

# [***These Republicans won states that Trump lost in 2020. Their endorsements are lukewarm (or withheld)***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJK-1FF1-JC5B-G0DW-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

ATLANTA — Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp will back his fellow Republicans' presidential ticket in November. That does not mean he will cheerlead for former President Donald Trump or even endorse him by name.

“I’m going to support the nominee,” Kemp told reporters this week after Trump won his state's primary on his way to clinching the GOP nomination.

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, once a favorite [*potential presidential candidate*](https://apnews.com/article/glenn-youngkin-president-trump-2024-gop-91adf2b58e18f2d48da29c6219570537) for anti-Trump Republicans, officially endorsed the former president last week. But he did so only after Trump won the Virginia primary on [*Super Tuesday*](https://apnews.com/article/super-tuesday-trump-biden-rematch-primaries-2024-e36971a222a2b50d35cb0a2c603ce4d5). And Virginia Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears, one of the nation's [*highest-ranking Black Republicans*](https://apnews.com/ea07010e9cf4b6794ffbdf560b413250), still won't endorse him.

“Everybody has to make their own decision,” she told reporters after Trump's victory. She then cited an Old Testament verse, Hosea 8:4, that reads in part, “They have set up kings, but not by me.”

While Trump coasted to his third consecutive Republican nomination, his domination of the party isn't seamless. Some high-profile members of his party, particularly in swing states full of voters skeptical of Trump, are trying to keep their distance while preserving their own futures.

For figures like Kemp and Youngkin who could make their own presidential bids in four years, that means careful positioning intended to satisfy enough Trump backers without alienating voters repelled by the former president. For Trump, it means a rockier road to winning coalitions in battleground states he lost to Biden in 2020 and Kemp and Youngkin won since, proceeding to enact policies popular with the right.

“He’s the King Kong of Republican ***politics***,” Whit Ayres, who worked for Florida Sen. Marco Rubio’s presidential campaign in 2016, said in an interview leading up to Trump officially securing the nomination. But, Ayres said, that's not the same thing as unifying the party and expanding the coalition in a general election.

A Trump campaign spokesman did not response to an Associated Press inquiry about how the former president plans to build party unity or seek more endorsements ahead of November.

Trump heads into a rematch with President Joe Biden facing a contingent of Republican dissenters, many of whom backed former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley before she dropped out after Super Tuesday. Haley ran above her statewide margins throughout the primary in [*areas with lots of suburban voters and college graduates*](https://apnews.com/article/haley-polling-trump-gop-super-tuesday-109ce563f68aa8e1b159d98769e943d8), highlighting Trump's enduring weaknesses with those groups.

Haley won 35% of Virginia’s primary vote. And nearly 78,000 people in Georgia — about 13% of the total vote — chose her in Tuesday's primary, though early voting was open before she dropped out.

Haley [*declined to endorse Trump*](https://apnews.com/article/nikki-haley-republican-trump-super-tuesday-losses-95ab56b68a8eefbbf04ef90f2f00ef29) as she suspended her campaign and instead urged him to try “bringing people into your cause, not turning them away.”

Trump “has to earn the votes of people who have moved away from the party,” said Eric Tanenblatt, a national GOP fundraiser who backed Haley over Trump.

Tanenblatt said he sees “no evidence” so far that Trump or his team are reaching out aggressively to court skeptical Republicans, and he argued that successful Republican elected officials are well-positioned to let 2024 play out on their own terms.

In 2021, a year after Biden won Virginia by double digits, Youngkin maintained Trump’s advantage across rural areas and small towns but [*flipped enough Biden voters*](https://apnews.com/article/virginia-election-ap-votecast-survey-75520c5c9a245bee384526abc138a61a) in more urban and suburban areas. In Georgia, Trump underperformed in the Atlanta suburbs, helping Biden win statewide by less than 12,000 votes out of 5 million cast. Two years later, Kemp romped to a 7.5-point reelection victory, [*outperforming Trump’s marks*](https://apnews.com/article/georgia-governor-race-2022-midterm-elections-f976a0e81f193277d22e176faa852acb) across the state.

Kemp, for his part, seems to have settled on how to navigate his party’s divided ***politics***: hammer Biden, focus on Georgia and talk about the future.

“It doesn’t really matter who our nominee is or would have been — my goal is to make sure we’re keeping our legislative majorities,” Kemp said this week, making clear that his top electoral priority is his own state.

Like Trump, Kemp has been especially animated about immigration, especially since [*Laken Riley*](https://apnews.com/article/laken-riley-university-georgia-death-nursing-student-a88e92600ab4dcce1a88e121b7b9c722), a nursing student, was killed in Athens, Georgia, prompting authorities to charge a man they say came into the U.S. illegally from Venezuela.

“The president had control of the House and the Senate from 2020 to 2022 and did nothing about the border, and we were complaining just as much then as we are now,” Kemp said this week, chiding Biden for [*using his State of the Union*](https://apnews.com/article/state-of-union-biden-gaza-ukraine-israel-1a42ff9d4ef3e0f2753e43ac8d39fc18) to remind voters that Senate Republicans stymied a border security deal.

But Kemp remains dismissive of Trump’s [*continued lies*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-indictment-2020-election-lies-georgia-misinformation-4b2269d68dad3024bd5afa711478505a) that his loss was somehow rigged, saying often that Republicans “don't need to be looking in the rearview mirror” or “complaining about the 2020 election.” He typically skips naming Trump when offering that advice, too.

The governor and the former president have had an uneasy relationship since Kemp rejected Trump's pressure to help overturn Biden’s victory in Georgia — a campaign for which the former president now faces a [*racketeering indictment*](https://apnews.com/article/georgia-election-interference-2020-trump-46e0b68c25719c404130f7e6eab69dcd) in Fulton County.

“We got to give people a reason to vote for us, not just be against the other candidate,” Kemp said. Of course, when asked explicitly why he would support Trump after how aggressively the former president skewered him after 2020, Kemp pivoted to the opposition. “Well, I think he’d be better than Joe Biden,” Kemp said. “It’s as simple as that.”

Youngkin was a bit more complimentary. In his endorsement, Youngkin praised Trump’s record on taxes, immigration and the economy and said “it’s time to unite around strong leadership and policies that grow our great nation, not four more years of President Biden.”

Still, that argument came in a written statement issued by Youngkin's political action committee and circulated on social media, not in a live event with voters or where the governor could take questions.

Whether or not Trump wins in November, Republicans who distance themselves from him now may have to placate Trump's most ardent fans in a future presidential primary.

Rose McDonald, an 87-year-old who voted Tuesday for Trump in the northern suburbs of Atlanta, insisted “there were things that happened that we know weren’t right with all those mail votes." Federal and state investigations have found no evidence of tampering with mail-in ballots that could have swung the election.

“I’m mostly satisfied with Kemp,” she said. “Mostly – I still think he was a chicken in 2020 for not letting Trump challenge the election.”

Kemp believes his political organization, even if it stays focused exclusively on legislative races, will prove his value and loyalty to the party.

“My belief is if we do that well as Republicans and tell people what we’re for and stay focused on the future, we’ll have a great night,” Kemp said, “and that’ll be all the way up and down the ticket.”

\_\_\_ Associated Press reporter Jeff Amy in Atlanta and Sarah Rankin in Richmond, Virginia, contributed to this report.

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