

The US election is on a knife edge. My trip to Georgia showed how easily it could end in tragedy

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5 A few weeks ago, I found myself standing in Georgia's state capitol building, watching a scene that encapsulated much of the presidential race. To my right: a cluster of election conspiracy theorists who still believe Donald Trump won in 2020. To my left, a group of voting rights campaigners, singing an old spiritual popularised during the civil rights era. They were here to observe last-minute efforts by hard-right officials to alter the way in which votes will be counted next month.

10 In a building dotted with relics of the past – from a plaque honouring the Confederate lieutenant Wright to a statue of Martin Luther King – there was an acute sense of the precipice on which the country now sits and the prospect of history repeating itself. This election has the potential to end in tragedy and farce simultaneously.

15 I am travelling the US with a film-maker for our series *Anywhere but Washington*. The aim is not to predict who will win. Polling indicates an unwaveringly close race, not only in Georgia, but in all seven critical battleground states. Our focus, instead, is the communities with the most at stake and the forces guiding the doom spiral of polarisation in American politics. Georgia was a centre of election denialism in 2020 and the site of Trump's failed efforts to press officials into "finding" him enough votes to overturn the result.

20 Out in the Atlanta suburbs, I followed a race for the 48th senate district, where a young Democrat, Ramaswami, is running against the incumbent Republican, Shawn Still. Ramaswami, a computer science graduate, is vying to become the first Indian American gen Z state senator here. He was inspired to run after finding out that Shawn Still was charged with several felony crimes as part of an alleged plot to fraudulently seize the 2020 election for Trump.

25 It was in this competitive race that I found my first kernel of hope and clarity. As he canvassed on the streets, Ramaswami spoke with a young voter who was unaware that her state senator had been involved in an alleged criminal enterprise to subvert democracy. She listened attentively as Ramaswami made his pitch, which included fluid arguments for gun control and abortion rights. "We need people who are like-minded and around our age to make the difference," she said. "Everything has to evolve. If we can evolve in our technology, why can't we evolve in our government?"

35 Then, we drove out to the conservative-leaning county of Fayette. Here, we stumbled across *The Trump Bus*, which has been rolling around the state since 2015. All of those congregated around the bus were well versed in the conspiracy-tinged lexicon of the Trump bubble.

Many of the fears expressed on both sides of the aisle – of widespread political violence, targeted killings and a descent into autocratic government – might have seemed farcical four years ago. But it became clearer that they are more realistic now than at any time in recent history. (494 words)