

ELECTIONS

Education is an issue shaping the Georgia primary election. How GOP policies could impact results



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Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp in April signed a slew of legislation focused on education, scoring himself and Republican allies a win heading into elections.

Georgia Republicans' focus on educational legislation looks to replicate the successful gubernatorial campaign of Virginia's Glenn Youngkin. But while classrooms have been the heart of the political debate in past months, the impact remains to be seen on the future of Georgia's classrooms or this year's political races.

"I think a lot of this is being driven by the Virginia experience," said Charles Bullock, professor of political science at University of Georgia. "It was something of an upset, and I think most people looking at it would say a major factor in his success revolved around educational issues."

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The conservative push on education has been a tight rope. In addition to the recent legislation passed, Gov. Kemp has also fulfilled a promise to give teachers a \$5,000 pay raise. He also has proposed full funding of Georgia's quality basic education funding formula, which sets the provisions for K-12 educational funding.

In the primary, this may help Kemp, who as an incumbent has a record to show. But the effects of this in a general election, where Republicans will look to whittle away inroads Democrats made in suburban areas, remain unclear, according to UGA's Bullock.

"I don't know if it would necessarily be an offset for a voter who is unhappy with some other aspects of what he has done," Bullock said. "If you're opposed to, say, the constitutional carry, or you're critical the state hasn't expanded Medicaid. I'm not sure this would offset it."

At the center of the legislation signed by Gov. Kemp is a measure that directs public school teachers on how they teach about race. It also establishes an oversight committee that has the power to bar transgender students from competing on sports teams that do not match the gender on their birth certificates.

On Wednesday, the Georgia High School Association's executive committee unanimously voted to require athletes to compete based on the gender assigned at birth. With the vote, transgender athletes would be effectively barred from participating based on gender identification.

"That was not an issue in Virginia but it appears to be a pretty hot button issue now," Bullock said. "It's the kind of thing that maybe appeals to or is concerning to the suburban mothers, who are potentially a decisive component within a general election."

Critical to President Joe Biden's win in Georgia, and the following two wins in the Senate run-off races from Democrats, were the gains the Democrat party made in white, college-educated men and women in the suburbs, Bullock said.

"Both of those groups continue to vote Republican, but Democrats were getting around 40 percent of that vote," he said. "If you take that and add it to the support Democrats were getting from minority voters that helps to form a coalition."

But the recent push on education is viewed as a viable path to winning back this group of voters to Republicans.

Another piece of legislation signed also makes it easier for parents to seek to remove books considered inappropriate or "obscene" from public schools' classwork or courses.

"Parents deserve transparency, oversight, and options when it comes to their children's education," Carson Steelman, press secretary for Heritage Action, a conservative organization, said in a statement following the legislation's signing. "Thanks to the General Assembly and Governor Kemp, Georgia is on the front lines of the fight for parental rights."

'It truly is a solution looking for a problem'

While Republicans have positioned the legislation signed as beneficial to parents, educators and advocates have noted the divisiveness they may create, placing teachers and educators against each other.

"There's a partnership between teachers and parents and that partnership is necessary, but it's also a natural partnership," Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, said. "Parents and educators have one goal ultimately and that is the success of our kids."

But the tone behind the legislation signed may turn this partnership into an adversarial relationship, Morgan said.

Georgia educators are also already required to teach the Georgia Standards of Excellence, she said, which do not include divisive concepts.

"It truly is a solution looking for a problem," Morgan said. "If the problem existed in a very small minority of cases the solution for that individual educator not living up to their responsibilities as an educator already exists."

Margaret Ciccarelli, director of Legislative Services at the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, said educators are concerned that several of the bills may give teachers mixed messages on how they can talk about racial issues and Georgia history in the classroom.

"There was not a serious analysis in any of the hearings at which this legislation was debated about existing Georgia code that requires transparency and how it wasn't working," Ciccarelli said. "The legislation really seemed to jump to the conclusion that we have an existing problem in Georgia schools and presented very heavy-handed solutions that we fear may make it difficult for educators to know where the line is."

Ciccarelli said to the governor's office's credit, that the legislation positioned as the parents' bill of rights was moved transparently.

"That being said, at PAGE we did not understand why the legislation needed to be brought," she said. "Multiple times during the legislative process the representatives of the governor said that it mostly just codified existing statutes, and state board and local board policies."

Tim Cain, a UGA professor whose research centers on academic freedom, said schools have been a flash point for the country's culture wars throughout history.

"Just over the course of the 20th century there's been different waves of these efforts," Cain said. "You think about the evolution controversies in the 1910s and 1920s where more than 20 states tried to ban the teaching of evolution in K-12 education, and some of those in higher education as well. Then we can think of the McCarthyist attacks of the late 1940s and 1950s."

The times when the country is most divided is when these issues are often played out through schools, he said. The combination of the pandemic and the Virginia state races last year may have also set the conditions for what is being seen

“Those attacks on education seemed to be very effective on the gubernatorial race,” Cain said. “When we see those attacks being effective on rallying a base and rallying voters, and not just the base but swing voters as well because of how things are characterized, that then has the power to cross into other states for political reasons.”

Will education be an Election Day issue?

Whether or not the tight rope between funding schools and passing legislation critics view as a restriction will contribute to success on Election Day remains unclear.

But the legislation again places educators at the heart of the latest cultural debate. The passage of the legislation also comes amidst challenges teachers are already facing due to pandemic pressures.

A study conducted by PAGE late last year found over half of all the teachers polled would not recommend a career in education. In addition to this, 31% of respondents also reported they were unlikely or highly unlikely to stay in the educational field. Burnout was the leading factor in teachers' responses.

Ciccarelli said school leaders already experience high levels of burnout because of the demands placed on them. And while administrator positions are typically high-stress jobs, the pandemic has exacerbated the problem.

"They will now be the arbiters of these cultural debates at a time when they are already burned out from navigating the culture wars during the pandemic," she said.

While the focus on education may have paid dividends in Virginia for Republicans, it remains unclear how much it will play a role in Georgia. In the primary, candidates with similar beliefs will be facing off against one another, and by November the political landscape may be different.

But Bullock noted educators tend to lean toward the Democrat party, and may also be part of the suburban constituency Republicans look to win back.

If pay raises and school funding can edge them to the Republican party it could score a big win, he said. Similarly, the recent legislation that may pose restrictions on educators could draw them out fiercely against Republicans.

Georgia's recent elections also show the state is very evenly divided, Bullock said, and it may not take much to tip the scales either way.

"If you look back to the presidential election 12,000 votes would turn that around," he said. "You're not needing to move massive numbers to potentially change the outcome."