

Elections in North Carolina

The emergence of two-party politics in North Carolina has followed the familiar southern pattern of presidential Republicanism emerging first, with Republican success in congressional and state elections following. Table 1 presents election results for selected offices from 1960 through 1988; since presidential elections and major state elections coincided in North Carolina, only presidential years are shown.

By 1968, two-party competition had begun to appear. Republicans won the presidential race for the first time in the century, albeit with only 40 percent of the popular vote, increased their number of congressional seats from two to three, and posted gains in both houses of the state legislature, from 33 to 41 of the 170 members of the two houses.¹

Four years later, Richard Nixon won a wide majority of the presidential vote in his re-election effort, and Jesse Helms and Jim Holshouser captured a U.S. Senate seat and the governorship respectively, neither of which had been won by the Republican Party in the twentieth century. Republicans also raised their numbers in the state legislature from 41 to 50, or nearly thirty percent of the total body.²

Republican strength remained greatest at the presidential level throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Only in 1976, with regional native son Jimmy Carter at the head of the Democratic ticket, did the state go Democratic in a presidential election.

Below the presidential level, Republican advances were less thorough and more uneven. Congressional elections displayed a pattern of surge and decline

Table 1: North Carolina Election Results, 1960-1988

| | 1960 | 1964 | 1968 | 1972 | 1976 | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Presidential Vote: | | | | | | | | |
| % Republican | 48 | 44 | 58* | 70 | 44 | 51 | 62 | 58 |
| Gubernatorial Vote: | | | | | | | | |
| % Republican | 45 | 43 | 47 | 51 | 34 | 37 | 54 | 56 |
| U.S. House Vote: | | | | | | | | |
| % Republican | 39 | 39 | 45 | 45 | 35 | 44 | 48 | 44 |
| Average Republican Vote: | | | | | | | | |
| Above 3 offices | 44 | 42 | 50 | 55 | 38 | 44 | 55 | 53 |
| Spread Between Highest and Lowest Vote for: | | | | | | | | |
| Above 3 Offices | 9 | 5 | 13 | 25 | 10 | 14 | 14 | 14 |
| U.S. House Seats: | | | | | | | | |
| # Republicans | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| # Democrats | 11 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 8 |
| N.C. House Seats: | | | | | | | | |
| # Republicans | 15 | 14 | 29 | 35 | 6 | 24 | 38 | 46 |
| # Democrats | 105 | 106 | 91 | 85 | 114 | 96 | 82 | 74 |
| N.C. Senate Seats: | | | | | | | | |
| # Republicans | 2 | 1 | 12 | 15 | 3 | 10 | 12 | 13 |
| # Democrats | 48 | 49 | 38 | 35 | 47 | 40 | 38 | 37 |

Note: Vote percentages are calculated as the percentage of the two-party vote.

* In 1968, the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, received 40% of the total vote. George Wallace, the American Independent Party candidate received 31%, and Democratic Party candidate Hubert Humphrey 29%.

Sources: *America Votes*, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, *The Book of the States*, and *NC Handbook*, various editions.

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that paralleled presidential successes. Four of the eleven U.S. House seats were captured by Republicans in 1972 and 1980, but in both cases the following off-year elections reduced the seats held to two. A high-water mark of five Republican seats occurred in 1984, but the familiar drop-off resulted in only three Republican seats after 1986.

U.S. Senate elections proved to be a more favorable hunting ground for Republicans. Jesse Helms was reelected three times, including highly publicized victories over Jim Hunt in 1984 and Harvey Gantt in 1990. A second Republican senator, John East, was elected in 1980, but that seat was recaptured by Democrat Terry Sanford in 1986.

In state elections, Republicans followed their 1972 gubernatorial success with victories in 1984 and 1988, with Jim Martin, a former congressman from the Charlotte area, winning both times. However, Democratic control of the state legislature persisted. Following Watergate, Republicans all but disappeared from the General Assembly, and the

party did not return to its 1972 legislative strength until 1984.

By 1988 the Republican Party had consolidated and extended its gains, and the state was moving closer to a truly competitive two-party system across the entire ballot. However, most of the Republican gains in the state have occurred under the advantage of a winning presidential candidate at the top of the ticket. The unanswered question is whether the Republican Party will fare as well if the country enters a period that is not characterized by Republican domination of the presidential race.

*Charles Prysby, Department of Political Science,
UNC at Greensboro*

Notes

1. Vanessa Goodman and Jack Betts, "The Growth of a Two-Party System in North Carolina," (Raleigh: North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 1987). 19-20.
2. Ibid.

Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1960 - 1988

A recent study by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate indicated that voter turnout in North Carolina for the 1988 presidential election was only 43.4% of those eligible to vote. This placed North Carolina not only well below the national average of 50.2%, but fourth from the bottom among the states. Only Hawaii (43.0%), South Carolina (38.9%) and Georgia (38.8%) had lower turnout for that election. In fact, there is a regional cast to these non-voting statistics as no southern state is among the ten highest states in turnout, but seven of the ten lowest states are in the south.¹

Ran Coble of the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research indicated that less three-quarters of the state's eligible voters actually bother to register to vote, and only about four of each ten registered voters then bother to vote.²

The North Carolina legislature adopted several changes in electoral laws that might stimulate non-voters to participate in the process in this year. The legislature focused on how to make it easier for citizens to register. Citizens can now register up to three weeks before the election, by mail, or when renewing a driver's license. Also, the state will conduct biennial month-long registration drives.³

So, if problems in getting registered have hampered turnout in the past, the state has opened up this process for the citizens.

But there are arguments that it is more than just these "rules-of-the-game" changes that can affect

voter turnout. Table 2 presents data on voter turnout and elections during the presidential years since 1960. In addition to the presidential elections in each year, the gubernatorial races are included and U.S. senate races if they occurred that year. The argument is that if the races are more highly contested, or if there is a change of incumbent or party, turnout will be higher (or is it vice-versa?).

Several points in these data are of interest. First, the state turnout level has always run behind the national level over this period although to a lesser level in the most recent elections. Second, the biggest change in turnout rates - both national and state - occurred after the adoption in 1971 of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allowing citizens between 18-21 to vote. The immediate impact of that change in who could vote was a sharp drop in the turnout rate, 5.8 points nationally and 11.6 points in the state. This is the equivalent to a 10 percent drop in turnout nationally and a 21.3 percent drop in the state.

The data in the table allows us to look at the politics of each election under the assumption that the greater the number of major contested elections on the ballot, the greater the turnout. In two of the eight election years involved there was such a relationship: 1984 and 1968. For the other six years it does not seem there was such a relationship.

The 1984 elections stand out as the year with the highest voter turnout rate for the state since the

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Thad Beyle, editor
Jennifer O'Lear,
managing editor
Allyson Benton,
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1968 elections. The politics of the 1984 election are well known - the reelection of a very popular Republican president, a highly visible and contested Helms-Hunt U.S. senatorial race, and the turnover of the governor's office to the Republicans.

The 1968 elections were also a time when the politics of the election influenced voter turnout but this time turnout was higher than usual. 1968 was a volatile presidential race between three candidates. This election also produced the closest win by a Democratic gubernatorial candidate to date. There was no U.S. senate race that year.

So, it would appear that it is at least a combination of the impact of the "rules-of-the-game" and the politics of the day that can affect voter turnout. What about 1992? There are contests for all three of these offices and currently polls suggest potential party turnover in two of them - the presidency and the governorship, and a tough race in the U.S. senate race. By these indicators we should anticipate a bump up in turnout in November.

*Thad Beyle, Department of Political Science,
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Notes

1. Bill Krueger, "Low voter turnout targeted," *News and*

Observer (July 26, 1992).

2. Krueger.

3. "General Assembly highlights," *News and Observer* (July 26, 1992).

Table 2: Voter Turnout For Presidential Elections, 1960-88

| | 1960 | 1964 | 1968 | 1972 | 1976 | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| TURNOUT:(%) | | | | | | | | |
| Nation: | 62.8 | 61.9 | 61.0 | 55.2 | 53.6 | 52.6 | 53.1 | 50.2 |
| State: | 52.9 | 52.3 | 54.4 | 42.8 | 43.0 | 43.4 | 47.4 | 43.4 |
| Difference: | 9.9 | 9.6 | 6.6 | 12.4 | 10.6 | 9.2 | 5.7 | 6.8 |
| RACES - PRESIDENTIAL: | | | | | | | | |
| Win-Party, US: | Dem | Dem | Rep | Rep | Dem | Rep | Rep | Rep |
| Win-Party, NC: | Dem | Dem | Rep | Rep | Dem | Rep | Rep | Rep |
| NC Margin-pnts: | 4.2 | 12.3 | 10.3 | 40.6 | 11.1 | 2.1 | 24.0 | 16.3 |
| U.S. SENATE: | | | | | | | | |
| US Senate race: | yes | no | no | yes | no | yes | yes | no |
| Win-party: | Dem | -- | -- | Rep | -- | Rep | Rep | -- |
| NC Margin-pnts: | 22.8 | -- | -- | 8.9 | -- | .6 | 4.7 | -- |
| GOVERNOR: | | | | | | | | |
| NC Govnor race: | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Win-party: | Dem | Dem | Dem | Rep | Dem | Dem | Rep | Rep |
| Margin-points: | 8.9 | 13.2 | 5.4 | 2.6 | 31.4 | 24.4 | 8.8 | 12.2 |

Plurality Politics in North Carolina

Over the past few decades we have watched North Carolina move from being a one-party Democratic state to become a two-party competitive state. Two major political indicators - party registration and election outcomes - make this point clearly. In addition, poll results indicate a rise in voters who classify themselves as Independents and they contribute to the development of plurality politics in the state.

In 1966 nearly 80 percent of the officially registered voters were Democrats and only 18 percent were Republican - a 4.5 to 1 ratio. Ten years later, the percent registered as Democrats dropped to 72 percent and as Republicans rose to 24 percent - a 3.1 to 1 ratio. By 1986 the two figures had changed to 69 percent Democrats and 27 percent Republicans - a 2.5 to 1 ratio.¹

As of April 1992, that ratio has dropped further to 62 percent Democrats and 32 percent Republicans - a 1.9 to 1 ratio.²

In statewide elections since 1965, Republicans have won five of the last six presidential races, five of the last nine U.S. Senate races, and three of the last six contests for governor - a 62 percent success rate.³ Republican strength in the state legislature has also grown from one senator in 1965 to 14 out of 50

currently, and from 14 representatives in 1965 to 39 out of 120 as of this past May.⁴

But there is another measure of partisanship that should not be overlooked - how North Carolina citizens perceive themselves when asked "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?" Here we find a slightly different pattern developing than just Democrats on a downward slide and Republicans on an upward climb. There is also a growing number of North Carolinians calling themselves Independents.

In a survey conducted by the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, only five percent of the 1968 electorate called themselves Independents. Others called themselves Independent Republicans (6 percent) or Independent Democrats (8 percent), obviously maintaining ties with one of the major parties. At the same time, 60 percent of the respondents labeled themselves Democrats and 21 percent Republicans.⁵

In the twelve Carolina Polls conducted twice a year since 1986, an average of 21 percent of the respondents indicated that they consider themselves Independents. The number of self-styled Independents has ranged from 17 percent (Fall 1990) to 24

percent (Fall 1988). The average percents for the major parties over this seven year period has been 42 percent Democrats and 32 percent Republicans, with a Democratic range running from 36 percent (Spring 1991) to 48 percent (Fall 1986) and a Republican range from 27 percent (Spring 1988) to 37 percent (Spring 1989 and 1991). So, while the Democratic-Republican ratio in partisan perception has moved to a ratio of 1.3 to 1 over this last seven years, about one-fifth of the North Carolina electorate sees itself as not aligned with either party.

Who are these Independents? Reviewing the cross tabulations in Table 3, we see several relationships: the younger the respondent, the more likely they are to be an Independent; singles and those who seldom or never attend religious services seem to be more likely to be Independent. Whites and those living in the eastern portion of the state are more likely to be Independent than their compatriots.

There was little variation in who was likely to call themselves Independents by respondents' gender, income level, ideology, or level of news-gathering in the media.

So the real story here is the development of plurality politics in the state. The common wisdom in North Carolina politics is that a Democrat usually starts out with 40 percent of the vote and a Republican with about 35 percent. The name of the game is to get your base supporters out to vote and then attract enough of those potential voters who are either unaffiliated by registration or view themselves as Independents to achieve the 50 percent needed to win. To a great degree, these voters of independent mind become the critical actors in the elections as they can make the difference between winning and losing.

The 1992 elections almost had the vehicles by which we could test some hypotheses about these Independents and whether they would indeed support an Independent candidacy for major office at both the state and national levels. But only Ross Perot has chosen to run at the presidential level. Joe Mavretic was unable to obtain enough signatures to get into the governor's race.

Thad Beyle, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

NOTES

1. Vanessa Goodman and Jack Betts, *The Growth of a Two-Party System in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 1987), 3.
2. Figures are as of April 6, 1992 and were provided by the State Board of Elections.
3. Thad L. Beyle, "Party Politics in the States: The 1988 Election States," *Comparative State Politics Newsletter* 9:4 (August 1988), 6.
4. Goodman and Betts, 19-20, and "The Legislators," *The Book of the States, 1992-93* (Lexington, KY: The

Table 3: The Independent in North Carolina Politics, Spring 1992

Question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?"

| | % of sample | % who are Independent? |
|-----------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Total sample | (100) | 21 |
| Gender: | | |
| Male | (46) | 22 |
| Female | (55) | 21 |
| Race: | | |
| White | (82) | 23 |
| Black | (14) | 10 |
| Age: | | |
| 18-24 | (13) | 29 |
| 25-44 | (39) | 23 |
| 45-64 | (32) | 19 |
| 65 and older | (15) | 14 |
| Education: | | |
| Less than hi.sch. | (17) | 13 |
| High school grad | (28) | 26 |
| Some college | (27) | 21 |
| College grad | (28) | 22 |
| Income: | | |
| Less than \$20K | (24) | 20 |
| \$20-40K | (34) | 20 |
| More than \$40K | (32) | 23 |
| Marital situation: | | |
| Married | (66) | 20 |
| Formerly married | (16) | 18 |
| Single | (18) | 31 |
| Religious attendance: | | |
| Seldom or never | (33) | 30 |
| Monthly or more | (20) | 16 |
| Weekly or more | (47) | 17 |
| Region: | | |
| Mountains | (8) | 13 |
| Piedmont | (59) | 19 |
| Coastal Plain | (33) | 26 |
| Regularly: | | |
| Read News Magazine | (35) | 19 |
| Read Newspaper | (50) | 20 |
| Watch TV News | (55) | 20 |
| Ideology: | | |
| Liberal | (15) | 19 |
| Moderate | (35) | 23 |
| Conservative | (29) | 18 |

Source: The Carolina Poll, School of Journalism and Institute for Research in Social Science, Spring, 1992. N = 621; margin of error +/- 4% overall, greater for subgroup comparisons.

Council of State Governments, 1992), 141.

5. Thad L. Beyle and Peter B. Harkins, "North Carolina," in David M. Kovenock et. al., *Explaining the Vote: Presidential Choices in the Nation and the States, 1963* (Chapel Hill: IRSS, UNC at Chapel Hill, 1973), 382.

North Carolina Politics: A View from New Hanover County

Twice each year, in the fall and the spring, two classes of 20 fellows each from the North Carolina Institute of Political Leadership conduct public opinion polls of registered voters in New Hanover County. The fellows design the poll, conduct the telephone interviews, code the data and analyze the results. This is part of their training in political campaign strategy and management. The Board of Directors expects them to use this training when they become candidates for state and local offices.

We now have the results of several of those polls back to December 1989 and can provide some sense of what those who live in New Hanover County feel about candidates and issues in North Carolina. While the sample size is relatively small (from 103 to 203) in these telephone polls and the margin of error is large (7+%), the results are still quite interesting.

Why would the results of polls in one county be of interest to others in the state? For the last 32 years, New Hanover County has been what some would call a "bellwether" county. What New Hanover County voters do in presidential and gubernatorial elections mirror what voters across the state do.

In the eight most recent presidential elections in which the Republicans won in the state five times and the Democrats three, New Hanover County voters not only backed the winning party candidate but were within five points of each party's total, and most recently within three points. While their voting totals were not as close to the state totals in the gubernatorial elections in which the Democrats won five and the Republicans three, there too New Hanover County voters were always on the winning side.

So, for the past three decades in the presidential and gubernatorial races, as New Hanover County goes, so goes North Carolina. Of special interest, then, are New Hanover County voters' responses to some common questions asked in five of the six polls taken since 1989. (The December, 1990 results are not comparable because the fellows did a call back survey of those voters who were undecided on their vote in the Gantt-Helms race in two state wide surveys done by Independent Opinion Research & Communications, Inc. of Wilmington for the *Raleigh News & Observer*).

There were three questions that appeared in each survey: the respondent's party identification, their views on legislative terms, and what they felt were the most important problems facing New Hanover County.

The survey reported the following results:

Party Identification: There has been little change in the registered voters ties to the major parties over this 28 month period. Those calling themselves Democrats have averaged about 59 percent of the county's voters, about 37 percent as Republicans, and four percent Independents. Only the March 1991 survey showed much variation in their major party identification.

Legislative Terms: Here the change was in the direction of the question over the five surveys. In the first two polls, over half the sample agreed that longer terms (four years) were desirable for state legislators. In the last three surveys, over two-thirds of the respondents supported term limits on members of the U.S. Congress. Different targets with different results.

Important Problems: The respondents concerns change from survey to survey. Initially crime and drug issues were of most concern, followed by education and transportation issues. Education continues to be an important problem, but among fewer voters, while jobs and the economy along

Table 4: New Hanover County Public Opinion Trends

| Poll Date: | 12/1/89 | 3/9/90 | 3/22/91 | 11/15/91 | 4/10/92 |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| N= | 110 | 139 | 191 | 193 | 203 |
| Party Identification: | | | | | |
| Democrat | 62 | 62 | 52 | 60 | 58 |
| Republican | 35 | 35 | 43 | 35 | 38 |
| Independent | 3 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Legislative Term | | | | | |
| Limits: | (4 yrs) | (4 yrs) | (limit) | (limit) | (limit) |
| Yes | 50 | 58 | 80 | 65 | 78 |
| No | 39 | 32 | 10 | 21 | 21 |
| Most Important Problems: | | | | | |
| Crime/drugs | 24 | 17 | * | 8 | 7 |
| Education | 18 | 39 | * | 9 | 15 |
| Roads/traffic | 13 | 5 | * | 8 | 7 |
| Coastal Development/ | | | | | |
| Environment | 6 | 7 | * | 5 | 6 |
| Jobs/economy | 4 | 5 | * | 13 | 13 |
| Taxes/spending | 3 | 2 | * | 15 | 7 |

* = question not asked in this survey

Source: North Carolina Institute of Political Leadership, Wilmington, NC.

with taxes and spending are rising in their importance. Not too great a surprise as we look at the economic landscape that surrounds us today.

Parenthetically, we tracked our surveys with those done for the *News & Observer* and other newspapers, and found out results remarkably close to those in statewide surveys.

New Hanover County truly is a "bellwether" or "statistical weather vane" for the rest of North Carolina and as such is a valuable research resource on state politics. It would be an interesting question to research whether any other counties fall into this same pattern.

Walter DeVries is the Executive Director of the North Carolina Institute of Political Leadership.

Table 5: The Sanford U.S. Senate Seat Since The Civil War

| Senator | Party/County | Dates of Service | Notes |
|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------|
| Augustus Merrimon | (D-Buncombe) | 1873-79 | e, r |
| Zebulon B. Vance | (D-Mecklenburg) | 1879-94 | e, d |
| Thomas J. Jarvis | (D-Pitt) | 1894-95 | a, r |
| Jeter Pritchard | (R-Madison) | 1895-1903 | e, r |
| Lee Overman | (D-Rowan) | 1903-30 | e, d |
| Cameron Morrison | (D-Mecklenburg) | 1930-32 | a, lp |
| Robert Reynolds | (D-Buncombe) | 1932-45 | e, r |
| Clyde Hoey | (D-Cleveland) | 1945-54 | e, d |
| Sam Ervin | (D-Burke) | 1954-74 | e, r |
| Robert Morgan | (D-Harnett) | 1975-81 | e, lg |
| John Porter East | (R-Pitt) | 1981-86 | e, d |
| James Broyhill | (R-Caldwell) | 1986 | a, lg |
| Terry Sanford | (D-Durham) | 1986-date | e |

Notes:

a - appointed r - retired lp - lost party primary
 e - elected (D) - Democrat lg - lost general election
 d - died in office (R) - Republican

Source: North Carolina Manual

In the next issue of *DataNet*:

Analysis of the 1992 Election Results

Submissions Welcome

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Jennifer O'Lear
 North Carolina DataNet
 Institute for Research in Social Science
 Manning Hall
 University of North Carolina
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3355

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Institute for Research in Social Science
 Manning Hall
 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3355