

Kemp's 'unmatched' record of diverse choices

Gov. Brian Kemp has drawn praise from his political foes by carving out a record of tapping women and diverse candidates to coveted jobs in the state's judiciary and other important positions that for decades overwhelmingly went to white men.

About one-third of the Republican's judicial appointments are people of color and more than half are women, according to an analysis of records. Each of his three selections to statewide political posts have been first-of-their-kind decisions. And he's stocked several key state boards with members who better reflect Georgia's diversity.

The governor said in an interview that he's seeking talented candidates who have long been overlooked while also trying to broaden a GOP base dominated by older white voters. It's a strategy that played out this week with a string of headline-grabbing announcements.

He appointed Verda Colvin, a Black jurist praised by a bipartisan group of leaders, to the state Supreme Court. He named Fitz Johnson to the Public Service Commission, making him the first Black member of the utility-regulating agency since 2006. And he tapped three other Black women to judicial posts.

"I've had a track record, despite what some have said, of making diverse appointments for well over a decade, back to when I was secretary of state," said Kemp. "We've made historic picks that better reflect the state, but they're also well-respected conservatives."

The effort to diversify state boards and courtroom benches long dominated by white men drew applause across party lines. But critics stressed that the record won't distract left-leaning voters from his conservative political agenda, such as his support for an elections rewrite that Democrats say targets Black voters, when he faces re-election in 2022.

"It's always a positive when the governor names people to leadership positions who are more representative of the state," said state Sen. Sonya Halpern, D-Atlanta.

An eye on 2022

The governor and other Republicans are on the defensive after Democrats flipped Georgia in the November presidential election and swept the January U.S. Senate runoffs.

White voters made up over half, 53%, of all registered voters in Georgia in 2020, while roughly 30% were Black. But as Georgia's voting population climbs, the bulk of new voters — nearly two-thirds — are people of color.

Even as Kemp stresses his conservative stances to protect his mostly white right flank in a primary, the governor is also eager to tout the appointments to a broader electorate in a likely 2022 rematch against Stacey Abrams, who has yet to enter the race but is expected to do so.

“Qualified picks like these make it harder for Democrats to go to the proverbial ‘identity politics’ route to criticize his record,” said Chip Lake, a veteran Republican strategist who doesn’t consult for Kemp. “They will go there anyways, but it helps inoculate him from criticism that he’s racist or discriminatory.”

His highest-profile picks have earned the lion’s share of attention.

When he named financial executive Kelly Loeffler to a vacant U.S. Senate seat, choosing her over then-Rep. Doug Collins and a raft of other white men jockeying for the post, she became the first Georgia woman to cast a vote in the U.S. Senate.

His other two picks for statewide positions have also established new records. Kemp made John King the first Latino statewide official in Georgia history when he tapped him as the interim insurance commissioner. And Johnson, a retired businessman, is the first Black Republican on the regulatory agency.

Though many of his senior aides and administration deputies are white men, the governor can point to first-of-their-kind picks. Caylee Noggle was the first woman to be a chief of staff to the Georgia governor. In June, he selected Black women to lead the state revenue department and the Georgia Technology Authority.

Of the roughly 1,200 appointments he’s made to state boards, agencies or authorities, about 650 of them were first-time selections. About 46% of those were either women or minorities, according to a tally by Kemp’s office.

Most of those fly under the radar, though some are more dramatic, such as an overhaul of the Stone Mountain Memorial Association that for the first time put a Black man in charge of what happens to the world’s largest Confederate monument.

Still, other key positions have gone to a cast of powerful, mostly male allies. He tapped former Sonny Perdue campaign chairman Alec Poitevint, an influential businessman and donor, to the state Port Authority. Former Perdue aide Nick Ayers, a powerful GOP operative, is a member of the Natural Resources board.

In 2019 Kemp re-appointed Dean Alford, a wealthy former state legislator, to the Board of Regents. Three months later, Alford resigned from the coveted position after he was arrested and charged with running a Ponzi scheme.

And the praise he drew for his appointments this week was tempered by concerns about his decision to name Public Service Commissioner Chuck Eaton — who was admitted to the state Bar but is not a practicing lawyer — to a Fulton County Superior Court judgeship.

State Sen. Jen Jordan, a Democratic candidate for attorney general, said it was “crazy” to post someone with no courtroom experience to a judgeship that handles some of the most serious criminal matters and complex civil cases in the state.

“This is the legal equivalent of letting someone pilot a commercial jet who has never flown a plane,” she said.

‘The most diverse ticket’

Kemp's most lasting mark so far might involve his picks in the judicial branch. In all, he's made 59 appointments to judicial posts since he took office, including 30 women – 15 of whom are minority – and five men of color.

Several were unprecedented picks, including the first Black female district attorney in Cobb County and the first Black superior court judge in Gwinnett County.

And four of the six appointments he's made to the appellate courts are persons of color or women, including Colvin and Justice Carla Wong McMillian, the first Asian-American to serve on the state's top court.

“The diversity that Governor Kemp has added to the bench in less than three years is unmatched in the history of our state by any other governor – Democrat or Republican,” said Vincent Russo, who was appointed by Kemp to co-chair the Judicial Nominating Commission, which vets candidates for the positions.

For decades, the vast majority of appointments to superior court positions and other coveted justice system posts predominantly went to white men. Even the spate of minority appointments has only nudged the needle.

A recent review of state data by The Daily Report found that between 2011 and 2021, minorities were five times less likely than their white counterparts to be selected by a governor for an open seat on the bench.

Leah Ward Sears, the former chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, notes that Colvin will be the only Black justice on the nine-member Georgia Supreme Court in a state that's roughly one-third African-American.

“When I served on that court not that long ago there were three African-American justices out of seven,” said Ward Sears, who was the nation's first Black woman to preside over a state Supreme Court.

“For that reason, I'm not ready to declare a victory for diversity here. We still have a ways to go to live in a time when the judges of our justice system reflect the diversity of our state. But I'm hopeful that one day we'll get there.”

In the interview, Kemp said he'll continue to select diverse candidates to important posts.

“It's beneficial for the future of our party to show people our message can resonate with all types of people no matter the zip code,” he said. “We will have the most diverse ticket in state Republican history this cycle. And it will send a great message to voters.”

To critics who say he's not moving aggressively enough, Kemp offered a pointed rejoinder.

“I've only been in office for two and a half years. And if they want to see what more I can do, they need to re-elect me.”