

# [***In 50-50 Georgia, unhappiness with the choices but urgency about voting***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BW6-4V11-JBSS-S003-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Decatur, Georgia (CNN) &#8212; Rebel Teahouse is Christine Nguyen's business. And her happy place.

Nguyen, 29, was a neuro ICU nurse, often treating patients who suffered a stroke or had brain cancer. Stressful enough, and then Covid-19 hit.

"We were right there - frontline," Nguyen told us in an interview. "There were all these battles about whether or not we should be vaccinated. ... Seeing all the death didn't help either."

So Nguyen left her nursing job and became an entrepreneur, opening a boba tea shop in a place that, like her, is in the middle of giant change.

"Two or three years ago, I would definitely be in scrubs. I would be tired," Nguyen said. "Nowadays, if you come into the shop, you will see I am always happy. There is just this different air - that I feel I can bring something to the community."

Decatur is in DeKalb County, one of the growing Atlanta suburbs that in 2020 rebuked [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) and helped [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) flip Georgia blue and win the White House. Trump's caustic tone is one source of his suburban struggles; his erratic handling of the Covid-19 pandemic - things like questioning science and suggesting ingesting bleach might help - made things worse.

"I definitely did not want Trump to win again," Nguyen said.

Yet she couldn't bring herself to vote for Biden and didn't vote that year.

"Because he was out of touch with our generation," Nguyen said.

This year, Nguyen says she will vote, and every few months she allows a local voter registration group to set up tables at Rebel.

She still has reservations about Biden, including his age and his handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict. But she sees voting as essential.

"The battle that is going on right now with abortion, I think that is something that speaks to me," Nguyen said. Still, she is undecided because of her qualms about Biden. But she's not a Trump fan. And looking at Georgia's 2020 math, she said, "Going third party, it feels like you are throwing your vote away."

That 2020 margin was [*just shy of 12,000 votes*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/results/president), so every shift matters here. Our visit was part of a [*CNN project*](https://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/all-over-the-map) to track the 2024 campaign through the eyes and experiences of voters who live in the battleground states - and the communities within them - that will determine the presidential winner.

That Georgia is among them is still a bit of a shock to locals.

"I never thought that could happen," Nguyen said. "I was, like, that's awesome."

Explaining Georgia's suburban evolution

Jan and Celia Gardner are conservatives and consistent Republican voters living Georgia's political change. They bought a home in the DeKalb enclave of Dunwoody 27 years ago.

"Pretty much a conservative community," is how Jan Gardner remembers it back then. "We are now a split community."

The Gardners wish Trump would tone down his rhetoric but are loyal Republicans who see Biden as weak and believe the former president would lower taxes and improve border security. Jan Gardner says it is time to move on from debates about the 2020 election results, but he does echo many other Trump grievances.

"I don't think we trust the DOJ," he said of the Justice Department. "I don't think we trust the FBI. I don't think we trust the CIA. We don't trust most of government. We just don't."

Their street is trademark suburbia. Neat lawns. Spring flowers in bloom. Trees filling in green. It's the kind of place people take evening strolls, walk the dogs, watch the kids play. All that, Jan Gardner says, is a constant of the past quarter century. One change: people are much more hesitant to talk ***politics***.

Schools come up. Traffic. Local taxes.

"That's pretty much where it stops," Jan Gardner said. "You have a pretty good idea of why."

Jan Gardner is retired. Celia runs a small travel agency. A getting-to-know-you conversation around the kitchen counter is engaging and entertaining. But these days, they said, putting people with different political views in the chairs is too risky.

A visitor asks this: Why can't ***politics*** be fun?

"It is as long as everybody's thinking the same way," Celia Gardner said.

It would be easy to overlook DeKalb County's role in the 2020 stunner here, because it was at the forefront of Georgia's demographic and political shift.

In the 2000 Census, DeKalb was majority Black - 54% - and that number was up just a tad 20 years later. Over that time, the percentage of White DeKalb residents dropped a bit, while the Latino and Asian populations grew.

What's really driving America's suburban shift blue, however, is education level: 36% of DeKalb residents had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2000; it is now 47%. In the 2000 election, Democrat Al Gore received 70% in DeKalb; in 2020, Biden won 83%.

An inclination to vote third-party - unless it's close

The suburban shift is even more pronounced in Gwinnett County.

In 2000, Gwinnett had a population of 588,448 residents; 67% were White and 34% had a bachelor's degree or higher. George W. Bush won the county with 64%.

Now, Gwinnett's population is approaching 1 million, the White share of the population is down to 32% and the percentage of county residents with at least four years of college is up to 39%. Biden won Gwinnett County with 58%.

"I've seen a lot of change, a lot more diversity which is good," said Kim Cavaliere, a school nurse who moved to Gwinnett County two decades ago. "I see a lot of growth. ... Probably too much growth."

Ask Cavaliere to list her big issues, and you get health care, prescription drug costs, abortion rights, opposition to the availability of assault-style rifles.

"Democrat, right," she said with a laugh.

But Cavaliere has lost faith in both national political parties and voted for third-party candidates in both 2016 and 2020. She just might go that route again this November.

"I just don't feel comfortable with Biden's age and I don't feel comfortable with Trump's mouth," Cavaliere said.

Count Cavaliere as among those stunned by the 2020 result here.

"I was actually in shock," she said.

Knowing Georgia is now a battleground could influence Cavaliere's 2024 decision.

"His age is really concerning to me," she said of the 81-year-old president. Plus, Cavaliere added: "With Biden comes the vice president that I know nothing about and who hasn't really done anything honestly that I can be happy with."

Cavaliere speaks nostalgically of the pre-Covid Trump economy but said she could never vote for him because of his erratic behavior as president, culminating with his actions on January 6, 2021.

"The way he talks. The way he runs his mouth and get, you know, people going and different groups going and fighting," Cavaliere said.

She's still inclined to vote third-party again but is perhaps open to reconsidering if Georgia could settle a close race.

"You have two people and I just don't have a lot of faith in either one," she said. "But as far as being a little more secure, as far as being a little bit more rational - Biden. ... I might not have a choice."

Carey Fulks wants to keep Georgia blue but he, too, wishes he had a different choice.

"For all of the negative things you can say about the Republicans, at least they have people out there running who seem passionate," said Fulks, 35.

He moved back in with his parents during Covid-19 and is skeptical when he hears Biden describe the economy as booming.

"Part-time substitute teacher, part-time DoorDasher, part-time everything, almost," is how Fulks describes his economy. "All I could find at the moment. Just taking jobs as they come."

He is back in the Grove Park neighborhood where he grew up, and sees a lot of change here in Atlanta. "We're a transient city," Fulks said. "So most people who are here aren't from here."

Biden won 73% of the vote in Fulton County - Atlanta and the closest suburbs - and high turnout will again be critical to his Georgia chances. Fulks will be there for the president, though he describes his motivation as "more against Trump, probably."

Adjusting to the realities of living in a purple state

Hall County is about an hour's drive north of downtown Atlanta, less from most of DeKalb or Gwinnett. It is rural, and reliably red - Trump won 71% of the county vote in 2020.

Matt Vrahiotes fits right in here - Christian, conservative, Republican.

"I try to vote with my Bible, I really do," Vrahiotes said an an interview. "I try to think: what is the moral thing to do? What is the right thing to do? But it's been a little harder over the past couple of years to pick a candidate that I think fits what I believe and what I like."

Eight years ago, Vrahiotes and his wife opened Sweet Acre Farms, a fruit winery tucked into the rolling hills of Alto, a tiny town of about 1,000 people.

"The first winery in Hall County since Prohibition," Vrahiotes said.

We spoke just as [*Trump's first criminal trial*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-hush-money-trial-04-23-24/index.html) was getting under way - the New York case related to a hush money payment to an adult film actress.

"It sounds crazy," Vrahiotes said. "It sounds like an irresponsible person, an irresponsible thing to do." He added, though, that he has "things that are morally in question for both" Biden and Trump.

Vrahiotes supported Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in the GOP primaries and wishes someone other than Trump had won.

"I'm not a Trumper," he said. "I'm not somebody who's got the flag in the back of my truck running around and that sort of thing. Honestly, I wish there was another candidate who would have come through the primaries. ... I like to call myself a reasonable Republican."

His issue list leans Republican. But his qualms about Trump have him shopping.

"At this point, I really don't know," he said. "Kennedy is somebody we could also kind of take into consideration," he added, referring to independent candidate [*Robert F. Kennedy Jr.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/22/politics/polls-rfk-jr-third-party-independent/index.html)

Again, in a state where every shift matters, Vrahiotes is aware a third-party vote in Hall County could, in the end, help Biden.

"But you also have to vote the way you feel it needs to be voted for," Vrahiotes said.

Whether Vrahiotes will ultimately tell us his choice is an open question, his caution born of two things: Georgia's newfound battleground status and the political leanings of the customers who fill the winery's tasting room.

"You really have to be careful about the things that you do and the things that you say," Vrahiotes said. "It's part of being a small business owner. You are in a purple state. You have 50% one way and 50% the other."

Vrahioties did tell us he voted for Trump in 2016. But he declined to say who he voted for in 2020 - when Georgia's flip blue made things here a lot more complicated.

"Atlanta's not far from here - it's an hour away," Vrahiotes said. "I literally turn bottles of wine into shoes for my kids and registration for soccer. If I sit here and ostracize 50% of my community, or 50% of my customers ... it could hurt me. It could hurt my business tremendously. Because as of late, people are dividing themselves. You're for this guy or you're for this guy. And it's hard, it's really hard to play the middle."

By John King, CNN

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