Construction, the following year. Bresnahan also owns a real estate development company.

A first-time candidate in 2024, Bresnahan was highly touted by national GOP strategists and cleared the Republican primary field thanks



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

Rob Bresnahan

to his self-funding ability and profile as a local businessman.

In the general election, Bresnahan ousted Cartwright, who was seen as one of Democrats' strongest incumbents. The district was a top target for Republicans, who expected Trump

to do well at the top of the ticket, and although Cartwright outspent Bresnahan, 2-to-1, he ultimately fell short, 51-49 percent.

In Congress, Bresnahan sits on the Agriculture, Transportation, and Small Business committees.

His campaign team includes general consultant Chris Pack of Breakwell Group, and pollster Joe Delisets of Guidant Polling & Strategy.

The Democratic Challenger

Cognetti, 45, is in her seventh year leading Scranton (population 76,000), the largest city in the 8th District and her home for the past decade.

Cognetti grew up in Oregon outside of Portland, graduated from the University of Oregon in 2002, and taught English in Japan for two years before moving to Washington, DC to work as a Democratic political operative. From 2005 to 2009, she worked for various candidates including Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and then-Rep. Chris Carney, who represented a precursor district to the current 8th (it was on that campaign that Cognetti met her future husband, whose family owned a Scranton-area sandwich shop and specialty foods store).

After three years in the Treasury Department during the Obama Administration, Cognetti earned an MBA from Harvard Business School in 2014 and worked for two years as an analyst for Goldman Sachs in New York. In 2016, she left Wall Street and moved to Scranton to be with her husband, and after a local school board member resigned she interviewed for and was appointed to fill his vacancy.

In 2019, Cognetti joined the state auditor's office, where she worked for a year, until the mayor of Scranton pleaded guilty to corruption charges and resigned. Cognetti ran in the special election to replace him, eschewing the closed-door Democratic nominating process (which she deemed "disgraceful") to run as an independent. In a seven-way general election, Cognetti (by then eight months pregnant) won a plurality victory with 37 percent, ahead of another Democrat-turned-independent (22 percent) and the Democratic nominee (16 percent). The *Scranton Times-Tribune* deemed

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to Bresnahan, thanks to the anti-corruption messaging she has leaned into since her first run for mayor as an independent (her slogan: Paige Against the Machine) and her success leading the city out of a financial crisis as mayor. Cognito and her allies see another advantage to that initial run as well, as it could help her create some distance from the deeply unpopular Democratic brand that Republicans will look to associate her with.

Cognito's past work for Clinton and other national Democrats is sure to come up in GOP campaign ads, as Republicans look to contrast her background with Bresnahan's life spent in the district and the union ties he's formed during his career in construction. Bresnahan has touted endorsements from unions including a historically Democratic IBEW Wilkes-Barre local, and was one of four Republicans to sign a discharge petition for a bill to restore collective bargaining rights to federal workers last year.

The attack won't be as simple as reminding voters Cognito was born in Oregon, though, now that she's served for so long as mayor and married into a prominent local family. Instead, Republicans will need to leverage her background, including her work as an operative and support from national Democrats, to make a case about her values.

"She's the three term mayor of Scranton, she's not a carpetbagger anymore," said one NEPA Republican strategist, "but the bigger thing is what ideology is she following."

For her part, Cognito welcomes the split-screen with Bresnahan but reframes it around wealth and material circumstances, highlighting her own simple lifestyle and husband's local sandwich shop in contrast with Bresnahan's recent purchase of a private helicopter. "Telling a mayoral story works," said one Cognito ally. "When you're the Mayor of Scranton, that's not a big transplant job, and there's ripe positive in what she did with the budget."

Republicans will also look to paint Cognito as a political opportunist

who puts national interests ahead of Scranton, first for launching her congressional bid while also running for re-election as mayor and more recently pointing to her attendance at a Washington, DC fundraiser in the week following a winter storm that hit Scranton. The National Republican Congressional Committee even dubbed her "Machete Cognito" after a particularly violent crime in Scranton.

While Democrats will also look to make healthcare a defining issue in the race, Bresnahan's allies believe the congressman has positioned

himself better on the issue than some of his colleagues.

Bresnahan voted for the One Big Beautiful Bill, which will draw plenty of Democratic attacks, but he was also one of four Republicans to sign onto the Democratic discharge



Paige Cognito

petition to extend premium Obamacare tax subsidies, along with Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick, Mike Lawler and Ryan Mackenzie — all of whom represent more competitive districts on paper

The freshman congressman will also point to a deal he supported and announced last month to sell three struggling NEPA hospitals to a nonprofit foundation to keep them open.

The General Election

Limited polling shows the race begins very close. A Public Policy Polling survey commissioned by the Democratic House Majority PAC in August found Cognito ahead by 2 points, 45-43 percent, and with Bresnahan's image rating 9 points underwater. A more recent Republican survey found Bresnahan ahead by a similar margin but still with a slightly negative image rating. Cognito, meanwhile, begins with roughly 50 percent name ID in both surveys, concentrated in Lackawanna and Luzerne.

Running up a double-digit margin in Lackawanna County will be crucial for Cognito. Not only is it her home county and the largest source of Democratic votes, but it's also the part of the district where down ballot Democrats can still overperform presidential partisanship. In 2024, Cartwright outran Harris' margin in Lackawanna by 9 points, his largest overperformance of any county. And while Cognito doesn't need to win Luzerne County, she has to keep it within single digits.

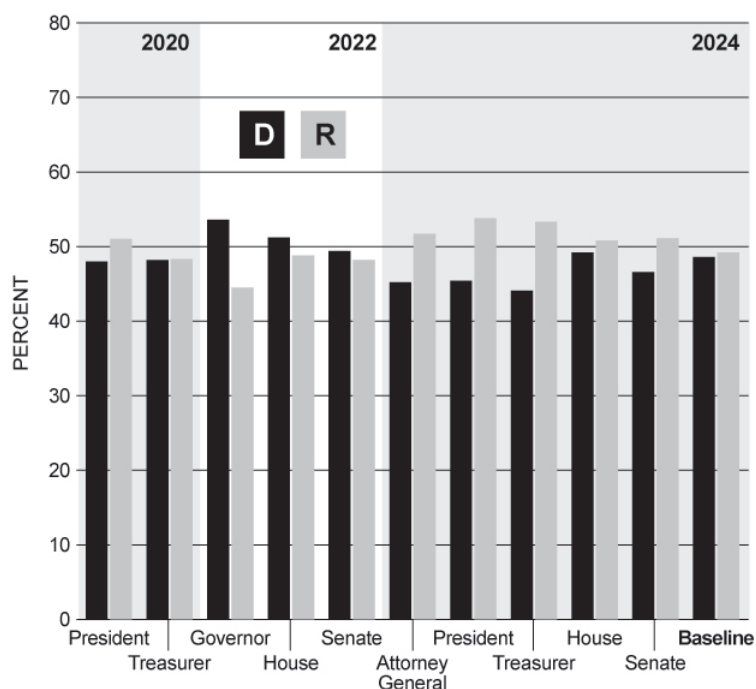
"She's going to be the mayor of Lackawanna County, but we can't let her be the mayor of Luzerne county too," said one Pennsylvania GOP operative. "If for some reason as mayor of Scranton she's able to do well in Luzerne, Rob has no chance."

Conversely, Bresnahan will be in a stronger position if he can eat into Cognito's strength in Lackawanna, potentially by emphasizing his community involvement and philanthropic efforts in the city, as well as his college ties through the University of Scranton.

Wayne and Pike counties, the most rural parts of the district, will be more difficult for the Scranton mayor to establish a foothold. In years past, voters in those districts were also far less likely to split their tickets.

Democrats are also eager to run with Shapiro at the top of the ticket rather than Harris, who collapsed late in the 2024 cycle and whose loss in Pennsylvania many Democratic strategists blame for losses in the 7th, 8th and 10th districts. Shapiro carried the 8th District in 2022 and could

Statewide Election Results for Pennsylvania's 8th District



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provide a tailwind for Coggnetti this year if he can muster a decisive victory over his likely opponent, state Treasurer Stacy Garrity.

That race is still undeveloped, though national Republicans are not optimistic about their chances in the Keystone State against Shapiro, who is popular and has stockpiled \$30 million ahead of his re-election campaign and potential 2028 presidential run. Some Pennsylvania Republicans believe the governor has a glass jaw and will come down to earth if Garrity can mount a real campaign against him, unlike state Sen. Doug Mastriano in 2022. And voters differentiate between gubernatorial and federal races, so a Shapiro win in the 8th in no way guarantees a Coggnetti victory.

Both parties will likely be heavily invested in the race, especially because the Scranton-Wilkes Barre media market is so inexpensive to advertise in. Several outside Democratic groups have already spent nearly \$3 million on negative ads hitting Bresnahan on cost of living increases.

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the ticket. But Democrats hold both Senate seats. Most recently, Raphael Warnock defended his seat against Republican Herschel Walker in a 51-49 percent overtime victory in 2022.

The Democratic Incumbent

At just 38, Ossoff has been the youngest member of the Senate for his entire term, and the former documentary filmmaker's rise to politics' highest levels is among the more unique of his peers.

Born in Atlanta to a well-off family, Ossoff graduated from Georgetown University in 2009 and worked on Capitol Hill, first as an intern for Civil Rights icon Rep. John Lewis and then as a staffer for Atlanta Rep. Hank Johnson. After earning a masters from the London School of Economics in 2013, Ossoff co-founded and led a company that produced investigative documentaries about foreign corruption.

In 2017, Ossoff burst onto the political scene as the Democratic candidate in a special election to replace Rep. Tom Price in the 6th District, a suburban Atlanta seat once held by Speaker Newt Gingrich that had trended rapidly toward the left. Boosted by his association with Lewis and a wave of anti-Trump energy rippling through Democrats in Georgia and across the country, Ossoff became a national cause, raising a then-record \$31 million. While he won 48 percent of the vote in the first round of the race, he faced a deluge of outside spending in the runoff against former state Secretary of State Karen Handel, and lost 52-48 percent.

In 2018, Ossoff passed on a rematch against Handel, who went on to lose re-election to Lucy McBath. But in 2019 he launched a bid for Senate against first-term Sen. David Perdue, ultimately winning a crowded Democratic primary with 52 percent (avoiding a runoff) against former Columbus, Ga. mayor Teresa Tomlinson and others.

Georgia was not initially a top target for Senate Democrats during the 2020 election cycle, as the party focused more on pickup opportunities



Jon Ossoff

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

The Bottom Line

The 8th District began as a second-tier opportunity for Democrats nationally and even in Pennsylvania, with the party more excited about the 7th and 10th Districts due to favorable political trends. But the NEPA seat continues to muscle its way closer to the center of the battleground.

The lack of serious primaries, the presence of hot-button issues such as congressional stock trading, and the ability for candidates and outside groups to spend heavily on the airwaves will make this a race to watch for the duration of the cycle. While it's not a must-win for Democrats looking to flip three seats en route to a majority, it will be an East Coast indicator on election night as to how large a potential Democratic majority might be. An early Coggnetti victory would be a welcome sign for Democrats; a quick call for Bresnahan would be a damper. And a photo finish such as in 2024 would signal another close, competitive fight for the House majority.

IE

in Colorado, Arizona, Maine, North Carolina, Iowa and Montana. But polling was close and Ossoff raised twice as much money as Perdue, who fell just 0.3 points short of an absolute majority in November, 49.7-47.9 percent, forcing a runoff to take place two months later.

That runoff became a national spectacle along with the runoff for Georgia's other Senate seat, open due to Johnny Isakson's resignation, and attracted hundreds of millions of dollars in outside spending. Dominated by Trump's false claims of election fraud in Georgia and debate over Covid-19 stimulus checks, the race broke in Democrats' favor and Ossoff prevailed over Perdue, 51-49 percent.

In the Senate, Ossoff sits on the Appropriations and Intelligence committees.

His campaign team includes media consultants Jon Vogel, Mike Reilly, and Anna Bukowski, pollster Fred Yang of Garin-Hart-Yang, and media consultant Ed Peavy of Mission Control.

The Republican Challengers

Three major Republicans are vying for the GOP nomination: Reps. Mike Collins and Buddy Carter, and former Tennessee Volunteers football coach Derek Dooley.

Collins, 58, is in his second term representing the 10th District in Georgia's Piedmont region. The 1990 Georgia State graduate is the son of former Rep. Mac Collins, who represented a different part of the state, southwest of Atlanta, from 1993 to 2005. The elder Collins ran unsuccessfully for Senate in 2004, placing third in the GOP primary behind Isakson and Godfather's Pizza CEO Herman Cain.

The younger Collins founded a trucking company in 1992 as an expansion of the Collins family's longstanding concrete business, and still owns it today.

In 2014, Collins ran for Congress to succeed GOP Rep. Paul Broun, who was waging an unsuccessful run for Senate. In the GOP primary, Collins won 33 percent of the vote, advancing to a runoff with pastor Jody Hice. Despite Collins recreating the viral Jean Claude Van Damme Volvo truck ad, he lost to Hice, 54-46 percent.

Eight years later, after Hice left to run for state secretary of state, Collins made a second play for the 10th District. This time, he placed first among a crowded field with 26 percent, advancing to a runoff against state Rep. Vernon Jones, a former Democrat who reinvented himself in 2020 as a Trump acolyte and earned an endorsement from the former president.

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Collins, who had an endorsement from Gov. Kemp, highlighted that Jones was not from the district and publicized the many accusations of misconduct against Jones, including harassment, rape, and misuse of government funds (Jones has never been charged with or convicted of a crime). Collins easily prevailed, 74-46 percent, and won the general election by 30 points.

In 2024, he won re-election by 26 points.

In Congress, Collins sits on the Science, Space and Technology, Natural Resources, and Transportation and Infrastructure committees. He has 98 percent and 100 percent lifetime ratings from the Heritage Foundation and the Club for Growth, respectively,

His campaign team includes media consultant Brad Herold of Something Else Strategies.

Collins is a member of the House Freedom Caucus, and often posts controversial memes and incendiary commentary on his social media pages. Among other episodes, he engaged with an anti-Semitic Twitter account’s harassment of a Jewish *Washington Post* reporter (though later denied he was himself commenting on her Jewishness) and was briefly banned from the platform for saying a migrant accused of assaulting a police officer should be thrown out of a helicopter.

Carter, 68, has represented the Savannah-based 1st District for more than a decade. A Savannah native and 1980 graduate of the University of Georgia, Carter is a longtime pharmacist who opened his own pharmacy in 1988 in Pooler, a fast-growing suburb of Savannah. Carter served on Pooler’s zoning board from 1989 to 1993, on the city council from 1993 to 1995, and as mayor from 1996 to 2004.

In 2004, Carter ousted incumbent state Rep. Ann Purcell in the GOP primary for a Pooler-area state House seat, 54-46 percent, going on to win three general elections unopposed. In 2009, after state Sen. Eric Johnson resigned to focus on his gubernatorial run, Carter ran in the special election to replace him, easily winning the GOP primary with 82 percent

of the vote. He won a full term, 70-30 percent, in 2010.

In 2014, Carter ran for the open 1st District, vacated by Rep. Jack Kingston, who like Broun was running for Senate. In the GOP primary runoff he faced surgeon and Army Ranger Bob Johnson. Carter was seen as the more establishment-friendly candidate and was backed by the Chamber of Commerce, while Johnson had Tea Party support and financial backing



Mike Collins

from the Club for Growth. Carter won, 54-46 percent.

Carter won the general election by 22 points, and has won re-election against nominal opposition by at least 15 points since, including by 24 points in 2024.

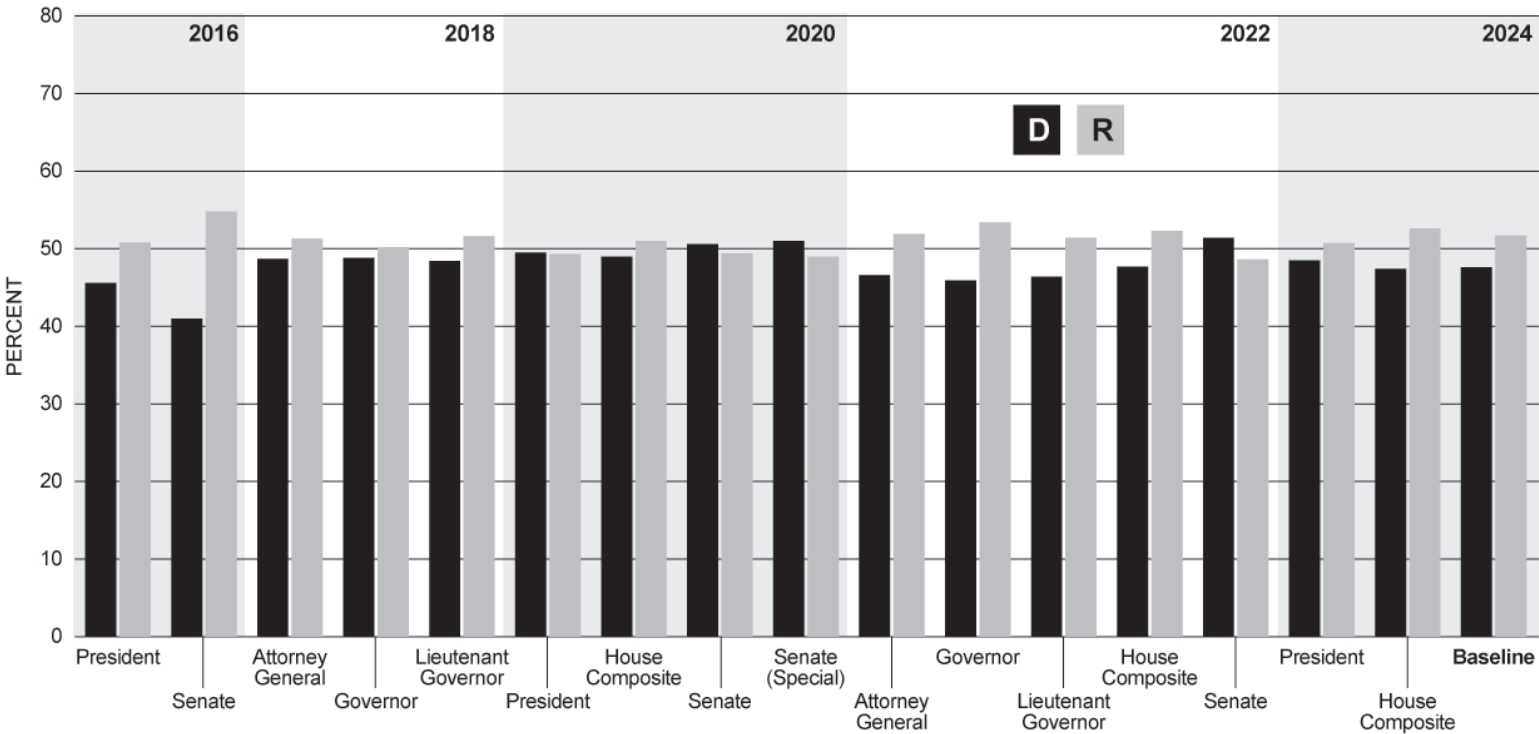
In Congress, Carter sits on the Budget and Energy and Commerce committees, and is a member of the Republican Study Committee as well as the Republican Governance Group (formerly the Tuesday Group). He has 77 percent and 60 percent lifetime ratings from the Club for Growth and Heritage Foundation.

His campaign team includes general consultant Chris Grant, and media consultant Ben Yoho of The Strategy Group.

Dooley, 57, is a former football coach best known for his time leading the University of Tennessee Volunteers and who has coached on NFL teams as well. The Athens, Ga.-born Dooley is the son of legendary University of Georgia coach Vince Dooley, who led the Bulldogs to a national championship in 1980, and talk show host Barbara Dooley, who ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 2002. He is

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Statewide Election Results for Georgia



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also a childhood friend of Gov. Kemp, who has endorsed his candidacy.

Derek Dooley played college football at the University of Virginia, graduating in 1990, and earned a law degree from the University of Georgia in 1994. He began coaching football soon after, first at Georgia, where his father was still the athletic director, and then as a positions coach at SMU, LSU (when the team won the 2003 championship), and the NFL's Miami Dolphins. In 2007 he won his first head coaching gig, at Louisiana Tech, where he coached for three seasons. In 2010, Tennessee hired Dooley to replace Lane Kiffin. Though he inherited a team in a rebuilding era, Dooley amassed a disappointing 15-21 record over three years and was fired in 2012.

Over the following decade, Dooley worked on the coaching staffs of the Dallas Cowboys, the University of Missouri Tigers, the New York Giants, and most recently the Alabama Crimson Tide.

His campaign team includes general consultant Cody Hall of Ascent Strategic, who previously led Kemp's political operation. Hall and Zack Roday, also at Ascent, are making the TV ads. The direct mail firm is Resolve Campaigns.

The Republican Primary

The May 19 primary may be just the first step in the process to pick a GOP nominee. If none of the candidates win a majority of the vote, the top two finishers will advance to a runoff on June 16.

As of now, a runoff is the likeliest outcome. All three candidates have the resources to run credible campaigns and none begin close to the 50 percent threshold. That said, an endorsement by Trump prior to the first round could reshape the race overnight and elevate his chosen candidate to a majority. But unlike in the gubernatorial race, where Trump endorsed his preferred candidate a year ago, the president has remained neutral in the Senate race and appears on good terms with all three candidates.

Collins has led in all public polling, though a large portion of voters remain undecided. A recent Public Opinion Strategies (R) poll conducted for an unaligned party found Collins ahead with 32 percent, followed by Carter at 16 percent and Dooley at 12 percent; 38 percent of voters were still undecided.

GOP sources largely agree with the race's overall shape, with Collins out front, followed by Carter in second and Dooley in third. Collins enjoys the strongest name ID of the three, thanks in part to his last name, which voters associate with not only his late father, but also the unrelated but popular former congressman and current Veterans Affairs Secretary Doug Collins.

Collins' vocal social media presence and his work on the Laken Riley Act have boosted his prominence as well. "You cannot underestimate how big that is with primary voters," said one Georgia Republican. And his image as a blue collar everyman resonates with voters, say GOP strategists. "He didn't grow a mullet just for the campaign," said one longtime Georgia consultant not working on the race.

While there's potential for the shape of the race to change significantly, GOP sources largely see one of the two runoff spots as Collins' to lose, while Carter and Dooley fight for the second place slot.

Dooley's path to a runoff relies on significant help from Kemp, the outgoing governor who remains incredibly popular among GOP voters and who recruited him into the race. Kemp's super PAC, Hardworking Americans, spent \$1 million to air pro-Dooley ads last August, which positioned him as a Trump-like outsider in contrast to "career politicians." While that ad buy helped Dooley secure a foothold in the race, Kemp will need to spend more to push Dooley into contention for a runoff spot. "If he has \$5 million to spend on Dooley, that could help him

sneak in," said one GOP source. But the super PAC reported just \$729,000 in the bank on Dec. 31.

Along with hammering in his endorsement from Kemp, allies of the former coach believe that framing Dooley as an outsider is crucial to winning the nomination. One pro-Dooley Republican pointed to the 2014 Senate primary as a roadmap, when Perdue, the former CEO and former political newcomer with a prominent last name, defeated three sitting members of Congress and a former Georgia secretary of state.

While Dooley doesn't have Perdue's personal wealth, he has moderately outraised both Collins and Carter since entering the race. That



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

Buddy Carter

said, Carter's personal wealth and Collins' existing campaign account put them ahead of Dooley in cash-on-hand at the end of the year. Carter ended 2025 with \$4.2 million to Collins' \$2.3 million and Dooley's \$2.1 million.

There's also skepticism among Georgia Republicans that Dooley, who only recently moved back to the state, will be able to connect with voters.

One longtime Georgia Republican compared the younger Dooley's run to his mother's 2002 congressional run: "She had a connection with the people of Georgia, was beloved, and that didn't work, and if that didn't work in a smaller congressional race, I don't see how it works now."

Carter, meanwhile, is struggling to overcome the conventional wisdom that says successful statewide candidates can't come from the coast. While some have gotten close — Kingston in 2014 narrowly lost the GOP primary runoff — and other successful candidates have coastal roots, such as the Savannah-born Warnock and Sea Island-residing Perdue, it's been decades since a candidate relied on a Savannah base of support to win statewide.

The personally wealthy Carter has told Republicans around the state that he's willing to spend up to \$10 million on his campaign, though it's not clear how much he would reserve for a general election. He's already spent the most by far, dropping a whopping \$4.6 million in paid advertising in two bursts last year, when he entered in May and later in September. But that spending, much of which came when he was the only candidate, still didn't bring him to parity with Collins in vote share or name ID, and Carter may still struggle in the vote-rich northern part of the state.

A January 28 Quantus Insights poll of the North Georgia 14th District, the most Republican seat in the state, found Carter in third place in the GOP primary with 6 percent, behind Collins at 25 percent and Dooley at 10 percent.

But absent a Trump endorsement, Carter's financial strength could be the biggest wild card in the race. "If Buddy times it right, he could come down the pike with \$8 million, outspend Mike 4-to-1, and if that happens he's in a decent spot," theorized one Georgia Republican.

Carter also has the longest political track record of the three, serving in office since the 1990s, and though he was previously known for his extensive work on health care and pharmacy police, he has worked hard over the past year to rebrand himself as a "MAGA warrior," as his ads declare him. Carter nominated Trump for a Nobel Peace Prize last year, and introduced a bill to rename Greenland "Red, White, and Blueland."

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“Logic would tell you Carter is a better general election candidate, because he has to fight [to win his House races], he’s a small business owner, and he’s got a lot of great healthcare knowledge,” said one longtime Georgia Republican. “But he’s trying to be a little too aggressive.” And fairly or otherwise, several GOP sources said Carter lacks the “look” of a senator, especially compared to the TV-ready Dooley and the unapologetically country Collins.

The General Election

It’s a common refrain among Republican strategists that Jon Ossoff is the “most vulnerable Senate Democrat on the map” — a fact that may be true but also doesn’t mean much when the rest of Democratic vulnerabilities come in open seats: Michigan, New Hampshire and Minnesota. And Ossoff is not nearly as vulnerable as he would have been had Kemp opted to run.

While Georgia and Michigan together make up the best opportunities Republicans have at flipping a Democratic seat and likely foreclosing any path Democrats have back to the majority, Ossoff presents a formidable challenge to whomever emerges from the GOP primary over the summer.

The Democrat, who shattered fundraising records in 2017 and again in 2020, reported \$25.5 million in the bank on Dec. 31 after raising nearly \$10 million over the last three months of the year. There’s fear among Republicans that Ossoff’s financial advantage will present a serious challenge for the eventual nominee.

“We’re going to end the runoff with zero dollars in the bank, and Ossoff is going to be sitting there ready to smoke whoever it is,” said one Georgia Republican tracking the race.

“The \$40 million gap is going to exist, but the belief is the environment and major donors all realize that’s where those dollars need to be,” said a national GOP strategist.

Republicans will pursue the same general line against Ossoff regardless of their nominee, looking to portray him as out of step with the state’s values and politics and making the case that he votes differently in Washington, DC than he talks in Georgia.

“He has really terrible votes, that is the central pillar of why he’s vulnerable,” said one Georgia operative, pointing to Ossoff’s vote for Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act as well as votes against banning transgender girls from sports and against re-opening the government during last year’s prolonged shutdown.

Republicans are also eager to chip into Ossoff’s support among the Atlanta Jewish community, where the senator (who is Jewish) has faced some backlash for his vote to block some weapons sales to Israel — after that 2024 vote, he was publicly rebuked by prominent Jewish organizations and donors.

And while Ossoff voted for the Laken Riley Act on final passage, Republicans still plan to hit him on his earlier votes against the bill, and on immigration and public safety issues more generally.

As in all the major races across the country, the biggest challenge for Republicans will be overcoming an enthusiasm edge that has powered Democrats to overperform in most elections since 2024 — including in last year’s Public Service Commission elections, where lopsided turnout boosted Democrats to gargantuan 25-point statewide victories.

“Ossoff is squeaky clean,” said one Republican, “He never does anything worthy of being offensive, so we’re struggling to get people to care a ton.”

Each Republican has a case to make about why they’re suited to motivate turnout while also winning over the swing voters in the Atlanta suburbs who voted for Biden in 2020 and Trump in 2024. Collins’ case revolves

around his ability to engage authentically with the MAGA faithful while also pointing to his two pieces of signature legislation, the Laken Riley Act and the TRANQ Act, a Biden-signed bill for narcotics research.

But he’ll also have to quiet concerns that his social media posting has crossed enough lines to alienate moderate voters, and that an ongoing House Ethics investigation surrounding his former chief of staff won’t give Ossoff the ability to run another anti-corruption campaign as they did against Perdue in 2020.

Dooley’s electability argument is focused squarely on the I-285 suburbs surrounding Atlanta that continue to break toward Democrats, and the more easygoing, “Kempian” style of politics Dooley hopes to practice. But his opponents express concern that Dooley’s lack of voting history and previous engagement with Trump (he didn’t vote in the 2016 or 2020 elections) will make it difficult to get the Trump coalition excited to turn out in a midterm election.

Carter has his long legislative record to point to, and his ample financial resources to put toward the general election, though it remains to be seen if he’ll engage either of those assets if he’s the nominee, or if he will continue his rebrand in an effort to boost turnout. His geographic position may be an even greater challenge in a general election as

well, as the price of getting known in the Atlanta media market skyrockets.

With none of the three candidates likely to put any distance between themselves and Trump, much may turn on how popular or unpopular the president is.



Courtesy Dooley Campaign

Derek Dooley

Recently, the administration’s raid on a Fulton County elections office has alarmed some Republicans in the state, who are eager to move past the 2020 election and blame Trump’s insistence that he won the state, despite no evidence, on Republican losses in the 2021 runoff elections. In 2022, even GOP voters appeared fed up with Trump-backed candidates who centered the 2020 election conspiracy in their campaigns. Four years later, one longtime Georgia Republican said “that raid was a mistake, we oughta leave that in the dustbin of history.”

The Bottom Line

Ultimately, Georgia is an inelastic state with high floors and low ceilings across all races, and neither party expects any candidate to win by more than a few percentage points. Despite that narrow window, the race is likely to attract hundreds of millions of dollars in outside spending. That’s to say nothing of the spotlight that could shine on the state in the event no candidate receives a majority of the vote in November, and the state has to vote again in a December runoff. The last two regular Senate elections in Georgia have progressed to runoffs due to Libertarian candidates capturing 2 percent of the vote.

For now, though, the story of the race is an unsettled GOP primary that has given the Democratic incumbent time to stockpile cash and look ahead to the general election in a favorable environment.

“You have to feel a little more comfortable as a Democrat than a Republican,” said one GOP operative watching the race, “but they have time to screw it up and we have time to make it better.”

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