

Transcript: Gov. Mike Easley's remarks

New Strategies for Southern Progress conference

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GOVERNOR EASLEY: Thank you, Ferrel. I appreciate the opportunity to stop by. I've known Ferrel for a long time and he always gives a kind introduction, but I should point out he's done a great job at the Center, and it's good for North Carolina, it's good for the state, it's good for the University. He also was our moderator for the textile summit which involved about five or six states. And we made some headway with the administration, not nearly enough, and we'll continue to lose a lot of those jobs. But I want to thank Ferrel for what he does.

I see a couple folks I've got to thank. Tom Ross has helped us with our efficiency and tax modernization issues that we're still grappling with and we're trying to streamline now. And I see Howard Lee, who's chair of our state board of education. And I'm in Chapel Hill, I've got to say this. He was Mayor of Chapel Hill when I was a student here. But since he's been in the Cabinet, he was a Secretary, he was a Senator, one of the very best that we've had. And I've tapped him to be head of the state board. And he's done a great job, great job and he's not only progressive but he can build a consensus which is very important. And my good friend Brad Wilson, who's chair of the Board of Governors for the Greater University System, has really taken on an active role and shown a lot of leadership.

Ferrel asked me to come over today just to share with you some of my experiences as we ran over the last couple of elections, 2000 and 2004. And to sort of put things in perspective, Mac McCorckle has brought to my attention that except for one time in the Depression, no Democrat has been able to carry the state, Senate or Governor, when the Republican nominee got over 50 percent. And that one exception was with Max Gardner. That's since 1976 I think it was. And it -- it just means there are a lot of coattails. I suppose part of what I did was ride George Bush's coattails both times, which is a different sort of thing, but it -- it works.

One of the things we tried to do -- I'm just going to go through four or five things very quickly that I try to do is, I try not to pass too many litmus tests. To be quite candid with you, I think that if you look at the Democrat and Republican parties right now in the state and in the country, I don't think either one of them represents the voters of the people in the middle. And if you put yourself in a position so that you pass the litmus test of just the Democratic party and the executive committee and so forth or just the Republican party, and what you end up with is two candidates that really don't touch the people in the middle.

Now, given that in North Carolina generally you have -- if you have two unacceptable candidates, generally the people will go to the right. I think the reason they go to the right is because if they don't like either one, they would rather go to the one who's going to give them less change, less to worry about, more conservative, not going to change much. Whereas they're afraid that if we might let the horse out of the barn, just all kind of runaway government programs, all kind of giveaways, that type of thing.

So I always found it not to be -- better not to be tagged as a liberal or conservative. I mean, you know, I like to run the hunt, I like to drive race cars -- Mudcat. You never wrecked one, Mudcat.

MR. SAUNDERS: Yes, sir, I have.

GOVERNOR EASLEY: I like to do a lot of those things that people would think are conservative. At the same time I believe very deeply in education. I think it is the key to getting this country back on track, to getting our people out of poverty. I think early childhood development is extremely important. The university system has to be funded. Our low wealth, disadvantaged kids have to be funded. We have a moral as well as an economic obligation to do that. And those things can be seen as more progressive.

So I think it's more difficult for people to put a label on you and stick you over in the corner and beat up on you if that's who you really are. If that's not who you really are, I think it's difficult to try and be somebody you're not. Life's tough enough going through as yourself, much less trying to be someone else. So I guess the first thing is, try not to pass all the litmus tests, at least not by 100 percent.

Secondly, you know, your parents always taught you to mind your manners and don't make other people feel uncomfortable. And I think the same is true in politics. Don't invade people's comfort zones too much unnecessarily. Obviously there's some issues where you have to. Some issues that matter that much. I think it's okay to stick it to your opponent from time to time. I think that's necessary. I think it's important to debate those issues and get in their face if you have to. You shouldn't be afraid to do that. Shouldn't be afraid to show a bit of an edge. But otherwise, if there are issues out there that people feel strongly about and disagree on, why make it -- why make it a fight about that? When that's really not the most important thing to the people in the middle.

A couple of examples. Choice is an issue in this state where a lot of people are sort of taking Kerry's position. They're antiabortion but at the same time they tend to be more pro-choice in that they don't particularly agree with it, but they don't want government making the decision for them. And they will accept and tolerate somebody who has a bit of a different position, but not if you keep bringing it up and getting in their face. Not if you want to be the main speaker at NARAL, the keynote address speaker at Right to Life.

Death penalty. I was a prosecutor, as Ferrel pointed out, for 15 years, and I have selected many a death penalty jury. And I will tell you when you go through the jury selection, there are a lot of good people out there who are anti death penalty and who have very good reasons and make a very good argument against the death penalty. In my job as Governor, I have to make clemency hearings and make decisions on those cases whether executions should go forward or not. But I don't get out and make a big issue about the death penalty. I don't go speak at the Victims Assistance Network in favor of the death penalty because people know where I stand. They know my position on the issue. And they don't particularly want it jammed back at them and in their face.

So I think on those issues it's better to mind your manners and be sensitive to other people's intelligent decisions that they've made about that, to their appropriate positions for the way that they feel in their life's experiences and then move on to those issues that are very important to us right now, like education, and don't get bogged down with these distractions. That's when you get yourself in -- you get the cultural issues on the table then and you're distracted, I think, from the more important issues, and on the more important issues is where we win, should win, should continue to win. If we just get them out there.

I think instead, sort of rule number three is, you appeal to the good. You appeal to the values in people. A couple of examples of what I'm talking about there. When I talk about North Carolina having the best prescription drug plan for seniors in America, I don't just stop there, I don't want to talk about something that's going to be perceived as a giveaway plan. Now, you and I may not perceive it as that. I certainly don't. But there are those who do unless you qualify. If you talk about that plan for the Greatest Generation, for

the people who built this country and made it great, those who fought in the Korean War and World War Two, the ones who were there for us doing their patriotic duty for this country when we needed them and now we need to be there for them when they need us. If you put it in those terms, I think you can reach out and find more common ground with people. And you're appealing to the best in people. You're appealing to people's values as to why they would do these things, why they would provide these particular plans and programs.

The same with education. You don't just have to talk about early childhood development or helping low wealth, at-risk kids. You can talk about that as a reason for and a need to do to build a better and stronger America. I talk from time to time about the real fight for American values today is not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it is in every schoolhouse, every university, every research facility in the nation. Because our dominance in the world economy is based on creativity and innovation, and if we drop the ball on education, we will drop the ball clearly on American dominance. And that makes it a patriotic issue. It makes it an American values issue as to why we have to continue to make that investment in education. To base it on more than just a moral issue, which is good enough for me, more than just a value -- I think it makes a patriotic issue.

Same with Medicaid. People talk so much -- there's going to be a big fight about that between the governors and the federal government as they go to cut. But I think it's important to appeal to, you know, whatsoever we do for the least of our brethren, that you do unto me. Everybody believes that. Whether you're at the synagogue or you're at the Protestant church or the Catholic church or -- Ferrel and I go to the same church. We don't bring that up a lot. But we -- I think it is important that you put -- you set these things in a set of values so you're appealing to the best in people. Because everybody out there has a lot of good in them. You just have to appeal to it. And that is something that I've tried to do throughout my career rather than just, you know, beating the drum on the issues and hitting the bells on the Democrat side while somebody else is hitting all the notes on the Republican side.

I think fiscal responsibility is probably the fourth important thing that we have to do for the party that is perceived as not being fiscally responsible. That ought to be one we can get back pretty quickly right now. It just takes a little bit of thought. I don't really see us seizing it, but what I see us trying to do in this state is doing as much as we can to make as much progress as possible but exercising discipline at the same time. I know you've already heard it from Mac McCorkle this morning and he made a talk to you about these same issues. It's so important that whenever we make progress we do it in a real and sustainable way. Otherwise we just step out there and say, okay, we've raised teachers to the national average or we started this program because you had a good year in revenues that you might not have next year. You've got to show, where's the source of revenue? You've got to show your discipline with your progress. You've got to show, when you offer opportunity, I think people want accountability. I often talk about opportunity for everyone but accountability demanded of everyone. And I think both liberals and conservatives can agree with at least half of that statement. Consequently it's easier to get them to agree with all of those statements.

The last thing that I try to do is -- I try to do some creative polling. We don't poll nearly enough. Fred Yang says we don't, but it may be because he just had a third child. But I try to ask questions like, do you think the Governor should continue to drive 160 miles an hour around a track to raise money for education or the troops? Or do you think it's too dangerous, that he ought to quit? And it kind of gives you a feel for where people are and

what they're thinking. By the way, two-thirds of the people want the Lieutenant Governor to be Governor apparently because they like us doing that.

But it kind of puts us in touch knowing what the people out there who pay attention to NASCAR, like Mudcat, are thinking. We like to poll -- I like to know where I stand among King of the Hill voters. How many of you watch King of the Hill? I like to ask that question. More than I thought. I guess -- you know, it's kind of a -- these four good old boys who sit around, you know, drink beer and polish their lawn mowers and things like that, animated cartoon, but it's interesting. It reminds me of so many of my friends. But then I like to see where do I poll with these folks? I also like to poll talk radio and find out where on the talk radio -- the one thing we found out from polling talk radio people is that, yeah, everybody hates taxes, they hate taxes, but I tell you what else, they hate spending too. And they don't like reckless spending. And Republicans like to spend just as much as Democrats. And if you go back and check those records, it's one of the things we were able -- at this time, we were able to find that the spending of my opponent who voted against all of the taxes, he voted for all of the spending. So against any taxes, but 3.3 billion in increases I think over a four-year period. And we were able to use that on talk radio. Saul Shorr, who many of you may have heard of from Philadelphia. We sort of broke him in early down here. He came up with a good little spendingitis talk radio ad that we ran and really moved some numbers in there. But I don't think you give on that issue. I think it's very important to look at the spending side of the ledger as well as the revenue side of the ledger.

To my mind, the revenue side of the ledger and doing the right thing there is just a matter of being fiscally responsible. So those are sort of the comments that I had that I thought about, Ferrel. And whatever you want me to do, I'll be happy to do. I could leave, I could run out of here. I could answer a question you've got or I could --

MR. GUILLORY: A couple of questions. I don't want to interrupt the panel too much but --

MS. BUTTS: We're already interrupted. That's fine.

MR. GUILLORY: Anybody have a question or two? Yes.

MR. ELLIOTT BRACK: I'm Elliott Brack from Atlanta. Governor, what do you think about the lottery in North Carolina?

GOVERNOR EASLEY: That was cold. I tell everybody we're the only state that plays the lottery and gives away the proceeds. But I think there's a good chance to get one this year. And if we do, I want to lock it up for education, nonsupplantable. And the three items I want to fund are the items that I think are the three most regressive elements of our education system, which would be our 4 to Pre-K program. Our class size reduction. We've reduced K through 3 down to 18 and we're having to pay for that because we have class creep. I'm not talking about corporally. I'm talking about as it grows. And school construction, especially for those low wealth counties who can't afford it themselves. So I hope we've got a good chance this year, but I'm still working on some people.

REPRESENTATIVE JOYCE ELLIOTT: I'm Joyce Elliott from Arkansas and I do watch King of the Hill. I like it. But my question is, in our efforts to get to the NASCAR -- in our efforts to get to the NASCAR crowd, which I think we need to do, are you attune to the tension that's beginning to happen when, especially in the African American community, people see an overemphasis on engaging that group and perhaps are taken for granted attitude toward the African American community and our seeing some of the result of that creep to the nonprogressives in this last election. How are you thinking about that and addressing that issue?

(Applause.)

GOVERNOR EASLEY: That makes a legitimate point. I don't try to appeal to the NASCAR group. I just happen to do recreational NASCAR from time to time. But I do think it is important to get off the table a lot of these cultural issues. And you've got to do that appealing to both groups. I think you've got to get the issues off the table, that that's sidetrack -- a campaign distract, a campaign -- the God, the gays and guns issues. And in order to do that, I think you have to be open to and sensitive to -- the part I was talking about being sensitive to and not getting in the face of other people. I think you've got to be open to all of those issues. I don't think you can -- the Democratic party can by any means can take the African American vote for granted. And one of the mistakes that candidates make from both parties is they do not understand the black vote, in at least in this state, as well as they should. They think it's one great big block that gets together and decides what's -- what the ballot's going to be. And you and I know that's just not the case.

It's a matter of who's going to be most sensitive to those issues of those voters. And I think that voters are getting more and more diverse and will as time goes on. And we're seeing the Republican party reach out to that vote. But I don't think it's inconsistent to reach out to, say, a NASCAR group and at the same time reach out to an African American group. So that part of your question, yes.

MR. RALPH SMITH: Do you think we'll see a moratorium on the death penalty on this state this year?

GOVERNOR EASLEY: I don't know. The moratorium on the death penalty passed the House -- I mean the Senate last year, was not taken up in the House. It probably has a better chance of it coming up in the House this year. Whether the Senate will take it back up, I don't know. I can tell you there has not been a lot of talk about it so far this year. Most everything has been covered in balancing the budget and dealing with hurricane relief. So -- Ferrel's cutting me off. I want to thank all of you for what you're doing, trying to reach some conclusions, make some decisions and hopefully we'll be able to make a little progress for this. And thank you, Ferrel, for all that you've done.

(Applause.)