



Democratic nominee for U.S Senate Sen. Raphael Warnock speaks to a reporter during a campaign stop on the campus of Morehouse College Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2022, in Atlanta. (AP Photo/John Bazemore)

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U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock and Republican challenger Herschel Walker were locked in a tight race in Georgia on the night of Nov. 8 as elections officials continued to count ballots in the state that determined partisan control of the Senate nearly two years ago and could do so again in these midterm elections.

The question is whether either contender can win the contest outright or they head to a Dec. 6 runoff. Georgia requires a majority to win statewide office, and with incomplete returns showing a close race with a [third-party candidate](#) on the ballot, it remained possible that neither Warnock nor Walker will surpass the 50% threshold. It was too early for The Associated Press to call the race.

"We're not sure if this journey is over tonight or if there's still a little work yet to do," Warnock told the supporters who remained in an Atlanta hotel ballroom just before 2 a.m. on Nov. 9.

"I understand that at this late hour you may be a little tired," the senator continued, "but whether it's later tonight or tomorrow or four weeks from now, we will hear from the people of Georgia."

Walker, a celebrity athlete turned politician, offered his supporters an optimistic view hours earlier at his campaign's election night party in suburban Atlanta.

"I don't come to lose," Walker said during his brief remarks.

A [runoff campaign](#) would be a four-week blitz that, depending on the outcomes in other Senate contests, could reprise the 2020 election cycle, when [two Senate runoffs](#) in Georgia doubled as a national winner-take-all battle for Senate control. Victories from Warnock and Sen. Jon Ossoff, D-Ga., left the chamber divided 50-50 between the two major parties, with Vice President Kamala Harris giving Democrats the tie-breaking vote.

A runoff would mean another month of Warnock hammering Walker, who is making his first bid for public office, as unqualified and Walker assailing Warnock as a rubber-stamp for the White House.

"Raphael Warnock votes with Joe Biden 96% of the time," Walker has told voters again and again. "He's forgotten about the people of Georgia."

Warnock, who is also the senior minister at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, answers that Walker is "not ready" and "not fit" for high office. That's an allusion to [Walker's rocky past](#), from allegations of violence against his ex-wife to [accusations by two women](#) Walker once dated that he encouraged and paid for their abortions despite his public opposition to abortion rights.

Both approaches highlight the candidates' most glaring liabilities.

Amid generationally high inflation and with Biden's popularity lagging in Georgia, Warnock wants voters to make a localized choice, not a national referendum on Democrats as a whole. Georgia's first Black U.S. senator, Warnock [pitches himself as a pragmatist](#) who cuts deals with Republicans when they're willing and pushes Democratic-backed cost-cutting measures when they're not. Among the top accomplishments Warnock touts: capping the cost of insulin and other drugs for Medicare recipients.

"I'll work with anybody to get things done for the people of Georgia," Warnock said.

Walker, meanwhile, denies that he's ever paid for an abortion. And glossing over a cascade of other stories — documented exaggerations of his business record, academic achievements and philanthropic activities; publicly acknowledging three additional children during the campaign only after media reports on their existence — Walker touts his Christian faith and says his life is a story of "redemption."

Through the scrutiny he calls "foolishness," the Republican nominee has campaigned as a cultural and fiscal conservative. Walker, who is also Black, pledges to "bring people together" while framing Warnock as a divisive figure on matters of race and equality. Walker justifies his attack using snippets of Warnock's sermons in which the pastor-senator discusses institutional racism.

Republicans used similar tactics against Warnock ahead of his runoff victory on Jan. 5, 2021. Warnock won that contest by about 95,000 votes out of 4.5 million cast.

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Runoff dynamics this year would vary widely depending on the Senate makeup. If the Senate majority already has been settled, it could make it easier for Warnock to frame the race as a localized choice between himself and Walker. But if the Georgia

outcome determines which party will hold a majority and set the agenda, Walker could have the upper-hand in his effort to tie Warnock to Biden and national Democrats.

Nearly half of Georgia voters say the economy is the most pressing issue facing the country, according to [AP VoteCast](#), an expansive survey of more than 3,000 voters in the state.

Rising costs were named as a top concern among the state's voters as they cast their ballots, with roughly 9 in 10 saying the inflated prices of groceries, gas and other goods were an important factor in their votes this election.

Only 1 in 10 Georgia voters identify the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to strip women of the constitutional right to an abortion as the most important issue facing the country, while almost 5 in 10 identify the economy and jobs. But abortion still weighs on how many people voted. About 7 in 10 Georgians say it is an important factor in how they voted.

Georgia voters were more likely to say that Warnock has the appropriate experience to serve effectively in the Senate than to say so of Walker, according to AP Vote Cast.

Nearly 6 in 10 voters said Warnock has the right background to serve as a senator. Only about 4 in 10 said the same about Walker, a football icon in Georgia.

The state's voters were also more likely to say that Warnock has strong moral values, with roughly half of voters saying so about the senator. About 4 in 10 voters said the same about Walker.

[Associated Press journalists Jeff Amy and Stephen Smith contributed to this story. Amanda Seitz contributed from Washington.]