

POLITICAL ECONOMY

IN THE CAROLINAS

THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA

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The 2020 election confirmed North Carolina's status as one of the country's largest purple states. As Donald Trump repeated his 2016 victory here, albeit with a much narrower margin of seventy thousand votes and about 1.3 percentage points, the Democratic governor Roy Cooper secured his return to office. The other high-profile statewide race, for US senator, was also tight. Incumbent Republican Thom Tillis won by nearly one hundred thousand votes, a margin of victory largely attributable to revelations about the extramarital affair of his opponent, Cal Cunningham. Polls had the Democrat ahead right up to Election Day, but his lead had been eroding since the news of infidelity broke on October 3.

The two major parties' intense competition for state offices continued down the ballot. With the exception of the races for treasurer and commissioner of agriculture, every office for Council of State (a sort of elected cabinet) was decided by less than 200,000 votes of the approximately 5.3 million cast. All incumbents running for reelection won, and Republicans maintained their 6–3 advantage. The lieutenant-gubernatorial contest was especially interesting. Both major-party candidates were Black; Yvonne Lewis Holley, a state legislator, was the Democrat and Mark Robinson the Republican. Robinson revealed a knack for gaining attention. He effectively launched his candidacy after a video of his speech in defense of gun rights made at a Greensboro City Council meeting went viral. He

was a distinct underdog in the GOP primary but rode a wave of social media and national attention right through the general election and into office.

There were elections for three of the state's seven supreme court slots, and Republicans enjoyed a net gain of two to cut the Democratic advantage to 4–3. These GOP victories included an extremely close and expensive race for chief justice. Sitting associate justice Paul Newby unseated incumbent Cherie Beasley by a miniscule 401 votes, despite being outspent by over a million dollars.

Although individual legislative races are often uncontested or one-sided because of redistricting or homophily—the tendency of Democrats and Republicans to live in communities with copartisans—the parties' aggregate seat totals reveal an intense rivalry at that level as well. A state court's 2019 ruling on partisan gerrymandering effectively gave the Democrats two new US House seats, reducing the Republicans' advantage in the North Carolina delegation to 8–5. The new Democratic districts are both in the Piedmont. The first runs roughly north to south from Franklin to Lee Counties and the second lies in the eastern Triad, fitting snugly between Greensboro and Durham. Deborah Ross and Kathy Manning represent the new districts; together they doubled the proportion of the state's delegation that is female. Republicans actually increased their majorities in the two chambers of the general assembly, but the party's advantage is still below the 60 percent threshold required to override a gubernatorial veto. They enjoyed a net gain of four seats in the state house and one in the state senate.

In many ways, the election returns revealed North Carolina to be much like the rest of the country. The state has a deep rural-urban divide, with Democrats dominating the cities and Republicans its small towns and farming communities. Joe Biden won all the state's big six urban counties (those with populations greater than three hundred thousand) by at least 14 percentage points in 2020, including the largest prizes of Mecklenburg and Wake Counties (both have populations of more than one million) by over 25 percentage points. Donald Trump won seventy-five of the remaining ninety-four counties, securing important victories in the booming exurbs—places such as Gaston and Union Counties, near Charlotte—which are becoming pivotal to the state's politics. Most rural counties he lost were in the heavily Black northeast. Biden also secured victories in growing counties. He won in Buncombe, home of Asheville, and New Hanover, home of Wilmington. These places are attracting large numbers of young workers and well-heeled retirees.

The number of truly swing counties has diminished greatly. In 2020 there were only three counties that both Cooper and Trump won: Lenoir, Martin, and Scotland. All of them are quite small, rural, and roughly in the eastern part of the state. In other words, they are home to the political descendants of the “Jessecrats,” the famous North Carolina voters of the 1970s and 1980s who considered themselves dyed-in-the-wool old-style southern Democrats except that they always voted for Republican senator Jesse Helms.

It is interesting to compare North Carolina with its regional peers. Observers generally describe the state as part of the Rim South. Compared with the Deep

South—which includes South Carolina—North Carolina’s economy is larger and has a smaller Black population. At about \$49,000, North Carolina’s GDP per capita is roughly 17 percent larger than South Carolina’s, and Black residents constitute about 5 percentage points less of the population in North Carolina than South Carolina. We might therefore expect the state to have become bluer since 2016, rather as Georgia, Texas, and Virginia did; Georgia, of course, went narrowly for Biden and elected two Democrats to the Senate. But those three states are more Hispanic or urban: Georgia and Virginia are three-fourths urban, North Carolina about two-thirds.

Georgia is particularly eye-catching. The state has about 150,000 more residents than North Carolina but historically much lower turnout—around half a million fewer voters in the past several presidential elections. This lower turnout should help Republicans, but the state’s Black voters are active and visible in Atlanta, a city with an infrastructure to mobilize them that goes back to the civil rights era. Atlanta is one-half Black, while, by comparison, Charlotte is one-third Black, both having grown those populations considerably as a new Black middle class has moved back to the South. Atlanta was fertile ground for the efforts of national Democrats—and, locally, the party’s defeated 2018 gubernatorial candidate, Stacey Abrams—to turn out the vote in the presidential and Senate elections. Relative to their respective states’ city dwellers, rural North Carolinians are quite a bit wealthier than rural Georgians. Republicans cannot count on the same kind of support among rural whites in Georgia as they can in North Carolina.

In fact, although the two states are demographically quite different, North Carolina’s political performance looks more like that of another Rim South state, Florida. Trump increased his margin of victory in the Sunshine State by about 2.2 percentage points over 2016. Much of this increase was due to his improvement in the southern tip of the state—including a net gain of two hundred thousand votes over his 2016 performance in Miami-Dade County, where immigrants from Cuba and South and Central America chose Trump by much higher proportions than did other Latinos. Observers attribute Trump’s success there to his tough-on-socialism stance and opposition to Nicolás Maduro’s regime in Venezuela. North Carolina has no such population, but we should note that Trump held strong in rural areas in the Panhandle and the white exurbs surrounding Jacksonville, Orlando, and Tampa—places that resemble counties such as Gaston, Johnston, and Union in the Tar Heel State.

The 2020 elections made Republicans the “out” party in Washington. What effect will this have on North Carolina? The state voted for the losing presidential candidate, and both its senators and a majority of its House members are now in the congressional minority. It has seen a significant loss of influence as a result. One of the state’s former House members, Mark Meadows, headed the influential House Freedom Caucus through 2019. Trump appointed him White House chief of staff in the spring of 2020. Prior to the election, Sen. Richard Burr had been chair of the important Judiciary Committee. Until the GOP lost control of the House in 2018, Rep. Virginia Foxx had led the Committee on Education

and the Workforce and Patrick McHenry had been chief deputy whip of the majority party's conference and chair of important subcommittees of both the Financial Services Committee and the Oversight and Reform Committee. The three senior Democrats in the House delegation are aging and seem distant from the levers of power: Blacks G. K. Butterfield and Alma Adams are seventy-four, and the Triangle region's David Price is eighty. Price is chair of the Appropriations Committee's subcommittee that deals with transportation and housing issues. He might use this to direct a sizable sum of the Biden administration's planned infrastructure spending to North Carolina.

With Democrats in the White House, however, Republicans will no doubt be eyeing the Senate seat Burr is vacating in 2022. The GOP field is crowded, with former governor Pat McCrory, former House member Mark Walker, and sitting House members Ted Budd running. Budd was endorsed by Trump quickly after the former president's daughter-in-law, NC State graduate Lara Trump, declined to run. It is unclear how, or indeed whether, Budd will benefit from Trump's backing.

On the Democratic side, state senator Jeff Jackson and former state senator Erica Smith, who ran for the Democratic nomination to run against Tillis in 2020, announced their bids early. Since then Cherie Beasley, the recently defeated chief justice of the state supreme court, has jumped in.

The redistricting made necessary by the census will affect the 2022 House races. This will be the third time the general assembly has drawn the congressional lines since 2016, when a federal court ruled that the

map created in 2011 was an unconstitutional racial gerrymander. As I noted earlier, state judges deemed the replacement map an illegal partisan gerrymander. With North Carolina so scarred from litigation surrounding redistricting, state legislators may tread carefully this time. There is some indication they might continue to push the limits of constitutionally permissible partisan gerrymandering, however. North Carolina's booming population gives it a fourteenth district. Moreover, Republicans maintain a tight hold of both chambers and, under a quirk in the state's constitution, do not need to worry about a veto from the governor, who plays no formal role in the redistricting process. It will be interesting to see whether the state GOP tries to draw itself nine safe seats.

The election naturally brought some new faces to the state legislature. The composition of the House and Senate Democratic delegations and their leaderships provide insight into the direction the party is going. Eighty percent of the House delegation and 77 percent of the Senate delegation are either female or not white. White men hold not one of the party's eight House and three Senate Democratic leadership positions. Much has been made of the extremism of state Republicans in recent years. Critics believe gerrymandering, the Trump phenomenon, and a complicit Republican governor—Pat McCrory, who held the office for a term following the 2012 election—have enabled state legislative GOP radicalism on taxes, spending, and social policy. For many progressives, the 2016 brouhaha over transgender rights—including the bill permitting people to use only the public

bathroom corresponding to the sex listed on their birth certificate—was the highlight. But the state’s Democrats have moved perceptibly to the left. The party is not as pragmatic and friendly to business as it was under Jim Hunt and Mike Easley, two governors who served for all but eight years of the period from 1977 through 2008. The Democrats’ legislative agenda following the 2020 elections reflects a new focus on identity politics. Its principal elements are an expansion of access to voting and environmental, women’s, and LGBTQ issues.

The 2020 elections in North Carolina are evidence the state is becoming increasingly like the rest of the country. It is not unique. Localized political effects are diminishing, and the nationalization of politics continues throughout. North Carolina still leans Republican, but Democrats do win statewide races and the state is a deepening purple. It is afflicted by deep partisan divisions manifested geographically in the divide between Republican rural regions and the growing urban centers that are strongly Democratic. The polarized politics of the coronavirus pandemic is unlikely to reverse these trends.