

## Opinion

# Stacey Abrams and Lauren Groh-Wargo: How to Turn Your Red State Blue

It may take 10 years. Do it anyway.

**By Stacey Abrams and Lauren Groh-Wargo**

Ms. Abrams was the Democratic nominee for governor of Georgia in 2018. Ms. Groh-Wargo was her campaign manager. They opened Fair Fight Action in late 2018.

Feb. 11, 2021

We met and became political partners a decade ago, uniting in a bid to stave off Democratic obsolescence and rebuild a party that would increase the clout of regular, struggling Georgians. Our mission was clear: organize people, help realize gains in their lives, win local races to build statewide competitiveness and hold power accountable.

But the challenge was how to do that in a state where many allies had retreated into glum predictions of defeat, where our opponents reveled in shellacking Democrats at the polls and in the Statehouse.

That's not all we had to contend with. There was also a 2010 census undercount of people of color, a looming Republican gerrymander of legislative maps and a new Democratic president midway into his first term confronting a holdover crisis from the previous Republican administration. Though little in modern American history compares with the malice and ineptitude of the botched pandemic response or the attempted insurrection at the Capitol, the dynamic of a potentially inaccurate census and imminent partisan redistricting is the same story facing Democrats in 2021 as it was in 2011. State leaders and activists we know across the country who face total or partial Republican control are wondering which path they should take in their own states now — and deep into the next decade.

Georgians deserved better, so we devised and began executing a 10-year plan to transform Georgia into a battleground state. As the world knows, President Biden won Georgia's 16 electoral votes in November, and the January runoff elections for two Senate seats secured

full congressional control for the Democratic Party. Yet the result wasn't a miracle or truly a surprise, at least not to us. Years of planning, testing, innovating, sustained investment and organizing yielded the record-breaking results we knew they could and should. The lessons we learned can help other states looking to chart a more competitive future for Democrats and progressives, particularly those in the Sun Belt, where demographic change will precede electoral opportunity.

We realize that many people are thinking about Stacey's political future, but right now we intend to talk about the unglamorous, tedious, sometimes technical, often contentious work that creates a battleground state. When fully embraced, this work delivers wins — whether or not Donald Trump is on the ballot — as the growth Georgia Democrats have seen in cycle after cycle shows. Even in tough election years, we have witnessed the power of civic engagement on policy issues and increases in Democratic performance. This combination of improvements has also resulted in steady gains in local races and state legislative races, along with the continued narrowing of the statewide loss margin in election after election that finally flipped the state in 2020 and 2021.

The task is hard, the progress can feel slow, and winning sometimes means losing better. In 2012, for example, we prevented the Republicans from gaining a supermajority in the Georgia House of Representatives, which would have allowed them to pass virtually any bill they wanted. We won four seats they had drawn for themselves, and in 2014 we maintained those gains — just holding our ground was a victory.

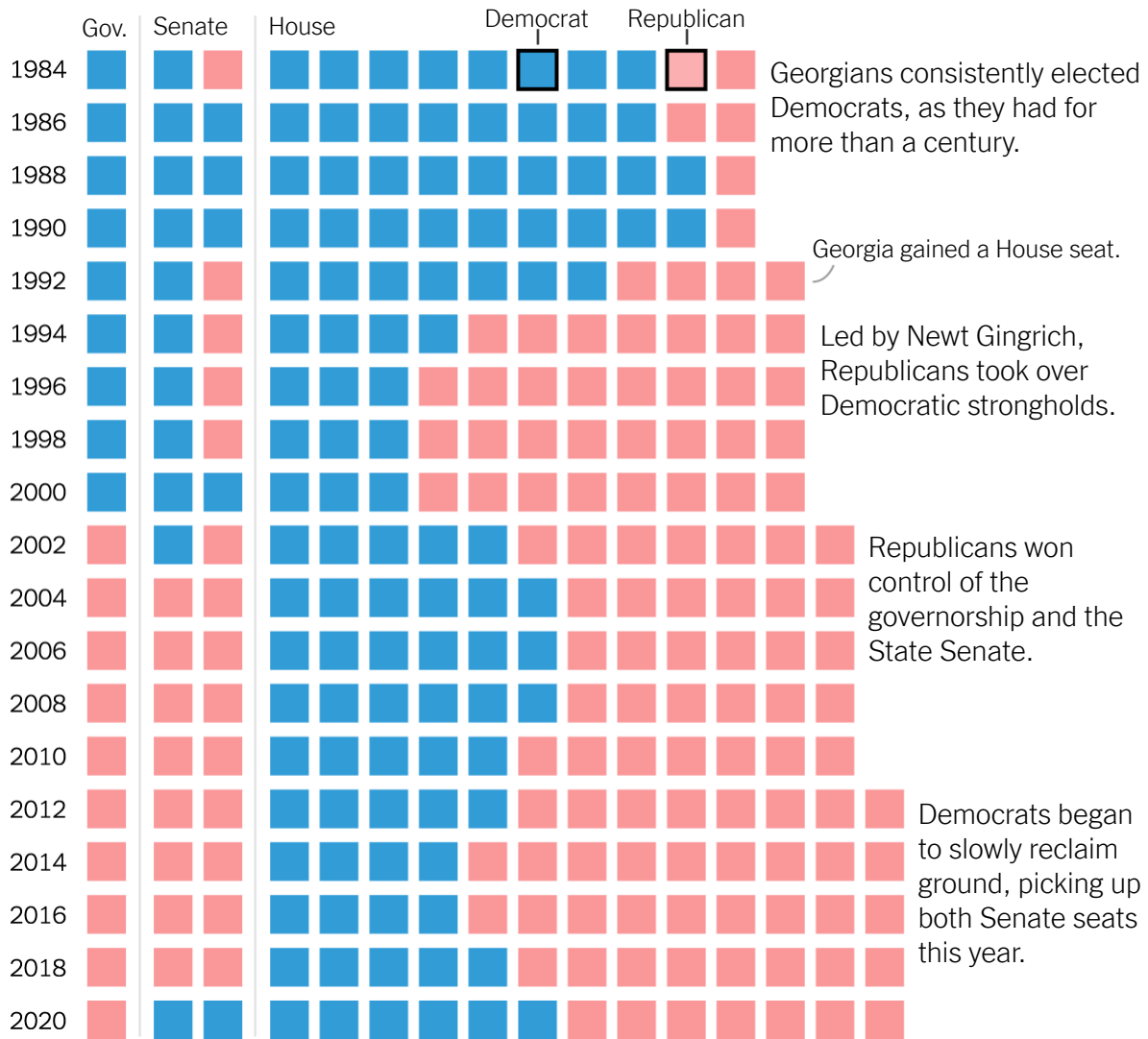
The steps toward victory are straightforward: understand your weaknesses, organize with your allies, shore up your political infrastructure and focus on the long game. Georgia's transformation is worth celebrating, and how it came to be is a long and complicated story, which required more than simply energizing a new coterie of voters. What Georgia Democrats and progressives accomplished here — and what is happening in Arizona and North Carolina — can be exported to the rest of the Sun Belt and the Midwest, but only if we understand how we got here.

### **Understand why you're losing.**

To know how to win, we first had to understand why a century of Democratic Party dominance in Georgia had been erased. For most of the 20th century, Georgia Democrats had existed in a strained alliance of rural conservatives, urban liberals and suburbanites, all unconvinced that voting Republican would serve their ends. After serving as the incubator of the Gingrich revolution in the early 1990s, Georgia turned sharply to the right. When Democrats lost U.S. Senate seats in 2002 and 2004, as well as the governorship in 2002, it showed that former conservative Democrats had fully turned Republican. The Democratic

Party lost its grip on power. By 2010, Democrats were losing every statewide race, and in 2012 the State Senate fell to a Republican supermajority. Clearly, Democrats had to change tactics.

### Georgia Democrats are starting to win again



Squares are colored based on which party won the seat that year. If a politician's term ended early, the color represents the party that controlled the seat at the end of the year until the next election. Source: 270toWin.

After each rout, Democrats conducted internal discussions, but self-analysis invariably misses obvious problems. In 2011, when Stacey became the Democratic minority leader in the State House after four years as a state representative, we met to discuss her initial plans for a return from the political wilderness. Lauren had been based in Ohio, supporting swing-state campaigns across the country and helping to shore up other embattled local leaders across the country. With a shared belief that Georgia was on the brink of change, we joined forces.

First, instead of relying on our own intuitions, we talked to colleagues who were in the trenches, and we read what Republicans said about Democrats. The concerns were obvious in retrospect: We were ineffective at holding Republicans accountable, our infrastructure was disorganized, we lacked a clear message, and we were failing to shine a spotlight on Republican hypocrisy. Bottom line: Democrats kept waiting for voters to be so disillusioned that they would come back into the fold. But we knew that this wasn't going to happen on its own. More important, we understood that promising demographic trends wouldn't translate to Democratic wins without deep investment and work over time.

### **Take action.**

Consider, for example, the mandate to create a clear message. Obviously, this isn't a problem unique to Georgia. Red states often lack a coherent political argument for the existence of a Democratic Party. Leaders say, in effect: "We're Democrats. We want progress." But their ambitions don't meet voters' realities. Or they define them only in reaction to what Republicans say about them. In contrast, Republicans offer clear messages their voters can adhere to (God, guns and anti-government, to name three).

Too often, Democrats try to ensure that their communications include everyone and everything, turning a legitimate message into an unclear or overstuffed manifesto. If your political identity is so inchoate as to be meaningless, you never gain the ability to persuade other people to join you. That is not how you win elections. State Democrats need a politics that people can vote for, embedded in what each particular state is facing. It should be grounded in truth and enhanced by national narratives, but not driven by them.

Whether it is creating economic opportunity in one of the five states without a state minimum wage or saving public education where children are losing out to failed reform policies, each state Democratic Party should create a narrative about where it is and where it is headed that voters can believe. Identify how Republican policies — like a school choice option that defunds public schools to finance for-profit education or killing unions to enhance "right to work" laws as a ploy to drive a low-wage economy — hurts average families. Then offer a realistic but aspirational alternative, like community schools and collective bargaining. The House Democratic Caucus under Stacey's leadership from 2011 through August 2017 focused on three areas: educational opportunity, economic security and shared responsibility. (In their runoff campaigns for the U.S. Senate, Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock focused their messaging on "health, jobs, justice.")

Never forget, however, that creating a political identity for state Democrats is not a national operation. Each state is starting from a different place, and for the message to have meaning and credibility, it must reflect the reality of where you are today, not just where you aspire to be. Resist the urge to leave your constituents behind.

## **Organizing is the soul of this work.**

Building progressive governing power requires organizing. At its most basic, organizing is talking to people about important issues, plus moving them to take collective action. Labor unions and groups like the N.A.A.C.P. are among the oldest examples of institutional organizing models. Grassroots organizing pulls in individuals who see their interests being served. The most effective organizing for political revolution answers the question, How do we make change?

First, you need a resonant issue to organize around. Then you need a concrete goal to organize toward. Good community organizers are crucial for connecting needs and dreams to resources and policy changes. While organizations are optimal, individuals can and do work independently to great effect. In our efforts in Georgia, we have always embraced the philosophy that we operate as part of an ecosystem of state and local organizers who focus on a range of sometimes conflicting narratives. A push for environmental legislation to restrict the use of fossil fuels must engage the thousands of union workers employed by industries reliant on those energy sources.

Effective collaboration cannot demand that participants surrender their core goals; it welcomes those who can help, even if only for the moment. Like many potential battleground states, Georgia has walked this tightrope; and depending on the issue, we have to face the ire of one side or the other. During Stacey's tenure as minority leader in the State House, she had to sit with labor leaders to explain why the Democratic caucus would be taking a position in support of a bill they opposed. But she also had similar conversations with environmental groups that objected to proposals that they felt didn't go far enough. Sustained engagement with all of the component parts of a Democratic coalition means that while those you disappoint may be angry with a particular action, they won't abandon the mission. Better still, sometimes they show up to defend their ideological opponent when the other is under attack.

## **Breathe life into the state party.**

A state Democratic Party is an engine of electoral transformation. The party acts as an organizer as well, but the party itself must be functional. It will be most responsive to — and reflective of — community ambitions when it has a robust democracy within itself, connected to the people and their needs. That work is often not as robust as it could be, unfortunately, because of ineffective or even corrupt leadership at the state party level or the fact that some progressive organizers and leaders refuse to engage with the party infrastructure (sometimes with legitimate cause); but if you want to build a battleground state, a strong state party is a necessity. State parties have legal standing to coordinate with

candidates and committees, and raise various types of funds that are needed to win elections. They need to be functional and transparent at a minimum, and high performing if at all possible.

Stacey became the House minority leader at the nadir of the Georgia Democratic Party. So we helped recruit and elect Democrats and expanded the role of the state legislative leadership. Stacey traveled the state to meet with legislators, county party chairs, members of the party executive community, people who wanted to run for office, grassroots leaders and activists, all on their home turfs. The thousands of hours of travel in and out of the legislative session, year-round for more than seven years, helped her understand their needs and their struggles. Her outreach, fund-raising and training initiatives helped infuse the party with cash and talented operatives. She spent time coordinating and supporting the necessary infrastructure, down to the nitty-gritty of editing news releases and taking late-night calls to problem-solve or just to listen to state party staff members and leaders talk through their challenges.

Lauren officially served as a consultant to our state legislative campaign efforts, but for most of those years, she was essentially a volunteer, as our funds were minimal. She had lived and worked in a competitive state and had a depth of fund-raising know-how. She secured access to voter files, and mentored and coached the legislative caucus staff as it grew from one person to nearly a dozen. She actively engaged local and national consultants who were needed to augment our scrappy early work and whose faith in our eventual rise would be essential to it.

Together, we developed win-loss scenarios and a legislative district targeting plan in 2012 that projected outcomes in each two-year election cycle through 2020. With limited resources, and because donors weren't banging down our door, we had to optimize every dollar, which meant understanding campaign finance rules. We worked to get the underfunded state party and the slightly better funded House caucus to pool dollars as much as possible.

By 2018, the state party had become a professionalized and responsive organization ready for the \$40 million effort the Abrams for Governor campaign orchestrated. Years of deliberative behind-the-scenes work that was rarely covered in the news media or discussed at donor conferences had improved both local and national trust of the state party, which in turn helped raise money and deliver victories in 2020 and 2021.

**Play the long game.**

For 10 years, we carried around charts of Georgia's demographic and registration projections, as well as one that showed shrinking margins of victory for Republicans in races for the Senate, the governorship and the presidency over time. That way, we could demonstrate that we were gaining momentum with each election cycle and that while demography was not destiny, it was an opportunity we were actually seizing.

Historically, the Democratic Party has failed to cultivate Black, Latino, Asian-American and Native American staff members to work in campaign roles outside of the area of field operations, where they were often expected to talk only to their own ethnic identity groups or people of color in general. To win in the 21st century, Democrats must cultivate and hire people of color in the central areas of communications, fund-raising, research, operations and management. Diversity in staffing is more than a nice nod to our multicultural party. Our success is built on diverse coalitions, and Democrats must have culturally competent staff members.

With this in mind, we cultivated a new generation of political operatives, organizers and fund-raisers from the very start. Stacey intentionally hired staff that looked like the diverse state of Georgia, and we augmented their work with a robust internship program. Year-round staff members, interns and fellows worked on the legislative session, learning the policy issues that affected Georgians. And every two years, we hired even more young people for the election cycle, training them to run campaigns, guide communications and organize in the legislative districts where we knew we could one day win but also where losing was highly likely. This new class of operatives came from every region of the state, carrying the concerns of their communities with them.

Cultivating a new political dynamic in state politics often puts you at loggerheads with the political operatives and professional consultants who have dominated Democratic politics. Bringing in new voices and changing the traditional conversation about how to win does more than defy the status quo. It invites an existential crisis and threatens livelihoods. To build a new battleground state, any leaders pushing this evolution will face resistance and, at times, open warfare from those who are on their side of the aisle but also on the other side of the struggle for ascendancy. The painful truth is that internecine warfare isn't simply a Republican problem — far from it. Failure can come not only at the ballot box but also in denunciations of this approach to coalition-building at party meetings or in conversations with donors or in the pages of the local paper.

The established political theory of victory in Georgia held that Democrats had hit their limits in Black turnout and that the key to winning was to regain white support for Democrats from Republicans and, crucially, to position ourselves to be more like Republicans to accomplish that goal. To be fair, this widely held belief continues to govern much of Democratic politics. But the composition of Georgia offered a real-time test of what

was possible. If we could build the registration, turnout, engagement and support from every community — Black, white, Latino, Native American, Asian-American — we could manifest a new political reality.

Our approach was rooted in the demographic numbers and in the moral clarity provided by an authentic, multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational and truly statewide coalition. More important, we understood that the transformation of what had become a solidly red state was a continuing campaign and must not be centered on one election or one leader.

Recent Democratic wins in Georgia and Arizona reflect growth in support from white voters but also, critically, increased turnout and support from Black, Latino, Asian-American and Native American communities. In Georgia, we have diverse and fast-growing populations of Latino and Asian-Americans along with a steady increase in the share of the Black population, both from immigration and from migration from other areas of the country. People of color live in all communities in Georgia, not just in our cities; they make up a third of rural Georgians and hold a significant status in suburban and exurban communities.

Some elections, like the one in 2018, represented a sea change in midterm voter participation. There were huge increases in votes from people of color in Georgia — where turnout by Asian-Americans and Latinos tripled. In 2018, 1.2 million Black Georgians voted for Stacey, eclipsing the 1.1 million total Democratic voters in 2014. What 2018 also presaged was the shift in how white voters chose their candidates, giving a Black woman a higher percentage of white Democratic votes than any candidate had received from Georgia voters since Bill Clinton ran for president. White support jumped by about three points, and voters of color increased their turnout during Stacey's 2018 run, and then both dynamics continued in the 2020 general election. Even the 2021 runoffs continued to bring to bear the most diverse coalition the state has ever seen.

We respectfully disagree with the widely cited analysis done by The Upshot at The New York Times regarding the participation rates of groups of voters in Georgia in the 2020 general election. TargetSmart, a political data company, found that when you factor in voters who do not list their race — a growing proportion of the electorate — the picture looks different. We can't know for certain who these voters are, but TargetSmart expects that many of them are voters of color. The company calculates that the Black share of the vote in Georgia was actually roughly 29 percent, which is commensurate with the numbers in previous elections.

We acknowledge that this represents a slight decrease as part of the whole; we also saw a sharp increase in Latino and Asian and Pacific Islander voters. We do not agree, however, with the notion that Georgia lost 2 percent of its Black vote share. For the 2021 runoffs, we



do agree with what The Upshot and others saw: unusually high turnout for both parties (for runoff elections) but extraordinarily high Black turnout, which in our view powered Senator Ossoff's and Senator Warnock's recount-proof wins.

### **Surround yourself with smart people.**

Lead strategists are vital to building a battleground state. They see the big picture and get you up to scale. You can't build a battleground state with just grassroots organizing or relying on a competent state legislative caucus. Each of these pieces has to be driven by someone who sees the full playing field.

Too often this person is messianic, or someone beholden to specific donors or a charismatic elected official. At their best, they're someone like Tram Nguyen, an executive director of New Virginia Majority, who played a key role in building a Democratic governing trifecta there for the first time since 1993.

Most states have some number of good elected political leaders, effective party leaders, committed organizers and high-performing progressive nonprofits. But they might not know one another, and the most talented strategists might not be well known because they're in junior and midlevel roles. This cohort of leaders has to look for the other high-performers and start working across silos and missions. They have to talk about how their roles can be mutually reinforcing, not competitive, which is often the case because of resource deficits.

Fund-raising to fuel the development of a new battleground state is not zero-sum. The success of one group should not diminish the potential success of another. In fact, the success of one or two political entities can lift the reputation of the whole state with both local and national donors. That's what we were able to do in Georgia in the early years of the decade, and that work has paid off by developing a network of groups and operatives that has gained the trust — and benefited from the largess — of a set of major donors.

### **One more time: Organizing is the soul.**

We have talked a lot about how we won in Georgia and about how to maintain a multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational statewide coalition. This work takes time and investment, as we have said, in an electoral strategy that makes progress over time.

But it also takes belief from the electorate you seek, one that is resilient when the wins don't materialize or when the other side recognizes and reacts regressively to your growing power. That is why organizing was and is the soul of how we operate every day. Our organizing centers, always, on everyday people dealing with deep wealth and income inequality and structural racism, with xenophobia and bigotry and, in the South, with some of the worst health and educational outcomes in America.

Other states can build and execute their own 10-year plans. For Georgia and much of the Sun Belt, the primary opportunity is in a growing cohort of people of color who see Democratic policies as their path to prosperity. For other states, a resurgence of labor unions or an increase in youth participation may be the key to adding new voices and voters. Democratic power in Georgia is durable because it is formed on a basis that treats the cities and the rural hinterlands with the same respect shown to the suburbs and exurbs.

By identifying an untapped or underrepresented voter pool, states can redefine their path to victory. To do so, each state must recognize that losing better is a crucial part of engineering a battleground state. Over time, with a larger, comprehensive strategy in place, smart investments, sustained effort and a commitment to organizing and civic engagement across communities — and again, a tolerance for setbacks — we can create a new generation of competitive states, from sea to shining sea.

Stacey Abrams (@staceyabrams), who was the Democratic nominee for governor in Georgia in 2018, is the founder of Fair Fight Action and the author of “Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose and the Fight for a Fair America.” Lauren Groh-Wargo (@gwlauren), the former campaign manager for Ms. Abrams’s 2018 campaign, is the chief executive of Fair Fight Action.

---

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We’d like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here’s our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).*

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.*