

December 20, 2019

Overview

Despite the absence of state and federal elections this year in Georgia, political theater has been active in our state of late and will be heating up even more in the next few weeks.

This political primer will quickly catch you up on the latest Georgia political news in anticipation of Dentons' Georgia legislative preview, which will be released the Tuesday prior to the State House and Senate convening for the second leg of the 155th Georgia General Assembly.

1. Senate Turn-Over

Georgians, regardless of political party, voiced their regret when US Senator Johnny Isakson (R) announced his retirement in late August. Known throughout the Senate chambers and here in Georgia as a consummate statesman with a steadfast belief in bipartisanship, Senator Isakson will leave behind a distinguished career.

Sen. Isakson will be replaced in the Senate by Kelly Loeffler, CEO of Bakkt, a digital asset platform, and co-owner of the Atlanta Dream WBNA franchise. A longtime Republican, Loeffler was selected by Gov. Kemp after a highly unusual public application process continued long enough for the Governor to narrow down his internal list.

One name on the list, who was ultimately not chosen, US Representative Doug Collins (R-GA-9), made the decision by Gov. Kemp significantly more difficult. As ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Collins has made a name for himself as one of President Trump's staunchest and most effective defenders on Capitol Hill.

Rep. Collins was endorsed by President Trump and his allies, including talk show host Sean Hannity and fellow US House members around the country, including Representative Matt Gaetz (R-FL-1).

Gov. Kemp stood firm in the face of significant pressure from a President who had backed him heavily in his 2018 gubernatorial runoff primary campaign against then Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle. Instead of selecting Rep. Collins, a known commodity in conservative Republican circles, Gov. Kemp chose Loeffler, a political newcomer with extensive business and civic experience and the wherewithal to funnel millions into a special election campaign in 2020. Choosing Loeffler is yet another appointment made by Gov. Kemp aimed, in part, at regaining ground lost in the vote-rich Atlanta suburbs of North Fulton, Cobb and Gwinnett Counties. The Governor may be hoping that Loeffler, who will share the ballot with him in 2022, will help regain the allegiance of educated suburban women, a demographic group that fled the GOP in 2018 and fueled Democratic gains in Congress and the state General Assembly.

While Loeffler has business and civic experience, she is untested in the political arena and Georgians will be watching

her intensely as she takes her seat in the US Senate and simultaneously launches her campaign in the upcoming special election.

2. Resignation Number Two—A Rising Star's Early Exit

US Representative Tom Graves (R-GA-14) will not seek reelection in 2020. A former State House member who rode the tea-party wave to Congress in 2010, Rep. Graves had amassed significant power in Washington prior to issuing his retirement proclamation to the surprise of many. A member of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Graves was seen by many as a future statewide candidate but instead is looking forward, he said, to a “new season in life.” His departure leaves a hole in the Georgia delegation to be filled by the conservative voters that dominate Northwest Georgia. Possible replacements could include State Sens. Jeff Mullis, Chuck Hefstetler and Bill Heath; State Reps. Rick Jasperse, Katie Dempsey and Trey Kelley; and former 6th Congressional District candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene.

3. Resignation Number Three—Earlier than Expected

Georgia Supreme Court Justice Robert Benham, the first African-American to serve on the state's high court, moved up his resignation date from December 31, 2020—the end of his current term—to March 1, 2020

As such, Gov. Brian Kemp will appoint his successor, who will not run for reelection until 2022. Benham's announcement effectively ends the campaign to succeed him, which drew several candidates, including Court of Appeals Judge Sara Doyle, former US Rep. John Barrow, former state lawmakers Beth Beskin and Superior Court Judge Horace Johnson.

4. A Georgian for Vice President?

Former Vice President Joe Biden hinted that two prominent Georgia Democratic women were on his vice presidential short list. While he did not name them, he referred to “the former assistant attorney general who got fired” (Sally Yates) and “the woman who should be the governor of Georgia” (Stacey Abrams) as possible running mates. His decision could be even more important than in years past if you believe reports that he is seriously considering serving only one term if he wins the White House. In such a scenario his vice president would be an early front runner to succeed him.

In sum, a fast-changing and unpredictable political landscape has handed Gov. Kemp two major appointments, opened a seat in Georgia's congressional delegation and fueled speculation of a Georgian in the White House. And all of this is in advance of a state legislative session the highlight of which will likely be a contentious budget process, thanks to declining state revenue and cost-cutting directives from the Governor.

Keep a lookout for our session preview for more on the coming budget debate and the other issues likely to consume the attention of state lawmakers when they return to Atlanta in January.

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