

## **Atlanta's Suburbs Wonder if Newcomers Will Turn Them Blue**

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### **Body**

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JOHNS CREEK, Ga. -- At first blush, this bedroom city of 83,000 a half-hour north of Atlanta might be mistaken for the perfect example of a white-flight Sun Belt suburb.

It sits squarely in the congressional district once represented by Newt Gingrich, with excellent public schools and master-planned communities so pristine they could have been built by a model train aficionado. In 2015, the all-white City Council rejected the idea of expanding public transit out from majority-black Atlanta on the grounds that it "would increase high-density housing."

But something has been happening in Johns Creek -- and, indeed, across much of the vast archipelago of cul-de-sac communities north of Atlanta that served as the launchpad for Mr. Gingrich's 1994 Republican revolution. The promise of a suburban idyll has been increasingly attracting all kinds of people -- many of whom are not white, and not Republican.

Today, 24 percent of people in Johns Creek are of Asian heritage. Indian-Americans shop for saris at the Medlock Crossing strip mall and flock to the latest Bollywood hits at the multiplex. Chinese-Americans and food lovers of all stripes head to the Sichuan House, near the Target and Home Depot stores, for sliced pork ears in chili sauce and "tearfully spicy" mung bean noodles.

Indeed, the northern Atlanta suburbs, once considered bastions of Republicanism, are experiencing an identity crisis -- one that became acute with the success of a Democrat, Jon Ossoff, in a special House of Representatives election in Georgia's Sixth District, which last sent a Democrat to Congress in the Carter administration.

Fueled by fierce anti-Trump sentiment, millions in outside donations and an untiring door-to-door campaign mounted by liberals including many newcomers to the district, Mr. Ossoff placed first in an 18-way race in April and will face Karen Handel, a fixture in Georgia Republican politics, in a June 20 runoff.

Many Republicans remain confident that Ms. Handel will prevail in a 70 percent-white district where even liberals concede that conservative culture dominates. Big churches and golf courses still do much to set the social tone, and homegrown conservative talk-radio personalities like Herman Cain and Erick Erickson help commuters assuage the increasingly painful slog through traffic.

November was a watershed, however. Though she did not carry Georgia, Hillary Clinton defeated Donald J. Trump in both suburban Cobb County, part of which is in the Sixth District, and nearby Gwinnett County. Both were once considered classic white-flight suburbs; today Gwinnett is majority-minority, and Cobb is fast heading that way.

## Atlanta's Suburbs Wonder if Newcomers Will Turn Them Blue

At the same time, Republicans here reject the idea that demography is political destiny. Instead, they envision a future in which the charms of suburban life, and the conservative politics that made it possible, will rub off on everyone. Instead of the newcomers changing the suburbs, they say, the suburbs will change the newcomers.

"You move to Cobb, you've got a good job and cheaper property taxes, and you say, 'Hey, maybe this is a better way,' " said Michael Altman, 58, a former vice chairman of the Cobb County Republican Party.

It is the kind of political reckoning that many American suburbs may soon confront, if they haven't already. A report last year by the Urban Land Institute noted that the percentage of foreign-born Americans was at its highest in 90 years, and that millennials were now starting families and looking for good public schools. It estimated that 79 percent of the nation's household growth would occur in the suburbs in the next decade, much of it in "affordable sunshine states" where the weather is warm, taxes are low and homes are relatively cheap.

Low taxes, cheap homes and sunshine indeed helped fuel the rise of Atlanta's northern suburbs beginning in the 1950s -- along with a heavy dollop of racism.

During integration the Klan presence was strong in Cobb County, and in later years, it was home to the former segregationist governor Lester Maddox and the white supremacist and convicted church bomber J. B. Stoner. But Cobb also became home to a large group of transplants decoupled from local history, many of them professionals transferred to metro Atlanta from elsewhere who were looking for good public schools.

Mr. Gingrich, who served as House speaker from 1995 to 1999, used language in his heyday that liberals saw as racially coded, railing against the "welfare state" of Atlanta. But for the most part he appealed to newcomers and old-timers alike, extolling free markets, technology and traditional values as a means of answering "the cries of the baby boom generation for a new politics responsive to the future's needs."

Maddox and Stoner are long dead, but the high-performing schools in places like unincorporated East Cobb County still serve as a magnet. Eight years ago, they attracted Jen Cox, a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat who had been living in Denver.

On a recent afternoon, Ms. Cox, a 47-year-old mother and real estate agent, backed her Toyota Highlander out of the garage of her handsome five-bedroom home in a neighborhood called Kings Cove. She drove past subdivisions of simple 1970s-vintage homes and newer, busier McMansions. Some of the neighborhood names, like Plantation North, hinted at the tumult of Southern history, though most -- Edgewater, Carriage Park -- strove for a more ahistoric blandness.

Ms. Cox is a co-founder of PaveltBlue, one of the many new grass-roots liberal groups that have sprung up or vastly expanded to help a Democrat win the Sixth District contest. As she passed numerous yard signs for Mr. Ossoff, she noted that such a display of support for a liberal would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

Ms. Cox described the social pressure to conform here that pervaded dinner parties and play dates, influencing the politics of even newcomers. "It's something really palpable here, like, 'You're in the Deep South. This is the way it is, and if you don't like it, we don't want to hear from you,' " she said.

But now, with the volunteers pushing Mr. Ossoff into the runoff, she said: "I don't think there's a clear explanation to what's going on out here. I think everyone's trying to figure it out."

Some feel threatened by the new liberal activism. On Election Day in East Cobb, a man pulling out of a polling place parking lot in a Jeep asked Ed Neubaum, a man with an Ossoff sign, whether he was a fan of Nancy Pelosi.

Certainly, replied Mr. Neubaum, a 57-year-old real estate agent. The other man replied with a vulgarity, called Mr. Neubaum a socialist and said he was responsible for "the burning of America."

"The burning of America, my God!"

"Yeah, the violence that you propagate ..."

## Atlanta's Suburbs Wonder if Newcomers Will Turn Them Blue

"How can I propagate violence? Wow."

The man found an opening in the afternoon traffic. The Jeep roared off.

Mr. Ossoff's supporters mention a number of incidents like these: hostile, but not violent. And in recent years, the suburbs' changing racial realities have created their own tensions. In 2015, a Cobb County councilwoman who is black accused a county police officer of harassment and intimidation when the officer followed her home, aggressively she said, in an unmarked car. In January, a Gwinnett County commissioner, a white Republican, referred to Representative John Lewis, the civil rights icon, as a "racist pig" in a Facebook post, infuriating many Democrats and African-Americans, who called for the commissioner's resignation.

Others note the small daily acts of interracial harmony on the neighbor-to neighbor-level that do not make headlines.

At the same time, at the level of regional planning, the Cobb and Gwinnett county governments have remained staunchly opposed to expanding Atlanta's bus and rail passenger system, Marta, even as the road system has failed to keep up with the influx of drivers. The rejection of public transit has long been caught up with fears of minority incursions and crime and a philosophical disinclination to fund big government. But some here say that this, too, could be changing.

"We're not talking about whether Marta should, or mass transit should, come to Cobb County as much as we're talking about it being done smartly," said Jason Shepherd, chairman of the Cobb County Republican Party.

In Johns Creek, the Asian-American residents came not for rail lines but for the schools, just as whites had before them, said Anjali Enjeti, who moved to the city 10 years ago from Pennsylvania. Many also work in the numerous tech companies stuffed in the surrounding office parks.

As the number of Asian-Americans has grown, Ms. Enjeti, a freelance writer, has noticed a different kind of white flight, in which people are leaving for neighboring Forsyth County not because minorities are lowering the standards in public schools -- but because they are perceived to be raising them.

"The high school is too competitive," she quoted one white parent as saying in an online essay. "My kids won't get into a good college because of all of the Asians."

Ms. Enjeti said she assumed most of Johns Creek's minorities leaned Democrat, based on the get-out-the-vote efforts she has made on Mr. Ossoff's behalf.

But in November 2015, voters elected Jay Lin to the Johns Creek City Council in a nonpartisan race. He is a Taiwanese-American, the owner of a home remodeling business -- and a Republican.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/us/politics/ossoff-handel-georgia-sixth-district.html>

## Graphic

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PHOTOS: Signs of demographic change are evident across Atlanta's suburbs, including a cricket match on a baseball diamond in Roswell. (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUDRA MELTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (A1)

Abberley Township, above, a subdivision in Johns Creek, Ga., north of Atlanta. Jen Cox in the field office for Jon Ossoff, who is running for Georgia's Sixth District seat. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUDRA MELTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

MAURA FRIEDMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (A11)

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