



## **Georgia General Assembly Political Recap, 2023 Session**

Prepared for: Clients of J.L. Morgan Company

Prepared by: Jay Morgan, Founder

*Change and challenges.* Those were the “watchwords of our order” here in 2023. Georgia’s political landscape has been a dramatic battlefield over the past few years and some changes came into sharper focus during the 2023 session of the Georgia General Assembly. The shifts began with Governor Kemp’s first primary win back in 2018. It’s worth recalling he was then the anti-establishment, gun-toting, true conservative who upended the better funded Lt. Governor. Kemp became the first “career Republican” to become Governor since Rufus Bullock in 1868 by rallying a base that had to trust he could win.

Gov. Kemp’s tenure has been challenged by one crisis after another, but it was the pandemic that steeled him and projected his instinctual leadership style on to the state and national stage. Rocky at first, his stance for small businesspeople solidified his base while also showing independent voters that he was the “good neighbor” Governor they could trust. His re-election was then never in doubt and his win made him a model for every new Governor across the land. Those who wish to succeed him here at home are taking notes and making plans.

The Governor approached this session differently than any in his first term. No longer needing to prove he is the most powerful Gold Dome player, he allowed legislators to fight their own battles over sports betting and a myriad of other perennial issues – except for school choice. While the voucher or choice bill gained early Senate approval, it was only when the Governor engaged that it became clear the House would need to vote. Even now as this issue will “layover” during the summer and fall, it becomes the biggest issue of 2024. There were too many side deals to keep track of as it sputtered on the final day of the 2023 session. There will be more to come as leaders set their respective agendas - especially as you juxtapose the upcoming reviews of many state tax incentives unique to Georgia.

Since presidential campaigns never seem to end, it was a welcome sight to have the state’s media focus on our new Speaker, new Lt. Governor, and new roles for other ambitious legislators. The first two weeks of the legislative session truly felt like a sophomore term in college. You know the campus and the correct building for class, but there were new classmates and professors. Everything that was old was new again as many legislators were thrust into opportunities to show their skills and knowledge of the process.

There were standouts like Senator Greg Dolezal - an original Burt Jones supporter who was fairly rewarded with chairmanship of the Transportation Committee and membership on the coveted Committee on Assignments. Dolezal came “Atlanta Falcons close” to the biggest win of the year on school choice with his tenacity and attention to detail. There are no trophies for “almost winning” but his experience on this and other issues will make him ever more focused in the 2024 session. Along with the new Lt. Governor who showed his own brand of determination in the last two weeks of the session, Senate President John Kennedy, Senate Majority Leader

Steve Gooch, and Senate Appropriations Chairman Blake Tillery all proved to be worthy of key leadership roles in varied ways.

Speaker Burns deftly and quite characteristically gave members more freedom and thus there were more opportunities for success, defeat, and plain old mischief. The new GOP leadership team consisted of an experienced Speaker Pro Tem, Jan Jones, and a steady Caucus Chair, Bruce Williamson, coupled with a new House Majority Leader Chuck Efstoration and Whip James Burchett – both savvy legislator-lawyers who were lowkey enforcers for the team. Chairman Matt Hatchett faced off with the Senate in his role as the new Appropriations Chairman and he landed the plane in the final minutes of the session in a calm and determined manner.

The business community survived this session but the drubbing the Georgia Chamber took from a more strategic, tactical, and better positioned trial lawyer advocacy team should serve as yet another wakeup call (the snooze button is showing wear). A reminder: Just because a legislator hails from a GOP district, there is no requirement he/she be “pro-business”. As the session wound down, 60 new members settled in their first term or abbreviated ones as the result of a special election. They are the most diverse freshman class ever in the history of the Georgia General Assembly and they could learn through observation. Will they?

As we look at the workplan for the next several months, it’s clear that education and research will be required: education of many members on a wide array of issues and research on how best to educate while calibrating the political calculus of 2024 in those new districts.