

Racial Politics in Georgia and the Presidential Elections

Governor Brian Kemp files suit against Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms over COVID-19 mitigation efforts

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*A contested gubernatorial election in 2018 involving Republican **Secretary of State Brian Kemp** and former Georgia State House Minority Leader **Stacey Abrams** highlighted problems related to voter suppression based upon the national oppression of the African American people.*

Hundreds of thousands of people were disenfranchised in this historic poll which could have placed the first African American woman as governor of a state.

The Abrams campaign went for weeks without conceding defeat to Kemp. Nonetheless, even after the conscience of the people of the United States had been heightened, the governorship of Kemp was allowed to move forward.

In 2020, amid the worst public health crisis in the U.S. for more than a century, Kemp has filed suit against Atlanta's African American **Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms** saying that she does not have the authority to require the wearing of masks in the city. This pandemic has spawned the precipitous decline in the economy domestically and internationally while the federal government in Washington has failed to provide adequate assistance to millions of workers.

Kemp has been a loyal follower of the Trump administration which in deference to its constituency has played to the instincts of the COVID-19 denialists and anti-scientific elements in order to shore up a base of conservative and neo-fascist voters. Now that Trump has been photographed donning a mask, perhaps these officials who follow his line on science and public health will recognize that these positions are endangering their own political status in an election year.

Although Trump is trailing Democratic presumptive nominee **Joe Biden** by double digits, the former Vice President under President Barack Obama, and a senator from Delaware, the corporate media polls in 2016 were proven horribly incorrect when the Republican candidate won the election through securing far more electoral votes. The popular vote in southern states such as Georgia could be important in determining the outcome of the November elections.

Nonetheless, in many southern states the Democratic candidates for president have not won a majority in decades. This reality serves as a consistent impediment to the exercise of

Black political power within the framework of a racist capitalist system.

Atlanta has been the scene of mass demonstrations and civil unrest stemming from the police execution of **George Floyd** on May 25. Several police officers have been disciplined and charged in the severe beatings of civilians and the shooting death of 27-year-old African American motorist Rayshard Brooks.



Atlanta erupts after Rayshard Brooks police execution

Earlier on July 6, Kemp announced the deployment of National Guard troops to Atlanta purportedly in response to the rise in violence within the city. The escalation in interpersonal conflict in Atlanta and other municipalities in the U.S., along with the continuing demonstrations against police brutality and other forms of racist violence against African Americans, are being melded together as a rationale for outside interference by the state and federal governments in patrolling the cities.

The Trump administration in June evoked the slavery-era Insurrection Act of 1807 mandating the dispatching of federal troops to suppress the legitimate demonstrations and rebellions in response to the law-enforcement executions of African Americans. The president is following up on this pledge by not only encouraging like-minded state governments to send in military forces notwithstanding the stationing of agents directly responsible to the White House, Justice Department and the Pentagon.

A Historical Legacy of Racist Violence and Political Suppression

Georgia was a slave state which seceded from the Union and joined the Confederate States of America (CSA) and actively participated in the Civil War during 1861-1865. After the defeat of the Confederacy, Georgia **Governor Joseph E. Brown** surrendered and was paroled by the federal government. (See [this](#))

Later however, Brown attempted to convene the state General Assembly composed of Confederate representatives and was placed under detention in Washington, D.C. Brown left behind a state plundered by the War where a half million whites felt threatened with losing control over more than 400,000 emancipated Africans.

There was a period of Presidential Reconstruction where the new General Assembly ratified the 13th Amendment which legally freed enslaved Africans by December 1865. Nonetheless, recently emancipated Africans fled the plantations and migrated to the cities and towns seeking an independent existence.

It was in the state of Georgia at Savannah that Union Military **General William T. Sherman** issued his Special Field Order No. 15 which called for the breaking up of the plantations and the granting to emancipated slaves some 40 acres and a mule. This proposal provided an avenue for those freed Africans to develop a self-reliant future beyond the collapse of the antebellum economy.

The then **President Andrew Johnson**, a Southerner from Tennessee who opposed secession, did not believe in holding the planters accountable for their rebellion against the federal government. This attitude on the part of Johnson was reflected in what eventually transpired in Georgia and other former Confederate states.

According to one account of this period in Georgia:

“Under that order (No. 15), federal authorities confiscated ‘abandoned lands’ along the coast and distributed them to freed slaves. This distribution proved temporary, however, as most of the land was soon restored to its original owners. Nonetheless, some Black families were able to buy or lease land from the government.” (See [this](#))

African Americans were active in state politics during Reconstruction and leaders such as African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Bishop Henry McNeal Turner fought to ensure the right to the franchise and land ownership. Turner was elected to the State Assembly and served for many years.

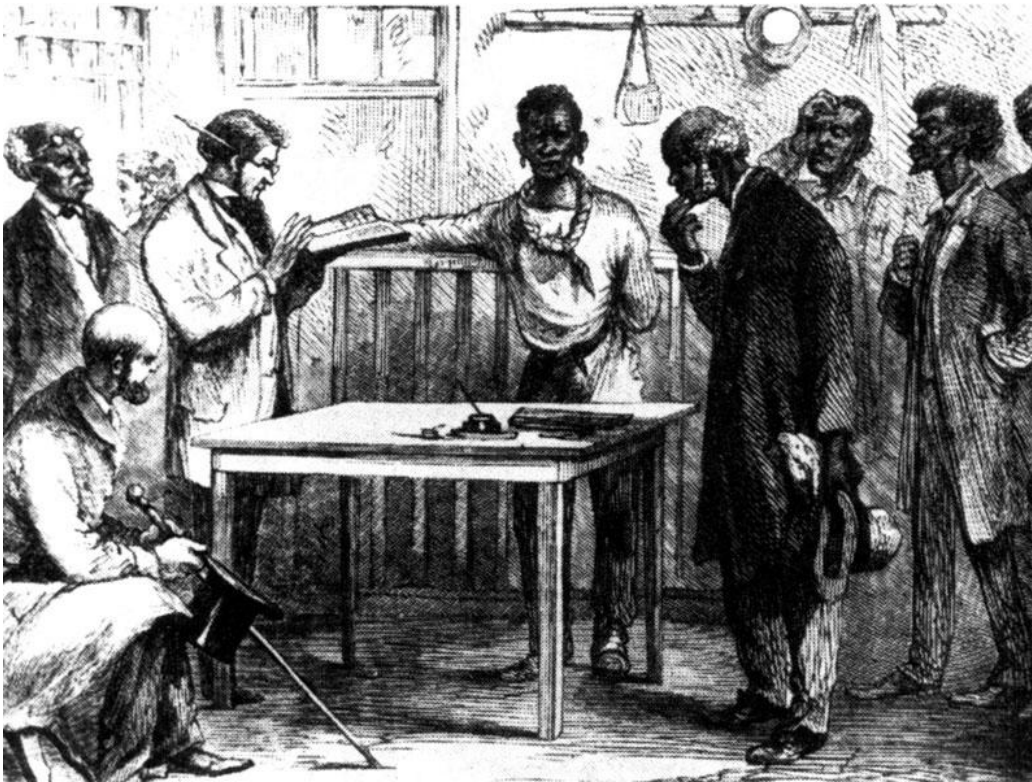
Nevertheless, resistance from the racist landowners and politicians led to the expulsion of African Americans from the State Assembly in 1868 along with the Camilla Massacre, where dozens of Blacks were gunned down while traveling from Albany to this southern town to participate in a Republican Party state convention. At least 12 people were killed in an effort to terrorize African Americans and force them from political activity. Later that year, the federal government re-imposed military rule, denying the state’s congressmen from taking their seats in Washington, D.C. After the demise of Radical Reconstruction, African Americans by the end of the 19th century were largely excluded from state and national politics.

It would take another century for African Americans to win the right to the franchise and some semblance of equality. During the 1950s and 1960s, Atlanta became a center for the Civil Rights Movement where both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), co-founded by **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were headquartered. In addition, Atlanta became an important source for African American education after the Civil War and Reconstruction as home to several leading Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Implications for the Outcome of the 2020 Presidential Elections

This legacy of voter suppression, a key component in the nationally oppressive apparatus of

the capitalist state in the U.S., portends much for the upcoming elections in November 2020 where Trump is seeking a second term of office. The same Georgia governor responsible for the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of voters in 2018 when he served as Secretary of State, is now presiding over the polls which will determine whether his political ally in the White House remains in that position.



African Americans registering to vote during Reconstruction in Georgia

The Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden has said next to nothing on the important questions of voter suppression and racist state violence against the African American people. Biden's main talking point: that he is not Donald Trump and therefore will "heal the nation" may not be enough to motivate the African American voters who are concerned with the rising rates of COVID-19 infections in their communities along with the mounting unemployment rates and its consequent evictions, foreclosures and homelessness.

Even with an enthusiastic electorate embodying a disdain for the policies of the Trump administration, if the right to vote is not guaranteed by local, state and federal governments the potential for a continuation of the current administration is quite possible. What is needed is the independent mobilization and organization of the people, the potential of which has been illustrated in the mass demonstrations and rebellions in recent months.

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Featured image: Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms and Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp; all images in this article are from the author

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