

Beyond House Bill 2:
The Real Reasons that Pat McCrory Lost his Governorship in 2016

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis project.
-William Rhyne, March 19th, 2018

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I. Introduction

Throughout the 2016 election cycle, political scientists, media pundits, and the public alike focused in on the importance of North Carolina, the southern swing state that many labeled as a “must-win” for a Republican party seeking to retake the White House and maintain a slim majority in the United States Senate. And they had a good reason to draw this conclusion. In 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama made waves when he became the first Democratic Presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter in 1976 to carry the state’s fifteen electoral votes, thrusting a state that had voted 56.1 percent to 43.6 percent to reelect George W. Bush straight from the safe-red camp to the uncertain, purple column. For a moment, it appeared as if North Carolina would become the next Virginia, a red-state that had turned towards blue. But four years later, in 2012, Mitt Romney edged out the incumbent Obama in the Tar Heel state with a 50.4 percent to 48.4 percent margin, cementing the state’s status as a toss-up.¹ It was essential, then, that Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump carry the state to have a shot at the Oval Office.

Still, North Carolina Presidential races were not the only nail biters—Senate and Governor results also reflected a voting behavior shift. In 2008, Democrat newcomer Kay Hagan walloped Republican incumbent Elizabeth Dole 52.7 percent to 44.2 percent on Obama’s coattails,² only to see her short-lived political career vanquished in 2014, when State House Speaker Thom Tillis bested her with a narrower margin, 48.8 percent to 47.3 percent.³ The governorship too switched hands, with Democrat Beverly Purdue taking the reins in 2008 and

¹ 270 To Win.

² North Carolina State Board of Elections. “Official Results: 2008 General Election.”

³ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “11/04/2014 Official General Election Results – Statewide.”

Republican Pat McCrory winning in 2012.⁴ And as the results in North Carolina got closer and closer, the nation noticed. In 2008, Obama unloaded just over \$15 million alone on advertisements in the state, compared to a meager \$3.8 million spent by his Republican opponent, John McCain.⁵ By 2012, these numbers had ballooned to \$40 million for Obama and \$57 million for Romney, only surpassed by the traditional battlegrounds of Florida, Virginia, and Ohio.⁶

Consequently, the stage was set for another North Carolina bloodbath in 2016, with the line-up including the Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton Presidential campaign, a reelection run for Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr (R), and Governor McCrory seeking a second term. It is safe to say that this cycle lived up to these expectations. Holding true to the recent pattern, North Carolina again offered few indications as to where the state's voting future is heading. Trump carried the state with a margin slightly larger than Romney's in 2012. Burr withstood a strong challenge from former Assemblywoman Deborah Ross. And perhaps most interestingly, McCrory lost the closest statewide race 2016 following a recount, handing the Governorship to Attorney General Roy Cooper by around ten thousand votes.⁷

At first glance, McCrory's loss to Cooper is surprising given the Republican success throughout the state. Conservatives in the legislature maintained GOP majorities in both the State House and Senate. Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton by 173,315 votes in the Presidential election. Burr boasted an even larger margin—267,211 votes—over Deborah Ross in the Senate race. Republicans also kept their grip on the state's Congressional delegation, the Lieutenant

⁴ Purdue decided not to seek reelection; McCrory defeated the Democratic replacement nominee—Walter Dalton.

⁵ CNN. "Election Tracker: Ad Spending."

⁶ The Washington Post. "Mad Money: TV Ads in the 2012 Presidential Campaign."

⁷ The New York Times. "North Carolina Governor Results: Roy Cooper Leads."

Governorship, and many of the other Council of State positions.⁸ In the Republican tide, then, Cooper's victory was the marquee event for North Carolina's Democrats in 2016, giving the party the power of the bully pulpit when it came advancing the party's agenda in the state.

By the numbers, McCrory's loss appears to be an anomaly. The reality, however, is that his defeat had been in the cards for a while. Most media accounts depict the beginning of McCrory's end as his response to Charlotte's anti-discrimination ordinance and the ensuing bathroom politics debacle that began in April of 2016. Many wrote the governor off as a symbol of what became known as House Bill 2, using the governor's defense of the much-maligned legislation as evidence of his inability to win reelection in a very Republican year. Still, others identified more nuanced factors in the governor's race—issues that hurt the governor long before the bathroom debate started. Few of these subjects received the time of day in the news media, and when they did, were often mentioned in passing. Yet given the razor thin voting margin—10,277 votes—any of these other problems could have ultimately tipped the scale in Cooper's favor.

This thesis examines North Carolina politics in three parts. First, I delve into the relevant historical context needed to fully understand modern day North Carolina campaigns and elections. Second, I provide a detailed account of the 2016 governor's race to introduce the many complexities and pressure points in the race. Third, I synthesize the conclusions of ten interviews with political experts and operatives in the state of North Carolina to contrast their comments with the overarching media narrative on the race: House Bill 2 cost Pat McCrory his Governorship. Ultimately, I argue that House Bill 2 was one of many factors that led to

⁸ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "11/08/2016 OFFICIAL GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS – STATEWIDE."

McCrory's defeat, but it cannot be singlehandedly responsible for the race's outcome. In support of this conclusion, I show how McCrory suffered from underlying character problems that resulted in numerous policy missteps throughout his administration. I also go further to argue that it was these missteps together, not just House Bill 2, that led voters to reject him at the 2016 polls.

II. Methods and Theory

The conclusions in this thesis are drawn largely from interview research conducted between December 2016 and January 2018. All interviews were conducted either in-person or over-the-phone, and the transcripts for the interviews (available as Appendix 1) were compiled by filling in detailed notes from each interview. These transcripts reflect on-the-record comments made by each interviewee, and all off-the-record and background information from each interview has been left out of both the transcript and the conclusions of this thesis. To increase the integrity of this thesis, all interviewees were given the opportunity to read and approve how their words were used and represented.

Furthermore, the results of the interviews can be matched loosely to voting behavior theory. The University of Michigan's ICPSR program notes that two overarching factors influence citizen voting behavior: party identification and broad ideological orientations. But more specifically, voters are also concerned with three more general elements of a politician: positions on certain public policy issues, evaluations of government performance, and the personal traits of the candidates.⁹ Dr. Donald Schroeder of Campbell University characterized these factors together as "a vague apprehension of what a candidate is like as a person," meaning that the three factors are intertwined when it comes to voters making decisions on which candidate to support.¹⁰

The results of the interviews matched Dr. Schroeder's sentiments. In North Carolina, given that the ranks of registered Democrats and Republicans are giving way to more and more independent voters each cycle, party identification and overarching ideology are becoming harder and harder to peg as the major influencing factors behind voting behavior. Certainly,

⁹ The University of Michigan. "Voting Behavior."

¹⁰ Donald Schroeder. "Interview with Donald Schroeder."

registered Republicans still showed up in force to support Pat McCrory for reelection, and likewise, registered Democrats went to the polls to vote for Roy Cooper. But as shown by the interviews, personality, government experience, and numerous policy details ultimately pushed the state's most important voting bloc—undecided, independent voters—away from McCrory and toward Cooper. The descriptive analysis of this phenomenon constitutes Chapter 3 (Section 5) of this thesis, and a visual representation of these results can be found as Appendix 2B3.

III. Historical Context

The story of the 2016 Gubernatorial race in North Carolina did not begin in 2016. Nor did it start during the 2016 election cycle. Yes, the events of Pat McCrory's first term and the McCrory-Cooper campaign contributed heavily to the outcome; however, at the same time, this politics reflected trends going back years, even decades. An analysis of the McCrory-Cooper battle, then, should include discussion of relevant developments in North Carolina politics. Two broad umbrellas classify these patterns. First, one must look to the mid-twentieth century to examine monumental shifts in Southern politics and follow these movements into the twenty-first century. These events often center around the rise of the Southern Republican party. Second, these more macro movements must be considered in the context of North Carolina and again be traced over time, with attention to the 1980s and the early twenty-first century. These happenings again focus on the growth of the Republican party, yet this time just in the context of a single state. Scholars have already conducted substantial research in these fields; as such, this section intends to summarize historical events that underlie the 2016 North Carolina Governor's race.

Overall, the modern Republican party in the South stems from the Dixiecrat revolt in 1948. For the next thirty years, racial tension motivated the growth of the party, with particularly salient gains beginning during Barry Goldwater's Presidential campaign in 1964. Originally, these advances were in response to civil rights legislation and resulted in a newfound relevance for Southern governors. Then, in 1980, Ronald Reagan took the party a step further, melding a coalition together by focusing instead on the role of government in individuals' lives while maintaining support among the Goldwater base. Capitalizing on Reagan's work, Newt Gingrich translated the Reagan success into Congressional gains in 1994, giving Republicans control over the House for the first time since 1952. After the more turbulent 1990s, a period of stasis ensued

in the 2000s. However, the conservative response to Democrat and African-American Barack Obama's election as President in 2008 again resulted in upheaval through the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party. Though this crusade lost national steam in 2012, it remained disillusioned as the party's base, ultimately culminating in the Southern Republican wave during the 2016 elections. In post-2016 election America, Republicans controlled all Southern state legislatures and every Governorship save Louisiana, Virginia, and North Carolina.

In North Carolina, the growth of the Republican party generally followed the same trend with key divergences. First, Republicans started from a position of power in North Carolina given their concentration in the mountainous Western portion of the state. Second, the transition to success began first in Presidential politics and ended with victories in down-ballot races. At the same time, however, Democrats in the state maintained a stranglehold on the governor's mansion, in part due to the immense success of Jim Hunt, who would eventually serve as governor for sixteen years. Hunt would come to embody the "ideal" gubernatorial candidate in North Carolina—strong personality, great command of state government, and popular policies, particularly in the education area. And as Southern states became increasingly conservative in the twenty-first century, North Carolina elections only got closer. By 2016, it would no longer be a foregone conclusion for Democrats to take the governorship and Republicans to win the Presidential election in the state. One of the state's Senate seats too switched parties twice in three election cycles. Ultimately, these trends had made North Carolina a full-blown battleground state by the beginning of the 2016 election season.

Changing Politics: The Rise of Southern Republicans

Quite frankly, Southern politics in the mid-twentieth century centered on one overarching theme: the position of African-Americans in Southern society. During this time, many political decisions traced back to the notion of maintaining white supremacy, even in numerous counties where blacks comprised the population's majority.¹¹ These mechanisms often revolved around disenfranchisement of black voters.¹² Moreover, such decisions required unity at both regional and national levels, for regional control remained as important as ensuring resistance to federal attempts bent on infringing upon the South's authority on the issue of race. As a result, a one-party political system ruled by Democrats characterized much of the South. Only in 1948 had cracks begun to show in Democrat dominance, with whites first losing power in predominantly black locales. Regardless, in this time, Southern politics was a function of battles between factions in the Democratic party.¹³

Likewise, Republicans approximated an actual party in only a few Southern states. During the mid-century, these Republicans fit into three groups: Presidential, mountain, and African-American. Presidential Republicans voted in Democratic statewide primaries and for Democrats in local elections, but they voted for Republicans when it came to Presidential politics. The mountain Republicans differed in that they voted on straight-Republican tickets and maintained control over some local governments and few state offices. The third mass, black

¹¹ V. O. Key Jr. *Southern Politics*, p. 5-7. Here, Key depicts the Southern counties with blacks composing more than 50% of the population in 1940. While many of these counties remain concentrated in the deep south, North Carolina does contain African-American population clusters in the Northeast corner and Southern piedmont regions of the state. Overall, 38.9% of North Carolinian counties contained a population made up of more than 30% black.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 531-675. Key goes into great detail about the numerous measures enacted to disenfranchise black voters. For purposes of relevance and brevity, these measures are not summarized in this thesis.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 8-12.

Republicans, inherently voted Republican given the Democrats' propensity to seek political, economic, and social control over them.¹⁴

Changes in this Southern party structure began with the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 after the President's Committee on Civil Rights recommended protecting the civil rights of minorities, including African-Americans.¹⁵ This marked the end of the Democratic "solid South."¹⁶ It would not be until the 1960s's "Southern strategy" articulated by Barry Goldwater took shape, however, that Republicans would begin to see substantial Southern gains. Specifically, conservatives rallied around Goldwater in the 1964 Presidential election because he opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act.¹⁷ Nationally, Republicans would continue to see increased success in subsequent Presidential elections until Ronald Reagan's landslide in 1980 due to white dissatisfaction with the national Democratic party agenda, especially over racial and economic liberalism.¹⁸ Reagan also maintained an immensely popular public celebrity.

Two pertinent theories account for this rise. First, Kevin Phillips's theory of "split-level realignment" explains the "top-down" approach to understanding the growth of Southern Republicans. At the time, Republicans only maintained a majority at the Presidential level, not in state and local offices, a trend that held throughout the South.¹⁹ Still, a second theory also bears merit in describing the rise of the Southern GOP: Hood, Kidd, and Morris's theory of relative advantage. In their book *The Rational Southerner*, the trio finds statistical support verifying that more than half of the growth in the Republican party can be written off as both a response to

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 277-297.

¹⁵ Key Jr. *Southern Politics*, p. 329-330.

¹⁶ Jack Bass and Walter DeVries. *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence Since 1945*, p. 23.

¹⁷ Bass and DeVries. *The Transformation of Southern Politics*, p. 27-28.

¹⁸ Earl Black and Merle Black. *Politics and Society in the South*, p. 260.

¹⁹ Black and Black, *Politics and Society in the South*, p. 259.

black voter mobilization toward Democrats and the relationship between party competition and GOP growth. They also reported mixed results when it came to the role of evangelicalism in the party's proliferation—an important conclusion given the strong association between evangelicalism and the Republican Party. Moreover, in direct contrast to Phillips, the group asserts that no statistical support indicates Presidential campaigns as catalysts for the Republicans' rise.²⁰ In other words, race continued to underpin politics in the South, especially the success of the Republican party.

The 1960s also saw increased attention on governorships and state legislatures in response to the civil rights movement.²¹ Overall, gubernatorial races remained a function of the changing demographics and party shifts around them.²² With racial politics minimized following black electoral participation, Southern governors expanded their agendas.²³ Removing the racial roadblocks in the South's politics effectively created a more competitive electoral environment.²⁴ And in some cases, Republican governors even attempted to include blacks in the growing make-up of Republicans.²⁵ Thus, Reagan's move toward ideology and "away" from race also took shape at the gubernatorial level. Moving forward, policy outcomes would become an important tool in determining successful Southern governors. As such, the structure of state governments in the South shifted, with states moving away from both two-year governors' terms and one term

²⁰ M.V. Hood III, Quentin Kidd, and Irwin L. Morris. *The Rational Southerner: Black Mobilization, Republican Growth, and the Partisan Transformation of the American South*, p. 99-117.

²¹ Branwell DuBose Kapeluck, Robert P. Steed, and Laurence W. Moreland, "Southern Governors and Legislatures." 270.

²² Kapeluck, Steed, and Moreland, "Southern Governors and Legislatures," in *Writing Southern Politics: Contemporary Interpretations and Future Directions*, ed. Steed and Moreland, p. 278-280.

²³ Kapeluck, Steed, and Moreland, "Southern Governors and Legislatures," p. 284-288.

²⁴ Earl Black. *Southern Governors and Civil Rights: Racial Segregation as a Campaign Issue in the Second Reconstruction*, p. 309.

²⁵ Black. *Southern Governors and Civil Rights*, p. 322.

limits for governors. And given the newfound competitiveness in general elections, the importance of the party primary in governors' races diminished significantly²⁶

Ultimately, Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 cemented the rise of Southern Republicans, as his message led white voters to identify with the Republican party along ideological—not just racial—lines for the first time. At the same time, his election marked only a partial realignment—white moderates and conservative Democrats could still win when properly mobilizing their coalitions.²⁷ In fact, only 34% of white Southerners identified themselves as Republicans in 1988.²⁸ Yet with the election of Reagan, conservative politics in the South moved beyond the race-centered politics of the mid-century. Interestingly, Reagan conservatives identified more with the notion of individual responsibility for their economic well-being; that is, people's lives are better when the federal government stays out of them.²⁹ His campaign also moved the religious right into the Republican coalition. Still, though, the racial undertones that characterized Southern politics remained: Reagan opposed both the Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and by carefully toying the line on these issues, he too brought the Dixiecrats into the new Southern Republican coalition.³⁰

The Reagan years forever altered the political make-up of the Southern electorate. By the turn of the century, this new Republican Party became composed mainly of whites, with greater support among men than women. Additionally, while only 30% of white Southern Republicans identified with the religious right, nearly all identified themselves as Christians.³¹ Here, the main

²⁶ Larry Sabato. "New South Governors and the Governorship," in *Contemporary Southern Politics*, ed. James F. Lea, p. 204-206.

²⁷ Earl Black and Merle Black. *The Rise of Southern Republicans*, p. 205-206.

²⁸ Black and Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans*, p. 230.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 225.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 215-218.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 242-253.

Republican advantage came in the form of white Protestants, which accounted for nearly 70% of Republican voters in 2004.³² When it came to income, Republicans enjoyed an advantage among the affluent and middle class. The working class, however, remained more volatile and swung between the parties, but it too began to tip more into the Republican camp. African-Americans and Hispanics were hostile toward the party, but Republicans did enjoy slightly higher favorability among Hispanic males. Nevertheless, the ever-cohesive minority support for Democrats led the Republican party to increasingly rely on forming white majorities.³³

The 1994 Congressional elections marked the Southern Republican party's breakthrough beyond Presidential politics. After the election, the Democrats' reliable control over this delegation had evaporated, as Republicans controlled the majority of the South's Senate seats.³⁴ But perhaps even bigger than the retaking of the Senate in 1994 were the Republicans' victories in the House of Representatives. Here, Republicans won a majority of the Southern House seats for the first time since Reconstruction. By 2000, 72 Members of the Southern Congressional delegation caucused with Republicans while only 53 caucused with Democrats.³⁵ Former House Minority Leader New Gingrich made these gains possible by doubling-down on Republican ideologies opposing an increased governmental role in their lives.³⁶ His campaign ploy, the Contract With America, a written promise to accomplish the conservative agenda in Congress, was successful throughout the country.

³² Earl Black and Merle Black. *Divided America: The Ferocious Power Struggles in American Politics*, p. 62-63.

³³ Black and Black. *The Rise of Southern Republicans*, p. 253-267.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 268-270.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 328-329.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 338. Interestingly, the groundwork for these victories was too laid in part by compromise between black Democrats and Republicans, as Democrats consistently boxed each group out when redistricting over the latter half of the twentieth century. Because of the unlikely coalition, blacks gained more Congressional seats and many Republicans found themselves in safer seats (332-336).

Moving forward, the Republican party continued to adapt to the South in the twenty-first century. By 2004, college-educated white protestants became the core of the increasingly conservative party. Again, these voters were driven primarily by their beliefs on individual responsibility.³⁷ The Republicans also continued to consolidate support in the mountain regions, which remained the only white Protestant-dominated region in Southern politics by 2004.³⁸ However, the 2008 election cycle marked a substantial reversal of Republicans' fortunes in the South. With the success of Barack Obama, a Northern liberal and the country's first African-American Presidential nominee, across the region, it appeared as if Republicans would need to rally more than just white voters to win.³⁹

Yet the 2010 cycle rapidly reversed this sentiment with the enormous electoral success of the extreme right—the Tea Party. While the 1980s and 1990s embodied a time of revitalization in the Southern Republican party, the 2000s represented a period of stasis. Upheaval ensued, however, at the start of the 2010 election cycle as a hostile response to President Obama and his liberal policies. The level of hostility remained almost unprecedented, and like Reagan's campaigns before it, relied heavily on racial undertones to convey its message.⁴⁰ Importantly, then, the South proved the perfect ground on which to sow the Tea Party soil, with racial resentment and evangelicalism standing as the two central pillars to both the Tea Party movement and the broader Southern Republican party. In fact, Hood, Kidd, and Morris find that evangelicalism is the strongest identifier among Southern Tea Party Republicans. But in the aftermath of Obama's reelection in 2012, it appeared as if the Tea Party's reliance on white

³⁷ Black and Black. *Divided America*, p. 62-66.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66-72.

³⁹ Branwell DuBose Kapeluck, Laurence W. Moreland, and Robert P. Steed. *A Paler Shade of Red: The 2008 Presidential Election in the South*, p. xiii.

⁴⁰ David Lotto. "The South Has Risen Again: Thoughts on the Tea Party and the Recent Rise of Right Wing Racism."

voters alone would not result in a broad enough coalition to support the Republican party's future.⁴¹

Moving into the 2016 election cycle, however, Republicans in the South found themselves in a strong position. In 2016, Republicans completely controlled every state legislature in the South save Kentucky, where they only held the State Senate.⁴² They also held the supermajority of governorships, with Democrats controlling only Louisiana, Virginia, and West Virginia.⁴³ Overall, 2016 proved fruitful for the Republican party in the South. The party maintained its stranglehold on state legislatures, even picking up the Kentucky House of Representatives to give the party total control over all Southern state legislatures.⁴⁴ The Governorships also remained largely unchanged, with North Carolina flipping to Democrats and West Virginia switching to a Republican.⁴⁵ Given the non-electoral nature of the West Virginia flip, the North Carolina Governor's race resulted in the only Southern Democrat pick-up. The causes for and implications of this switch constitute the remainder of this thesis.

Laying the Groundwork: The Growth of the Republican Party in North Carolina

Early Rumbblings

Democratic control of North Carolina began in 1898, when Furnifold M. Simmons organized a Democrat machine to seize the legislature away from fusion coalitions. He would go

⁴¹ M.V. Hood III, Quentin Kidd, and Irwin L. Morris. "Tea Leaves and Southern Politics: Explaining Tea Party Support in the Region."

⁴² National Council of State Legislatures. "2016 Legislative Partisan Composition;" Ballotpedia. "Kentucky House of Representatives elections, 2016."

⁴³ Nick Conway. "Governor's Political Party by State, 1790-2016."

⁴⁴ National Conference of State Legislatures. "State Partisan Composition."

⁴⁵ Stephen Wolf. "Republicans now dominate state government, with 32 legislatures and 33 governors." During the 2016 election cycle, West Virginia elected Jim Justice as a Democrat for Governor. However, less than seven months later, Justice switched party affiliation to Republican at a rally with President Donald Trump.

on to dominate state politics until siding with Herbert Hoover in 1928, with the ensuing Great Depression costing him his political power in 1930. After Simmons, a succession of Cleveland County politicians known as the “Shelby Dynasty” ran the state, but it was not until 1948 and the surprise election of progressive Kerr Scott that modern North Carolina politics began to take shape.⁴⁶ All the while, Democratic politics in North Carolina remained sectionally-charged, with strong divisions apparent between the East and the West.⁴⁷ Republicans, on the other hand, clustered heavily in the Western, mountainous region of the state. But even here, Democrats gerrymandered districts to keep the Republican stronghold as weak as possible. From 1920 to 1948, Republicans composed only 33% of voters in gubernatorial and Presidential elections.⁴⁸

Importantly, the size of the Republican party during this time heavily influenced the nature of the Democrats, most apparent in the high degree of Democratic organization. As noted, most of these Republicans existed as mountain Republicans, meaning they voted along party lines.⁴⁹ Few were Presidential Republicans.⁵⁰ Given the necessity to control Republicans, North Carolinian Democrats became known as sophisticated leaders and presided over quality government.⁵¹ At the same time, North Carolina boasted the strongest organization of Republicans in the South, enabling them to pressure Democrats in 75% of the state’s counties. In turn, these pressures formed something of a positive feedback loop, leading to active campaigning by Democrats throughout the state.⁵²

⁴⁶ Key Jr. *Southern Politics*. P. 211-213.

⁴⁷ Key Jr. *Southern Politics*, p. 219. As noted by Key, North Carolina’s East-West division falls along the line demarking the Piedmont and the Coastal plain, running from Anson County in the middle-South portion of the state to Northampton County in the Northeast region of the state. Appendix 2B1 details a map showing this divide.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 220-223.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 280-281.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 279.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 223-228.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 283-285.

In mid-twentieth century North Carolina, Democrats still controlled state politics. However, during Kerr Scott's Governorship, the tides began to turn, changing first in the Democratic party. In 1949, Scott appointed preeminent North Carolina progressive Frank Graham to the state's United States Senate vacancy. During the 1950 special election for the same seat, Graham lost the Democratic primary to the racially and economically conservative Willis Smith. Smith's election was representative of the white Democrats' unwavering opposition to racial change.⁵³ Importantly, this chasm over the racial question in North Carolina falls in order with the rest of the South. It would later lead many Democrats to switch party affiliation to the Republican party.

After the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision in 1954 outlawing segregation in public schools, the issue of race came to dominate North Carolina politics. Ultimately, the decision would lead North Carolina to retreat from its mid-century height of liberalism. In the short-run, conservative Democrats saw ballot success in the 1950s. Among them stood Senator Sam J. Ervin, who would later garner attention as the Senate's chief proponent of continued segregation.⁵⁴ At the state level, soon-to-be-perennial-governor-candidate I. Beverly Lake, another conservative Democrat, rose as the state's most fervent advocate against desegregation.⁵⁵ But this period too saw increased electoral success for Republicans. In the 1952 Presidential race between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, Eisenhower received the most Republican support in the state since Herbert Hoover in 1928.⁵⁶

⁵³ Paul Luebke. *Tar Heel Politics*, p. 15-17.

⁵⁴ Rob Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics: The Personalities, Elections, and Events that Shaped Modern North Carolina*, p. 154-155.

⁵⁵ Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, p. 164-168.

⁵⁶ Hoover's support can mostly be traced to Furnifold Simmons' political machine. His victory and subsequent handling of the Great Depression would go on to cost Simmons his support and lead to his exit from public office.

Importantly, Eisenhower expanded the Republican party beyond its mountain stronghold, achieving a one-to-one vote status with Stevenson in the Piedmont and taking the counties containing North Carolina's three largest cities: Mecklenburg (Charlotte), Forsyth (Winston-Salem), and Guilford (Greensboro).⁵⁷

But if the 1950s showed a North Carolina moving toward conservative Democrats and Republicans, then the early 1960s serve as a reminder of the state's political volatility. The 1960 governor's race saw a progressive Democrat, Terry Sanford, unite the party's liberal and conservative wings to seize control of state politics.⁵⁸ Sanford would go on to become one of the behemoths of twentieth century state politics. Still, his victory as a progressive came with costs of party unification—Sanford's 54.5% winning percentage made 1960 the tightest Southern Governor's race since 1920.⁵⁹ On the Presidential level, Democrat John F. Kennedy carried the state due to a strong showing in the Coastal region (the same region that voted overwhelmingly for I. Beverly Lake in the governor's primary).⁶⁰ At the same time, however, I. Beverly Lake used North Carolina's television station, WRAL, to his political advantage—the first widespread use of television in North Carolina politics. Thus began the conservative domination of the state's airwaves, an important trend that would continue throughout the remainder of the century.⁶¹

The rest of the 1960s, however, paint the opposite picture. With civil rights legislation moving through the United States Congress in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

⁵⁷ Tom Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy: North Carolina Politics from Kerr Scott to Pat McCrory*, p. 37-38.

⁵⁸ Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 77-84.

⁵⁹ Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, p. 186.

⁶⁰ Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 71-77.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 64-65.

(unanimously opposed by the North Carolina Congressional delegation)⁶² and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, North Carolina voters began to move to the right. In 1964, conservative Dan K. Moore won the Democratic primary for Governor after receiving Lake's public endorsement.⁶³ The Presidential election proved a different story, though, with North Carolina falling for Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson and refusing to join its Southern neighbors in supporting extremist Republican Barry Goldwater.⁶⁴ It would not be until 1968 that the state saw its first major crack toward the Republican party. Here, in the face of zealous antiwar and anti-black protests, Republican Richard Nixon took North Carolina in the Presidential election. George Wallace, the election cycle's premier segregationist candidate, carried the Coastal region, the state's predominantly Democrat-yet-staunchly-socially-conservative refuge.⁶⁵ And in the Governor's race, Democrat Bob Scott, Kerr Scott's son, won with the smallest margin for a Democrat to date, garnering only 53% of the vote. It was increasingly difficult for progressives to carry their once-friendly state.⁶⁶

Next, the 1970s saw the partisan floodgates open in North Carolina, characterized by the beginnings of a strong contrast in national and statewide voting patterns. Retrospectively, the largest domino crumbled on September 17th, 1970, when up-and-coming Democrat and state media aficionado, WRAL's Jesse Helms, switched party affiliation to the Republican Party.⁶⁷ In 1972, Helms won election to the United States Senate, becoming the first statewide Republican to carry the state's heavily Democratic Coastal region in the twentieth century by winning over

⁶² Ibid, p. 98.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 96-97.

⁶⁴ Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 100. 1964 marked one of the first major party shifts for Southern Democrats, as 1948 Dixiecrat Presidential candidate Strom Thurmond, one of South Carolina's Senators, switched affiliation from Democrat to Republican.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 116-125.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 124.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 144.

both I. Beverly Lake and George Wallace voters, as well as social conservatives. In the Governor's race, a Republican too won the office. But the winner, James Holhouser, performed exceedingly well only in the Republican West, while the Democrat's candidate, Hargrove "Skipper" Bowles, took the Coast.⁶⁸ Thus began North Carolina's peculiar history of electing Republicans to national office and Democrats to statewide offices over the course of the late twentieth century (Appendix 2B2). At the same time, however, the 1972 election cycle in North Carolina marked the rise of Democrat Jim Hunt, who would go on to become the state's most prominent Democratic politician in the second half of the twentieth century, and like Sanford and Helms, another of the state's political icons.⁶⁹

"Mudslinging at Mayberry"—The Ballad of Jim Hunt and Jesse Helms

In a sense, the elections of 1972 mark the beginning of today's North Carolina politics. Although Jesse Helms and Jim Hunt have long since passed through the state's elected offices, their collective impact remains significant. Just as discussions about the rise of Southern Republicans and the party's corresponding growth in North Carolina bear merit in providing context for this thesis, so does the more focused story of Jesse Helms and Jim Hunt. Together, these bastions of the right and left transformed the game when it came to winning national (Helms) and statewide (Hunt) elections. And ultimately, it would be from these maps that the events of the 2016 North Carolina elections arose and transpired. First, however, their contributions to state politics must be considered in context.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 137-156. The contrast between the Helms and Holhouser voters is quite stark and reflects the general East-West divide in North Carolina politics. The statewide maps showing the county-by-county vote breakdown are available as Appendix 2B2.

⁶⁹ Eamon, *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 146-148.

Hunt served four terms as Governor, broken up into two periods: 1977 through 1985 and 1993 through 2001.⁷⁰ Helms served five terms as a United States Senator from 1973 to 2003.⁷¹ Yet the two will be remembered for their epic 1984 Senate election battle, a strong contender for the most brutal Senate campaign in American history.⁷² However, before delving into the 1984 race and its implications for North Carolina politics today, it is first pertinent to discuss the two separately; that is, to analyze their individual impacts on statewide politics.

Helms was a key cog in the conservative takeover of the American South during the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, he became a master of the media—he was one of the first to criticize the “leftist” nature of the news media, a phenomenon that pervades national politics today (possibly more than ever), and he was instrumental in the building of a conservative media to bring his Republican message to voters. As Vice President of WRAL-TV, a Raleigh based television company; city editor for the Raleigh *Times*; and editor of the North Carolina Bankers Association’s *Tar Heel Banker*, Helms advanced commentaries to undermine Democrats.⁷³ Ultimately, his efforts transcended the fragmented class lines of disillusioned New Deal supporters, unifying these white voters in Eastern North Carolina through grassroots anger.⁷⁴ This key demographic, white Democrats who voted for Republicans in national elections, would become Helms’s trusty base, known colloquially as the “Jessecrats.”⁷⁵ Through the support of

⁷⁰ National Governors Association. “Governor James B. Hunt.”

⁷¹ The Jesse Helms Center. “Jesse A. Helms Biography.”

⁷² Rob Christensen. “Christensen: Helms-Hunt Battle Still Epic after 30 Years.”

⁷³ Bryan Thrift. “Jesse Helms’s Politics of Pious Incitement: Race, Conservatism, and Southern Realignment in the 1950s.”

⁷⁴ Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 2-5.

⁷⁵ Darryl Nirenberg. Mr. Nirenberg, who served as Jesse Helms’s Chief of Staff from 1991 to 1995, was able to give me lots of great insight into the Senator’s career, as well as insight into North Carolina Senate races since Helms’s retirement, particularly Dole’s victory in 2002 and Burr’s victory in 2016.

Jessecrats, Republicans were victorious throughout North Carolina, culminating with Helms's own election to the United States Senate in 1972.⁷⁶

As a Senator, Helms became the de facto leader of North Carolina Republicans. Along with aide Thomas F. Ellis, Helms started the North Carolina Congressional Club, a powerful organization created to elect Republican lawmakers throughout the state. With the help of direct mail fundraiser Richard Viguere, the two were able to turn the group into a conservative powerhouse, and by 1974, the Club had more money on hand than either state party.⁷⁷ This operation found particular success among lower income voters, who relied on direct mail letters for the majority of their political news.⁷⁸ However, despite his national stature as a conservative leader and his effective campaigning and fundraising strategies, Helms always found himself in close general election races—a testament to his reputation as an extremist. Even in 1984, during the Republican landslide on the coattails of Ronald Reagan, Helms only took 51.7 percent of the popular vote.⁷⁹

Across the aisle, the moderate Hunt filled an equally important role for Democrats in North Carolina. In 1972, during the conservative wave that brought Helms into power, Hunt became the highest-ranking Democrat in the state government—Lieutenant Governor. Given his newfound stature, Hunt became the opposition leader to the Republicans, acting as the leading spokesman for the North Carolina Democrat Party and enabling him to position himself for the Governorship in 1976, an office he won handily, 65 to 34 percent. Importantly, Hunt would use his moderate ideological appeal to strengthen his party. By the time his fourth term as Governor

⁷⁶Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 2-5.

⁷⁷ Bryan Thrift. *Conservative Bias: How Jesse Helms Pioneered the Rise of Right-Wing Media and Realigned the Republican Party*, p. 196-7.

⁷⁸ Darryl Nirenberg.

⁷⁹The Political Guide. "Election Results - U.S. Senate Seat in North Carolina,"

ended in 2001, North Carolina Democrats were the strongest in the South—they would hold the governorship for twenty years straight (twelve more after Hunt) and produce a serious candidate for the 2004 Democratic Presidential nomination: John Edwards.⁸⁰

But how was Hunt able to position his party in this manner? It all goes back to his success in pushing through one of the most consequential state constitution amendments in North Carolinian history; a trend that followed similar developments in Southern politics. During his first term as Governor, Hunt convinced both the legislature and voters to support an amendment allowing Governors to serve consecutive terms.⁸¹ Without such an amendment, Hunt would have been barred from office due to term limits. Instead, he held power for two separate eight-year stints, enabling him to bring substantial, positive change to both the North Carolina economy and the state's education system.⁸² And over in the State House, the break with term limit tradition permitted Democrat Speaker of the House, Liston Ramsey, to serve as Speaker for eight years, beginning in 1981. This feat would be replicated by Jim Black, a Democrat who would go on to serve as Speaker from 1999 to 2007, and by Marc Basnight, who would lead the Democrat majority in the state Senate from 1993 to 2007.⁸³ In reality, Democratic control over the North Carolina State Legislature would continue until the nationwide Republican landslide in 2010.

Yet to fully contextualize the era of Helms and Hunt with the North Carolina political landscape at the start of the twenty first century, their epic 1984 United States Senate battle must be analyzed. Does the outcome of this race show North Carolina leaning in one direction

⁸⁰ Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, p. 235-40.

⁸¹ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce. Gary Pearce, a longtime aide to Governor Hunt and still one of North Carolina's top political minds, was able to give me great insight into Hunt's career, as well as provide commentary on North Carolina politics today. Importantly, Pearce's perspective enabled me to synthesize the Democratic viewpoint into my paper—all of my other interviews were with Republicans.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, p. 246-7.

ideologically towards the end of the twentieth century? Interestingly, the answer is no; in fact, the race provides a great jumping off point into showing just how close and unpredictable North Carolina elections would become. On the surface, 1984 appeared to be a great year for Helms. He enjoyed not only the incumbent advantage but also the coattails of popular President Ronald Reagan, who would go on to defeat his Democrat challenger Walter Mondale in the biggest electoral blowout in history. Nationally, Republican candidates were even polling above Democrat candidates by a seemingly insurmountable margin, 62 to 35 percent.⁸⁴ But Helms would only go on to reclaim his Senate seat by 86,280 votes, with a margin of 52 to 48 percent—a much narrower spread than the Reagan ticket enjoyed.⁸⁵

The question remains, then: what accounts for the significant divergence between Helms's result and Reagan's national landslide? Additionally, what lessons does this outcome hold for North Carolina politics today? At the end of the day, it can be assumed that Reagan's nationwide popularity and Helms's own image were crucial in giving him a cushion in the race, one that was all but eliminated by election day due to Hunt's own immense popularity in North Carolina. Without them, the Hunt campaign believed that their candidate would have won the race.⁸⁶ Moreover, voting demographics were also an important factor. Helms was able to turn out his base, something he credited to fundamentalist churches, which were able to register thousands of new voters that would later support Helms at the polls. And in the Interstate 85 corridor, a stretch of populous North Carolina counties from Charlotte to Raleigh, Helms was

⁸⁴ William Snider. *Helms & Hunt: The North Carolina Senate Race, 1984*, p. 199-201.

⁸⁵ Snider. *Helms & Hunt*, p. 205.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 206.

able to secure small, but ultimately significant, victories.⁸⁷ It would be the struggling North Carolina economy, particularly in the tobacco industry, that almost kept Helms from reelection.⁸⁸

Still, there are three important takeaways from the Helms-Hunt battle. First, at the national level, the 1984 election resulted in a new “alignment” behind Ronald Reagan and the conservatives, with Republicans generally winning their races by significant margins. Yet the opposite was happening in North Carolina: “de-alignment,” the breakdown of party orientation that gave way to a more independently minded electorate.⁸⁹ The presence of this de-alignment has become critical in understanding the outcomes of modern North Carolina elections—as the independent vote swings, so does the race.⁹⁰ Secondly, the voting breakdowns in key demographics showed that the election result in North Carolina was an exception to the national norm. Among women, Hunt carried the vote 57 to 43 percent,⁹¹ a far cry from the 57 percent that voted for Reagan.⁹² Meanwhile, while Reagan carried around 60 percent of voters aged eighteen to forty-nine,⁹³ Hunt was able to win a narrow majority in this demographic.⁹⁴ These demographic results would quickly become the standard for not only North Carolinian elections but also races nationwide, with gaps still widening today.

But lastly, and perhaps most importantly, political advertising in the Helms-Hunt campaign may have been the ultimate deciding factor in a Helms victory. It is no secret that Helms was a master of campaign advertising, and his “assault-your-opponent” strategy of

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 201-5.

⁸⁸ Darryl Nirenberg.

⁸⁹ Snider. *Helms & Hunt*, p. 201-2.

⁹⁰ Darryl Nirenberg.

⁹¹ Snider. *Helms & Hunt*, p. 205.

⁹² Bella Abzug, and Mim Kelber. “DESPITE THE REAGAN SWEEP, A GENDER GAP REMAINS.”

⁹³ The Roper Center. “How Groups Voted in 1984.”

⁹⁴ Snider. *Helms & Hunt*. 205.

negative campaigning still pervades the North Carolina election scene.⁹⁵ Indeed, both campaigns used negative advertising to slander the opposition. But through a closer look at the differing strategies of Helms and Hunt, it becomes clear as to why Helms's was ultimately more effective: thematic continuity.⁹⁶ Throughout Helms's campaign, his attacks on Hunt struck the same chord—"where do you stand, Jim?", enabling Helms to portray the moderate Hunt consistently as a wobbling politician.⁹⁷ These spots were made possible by another tactic Helms helped pioneer: the tracker, an aide that followed the opposition and recorded everything they did.⁹⁸ In the end, Helms's strategist Carter Wrenn estimates that in the first three weeks of the "where do you stand, Jim" campaign, the Helms team saw a substantial ten point bump in the polls, where \$4 to \$5 million in advertisements over most of 1983 had only resonated in a five point bump.⁹⁹

Conversely, Hunt's approach was more disjointed. Some of his advertisements portrayed Helms as a "villain," depicting Helms as supporting oppressive foreign regimes that murdered women and children. Yet other Hunt ads were positive, attempting to show Hunt as the good guy, despite his extremely graphic and nasty attacks on Helms. These advertisements were rendered ineffective because Helms was able to associate himself more effectively with the actual "good guy:" Ronald Reagan.¹⁰⁰ In the Helms victory, the importance of reinforced

⁹⁵ Ferrel Guillory. "A Political Paradox: North Carolina's Twenty-Five Years Under Jim Hunt and Jesse Helms."

⁹⁶ Larry Smith, and James Golden. "Electronic Storytelling in Electoral Politics: An Anecdotal Analysis of Television Advertising in the Helms-hunt Senate Race," p. 256.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 250.

⁹⁸ Darryl Nirenberg.

⁹⁹ Carter Wrenn. Interview with Carter Wrenn. Carter Wrenn, a longtime Helms strategist and top political mind in North Carolina, was able to give me great, inside information about Helms's career, including his 1984 Senate race, as well as pertinent commentary on North Carolina politics today and the outcome of the 2016 elections.

¹⁰⁰ Larry Smith, and James Golden. "Electronic Storytelling in Electoral Politics," p. 251-3.

narrative advertising won out over single-scene negative storytelling, setting the stage for modern political advertising.¹⁰¹

At the end of the day, Helms and Hunt often overshadow another figure in late-twentieth century North Carolina politics that deserves mention: Jim Martin. Elected twice as a Republican Governor in 1984 and 1988, Martin became the second and final Republican governor of the state in the twentieth century. He also stands with Sanford, Helms, and Hunt as one of the state's iconic twentieth century politicians. For contextual purposes, Martin is important as a comparison to Pat McCrory. Both were from the Charlotte area, both were elected numerous times (though for different offices) by Mecklenburg County constituents, and obviously, both went on to win the Governor's mansion.¹⁰² Martin's Administration remains especially significant because he serves as the only foil to McCrory given the lack of Republican governors during the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, analyzing where each's strategy ran parallel and diverged, be it in practice or level of success, is worthy of consideration before diving into McCrory's tenure as Governor.

Jim Martin rose to power as an education policy analyst among Mecklenburg County Commissioners, creating tax revenue to add more money to the county's education budget.¹⁰³ Martin was quickly labeled as a conservative rising star, leading him to announce his candidacy for United States Congress. During his announcement speech, he championed education improvement as a primary motivator.¹⁰⁴ And as his first act as a Congressman, Martin introduced a bill to improve public education. He also quickly became the most reliably-conservative

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 256.

¹⁰² John Hood. *Catalyst: Jim Martin and the Rise of North Carolina Republicans*.

¹⁰³ Hood. *Catalyst*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 59.

Member of the North Carolina Congressional delegation.¹⁰⁵ Due to his interests as a Professor of Chemistry at Davidson College before entering politics, Martin's Congressional portfolio went on to include science and nuclear war. He also remained passionate about balancing the federal budget.¹⁰⁶

By the early 1980s, Martin had become homesick in Washington, as he sought more time with his family back home. But instead of returning to North Carolina and going back to his old life as a Professor, Martin elected to run for the Republican nomination for Governor in 1984. As more of a moderate and given the bloodbath brewing between Jim Hunt and Jesse Helms in the Senate campaign, Martin failed to win endorsements from conservatives. Perhaps to an extent due to a lack of Democratic focus on the governor's race, Martin became only the second Republican elected governor in North Carolina during the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷

Importantly, Martin's success stemmed in part from his positions on transportation politics. During the 1984 election, the status of Interstate 40's construction between Raleigh and Charlotte was a contested election issue. Though he lost the Democratic primary to Rufus Edmisten, Eddie Knox had become widely popular for his pledge to complete the construction during his first term as governor. Edmisten took a more conservative approach.¹⁰⁸ In the general election, Martin followed Knox's move, delivering scathing rebukes of Edmisten's unpopular position at every possible avenue.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Martin continued to trumpet his experience as a successful education reformer and focused on improving turnout where conservatives

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 109.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 118.

¹⁰⁸ Hood. *Catalyst*, p. 130.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 133; p. 143.

traditionally did poorly.¹¹⁰ Nearly thirty years later, the transportation issue would play a significant role in costing Pat McCrory his own reelection.

During his first year in office, Martin made education central to his Administration. He doubled-down on increasing teacher pay in his inaugural address. Moreover, Martin attempted to divert funding from Hunt's big government education programs to make these pay increases happen. By the end of 1985, Martin boasted a 64% favorable rate among North Carolina voters, along with a majority of voters believing he was doing a good job. Meanwhile, the liberal state legislature looked badly in comparison. Moving forward, Martin prioritized transportation, education, prison crisis, fiscal, and environmental policies throughout the remainder of his two terms as Governor. He also found himself embroiled-by-proxy in a bitter race for the state's GOP chairman.¹¹¹ Ultimately, Pat McCrory was unable to recreate Martin's first term success during his own administration.

North Carolina Politics in the Twenty-First Century

Undoubtedly, both the North Carolina electorate and the state itself are drastically different from the North Carolina of Jesse Helms and Jim Hunt (and even Jim Martin). So although it is important to contextualize modern elections through the impact of these titans, an analysis of these two politicians alone does not provide a complete picture of North Carolina politics today; a discussion of twenty first century Senate, Governor, and Presidential elections is also needed. Conveniently, this conversation can be split into two time periods: 2000 through 2008 and 2009 through 2014, with the divider being the national Democratic wave brought on by Barack Obama in 2008. In looking at these separate Senate and Presidential elections, it is

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 135; p. 145.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

apparent that both parties have seen considerable progress in North Carolina, only to see their momentum stymied prematurely by the other party. Only in Governor's races has one party, the Democrats, seen consistent electoral success.

The Senate tale kicks off in 2002, when Elizabeth "Liddy" Dole, wife of former Senate Majority Leader and Republican Presidential nominee Bob Dole, beat former Bill Clinton Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles handily to replace the retiring Jesse Helms. Still, Dole's 54 percent to 45 percent margin was somewhat unexpected: with \$21 million spent, the Dole-Bowles race was the most expensive Senate campaign in the country, leaving many experts stifled by the actual margin of victory.¹¹² However, Dole possessed three advantages that ultimately brought her the race. First, she had national name recognition, as well as a political persona separate from her husband and developed during her time in the Reagan and H.W. Bush Administrations. Second, she had a great relationship with Helms, giving her his full support in the race. And third, she was just a better candidate than Bowles, a skilled businessman and administrator who lacked the political know-how needed to win.¹¹³

Despite her success in 2002, however, Dole would go on to lose to Kay Hagan, a state senator running on Barack Obama's coattails, in 2008. This time around, the Jesse Helms that carried Helms to victory for thirty years comprised only 7 percent of the vote, increasing the impact of the undecided vote on swinging the election.¹¹⁴ In keeping with the national trend, these voters would inevitably break for Obama, bringing Hagan to the Senate. Money too played a role—Hagan and Dole each spent \$5 million, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee infused over \$11 million to take out Dole.¹¹⁵ However, Dole also made one massive

¹¹² Bella Abzug, and Mim Kelber.

¹¹³ Darryl Nirenberg.

¹¹⁴ Carter Wrenn. "Behind the Curtain: The Senate Race."

¹¹⁵ Gary Pearce. "Winners and Losers 2008."

mistake: in the final days of the election she sunk into the gutter and ran a television ad accusing Hagan of being an atheist. In response, Hagan aired “Belief,” a spot criticizing Dole’s attacks on her faith and doubling down on her own career as a Sunday school teacher.¹¹⁶ Hagan’s defense received praise nationwide, and it was the final nail in the coffin for the Dole campaign.¹¹⁷

But in 2014, this seat would flip again, with Hagan losing narrowly to Thom Tillis, the North Carolina House Speaker. This time, Obama could not help carry Hagan—his job approval was hovering around what would become his eight-year low,¹¹⁸ helping Tillis to a small victory.¹¹⁹ Together, these shifts beg the question: what are the takeaways from the Dole-Hagan-Tillis saga that has followed thirty years of Helms? At the end of the day, the back and forth nature of this Senate seat can be contributed to the magnitude of personality generally needed to win North Carolina Senate races—Helms was only able to hold onto his seat for so long because he built such a big name for himself throughout the state and across the nation. Neither Dole nor Hagan were able to build the same persona, and it has yet to be seen if Tillis will be afflicted with this same plight in 2020.¹²⁰ Thus, Democrats were able to pounce on Dole’s lack of record in 2008 by offering the alternative of Obama’s grand vision of change, and the Republicans were able to counter in 2014 by portraying Hagan’s record as only following that of Obama—she did not have her own agenda to help the people of North Carolina.

Yet North Carolina’s other sitting Senator, Richard Burr, has been able to circumvent the necessity for such a personality; he has held onto his seat for three terms without being widely identified as associated with any particular legislative issue or generating much press.¹²¹ In 2004,

¹¹⁶ Kay Hagan. “Belief.”

¹¹⁷ Tarini Parti. “New Hagan Ad Flashback to Dole Race.”

¹¹⁸ Gallup. “Gallup Daily: Obama Job Approval.”

¹¹⁹ Gary Pearce. “What Happened.” *Talking About Politics*, November 6, 2014.

¹²⁰ Darryl Nirenberg.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Burr defeated Erskine Bowles in the race to replace retiring Senator and Democratic Vice Presidential nominee John Edwards. It was a come from behind victory in a race that would see over \$20 million in spending, again one of the most expensive in America. After polling ten points below Bowles throughout the summer of 2004, Burr was able to gain ground with television ads sticking Bowles to Bill Clinton using a Helms-esque continued narrative. Moreover, a federal tobacco buyout passed in October of 2004 energized North Carolina farmers to turn out for Burr.¹²² This would help Burr win big in crucial Eastern North Carolina,¹²³ but it was increasingly clear that the candidate who could win suburban voters would take the election. He was able to sway these voters and make it to the Senate.¹²⁴

Burr's reelection in 2010, however, was more of a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the anti-Obama sentiments that resulted a national Republican landslide were of key importance to Burr's successful campaign.¹²⁵ But he also made strides in strengthening his relationship with swing voters. Following Obama's success with African-American voters in 2008, Burr reached out to these voters with increased diligence. Particularly, he battled for legislation to increase graduation rates for low income and minority students; he became more involved combatting sickle cell anemia (which disproportionately affects African-Americans); and he fought to reauthorize Healthy Start, a program bent on lowering the infant mortality rate (which also disproportionately affects African-Americans).¹²⁶ As a result, polling in the lead up to the race showed Burr had increased his proportion of the African-American vote from 12 percent in

¹²² Elissa Gootman. "THE 2004 ELECTIONS: STATE BY STATE -- South; Strong Performances by President Bush and Republican Senators."

¹²³ The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "ELECTION 2004: U.S. Senate: AROUND THE SOUTH: NORTH CAROLINA: Edwards' Senate Seat Goes to Republican."

¹²⁴ Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, p. 311

¹²⁵ Gary Pearce. "Memo to Democrats."

¹²⁶ CQ. "CQ's Politics in America 2010 (111th Congress)."

2004¹²⁷ to 22 percent in 2010.¹²⁸ For comparison, Tillis won only 4 percent of this vote in 2014.¹²⁹

The Presidential election side of things also shows North Carolinian preferences shifting from party to party. Republican George W. Bush was immensely successful in both the 2000 and 2004 elections in the state, carrying it 56 to 43 percent in 2000¹³⁰ and 56 to 44 percent in 2004.¹³¹ Despite the competitiveness of down ballot races in 2000, North Carolina was marked as a “safe” state for Bush, and neither Bush nor his Democrat opponent Al Gore spent any money on television advertisements in the state.¹³² In 2004, the Democrats attempted to make the state more competitive, nominating John Edwards for Vice President. In the post-convention bounce, a poll showed the Kerry-Edwards ticket tied with the Bush-Cheney duo. This poll would become wishful thinking, however: by August, the party had again conceded the state to Bush.¹³³

Then, almost astonishingly, everything changed in 2008. Early on, it appeared as if North Carolina would again be a safe bet for Republican Presidential nominee John McCain. Ultimately, however, Obama would carry the state by 14,000 votes—a razor thin margin. There are four reasons for this shocking victory. First, McCain suffered due to his connections with some of Bush’s unpopular economic and foreign policy decisions. Second, Obama had a superior campaign organization in the state, whereas McCain put forth substantially fewer of his ground resources. Accordingly, the Democrats saw increased success in registering new voters, particularly African-Americans, and convincing these new voters to turn out and actually vote.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ SurveyUSA. “Results of SurveyUSA Election Poll #17528.”

¹²⁹ NCEC Staff. “North Carolina 2014 U.S. Senate Post-Election Analysis.”

¹³⁰ US Election Atlas. “2000 Presidential General Election Results - North Carolina.”

¹³¹ CNN. “Election Results.”

¹³² Robert Steed, and Laurence Moreland. *The 2000 Presidential Election in the South*, p. 170.

¹³³ Kevin McMahan, David Rankin, Donald Beachler, and John White. *Winning the White House, 2004*, p. 142-4.

Third, North Carolina was experiencing a major demographic shift. It was one of the fastest growing states between 2000 and 2007, with much of the influx headed towards metropolitan areas. In Mecklenburg County (Charlotte) and Wake County (Raleigh), two counties with large amounts of Democrat voters, population sizes increased 25 percent and 33 percent, respectively.¹³⁴ Finally, there was Obama's emphasis on getting out the early vote, which allowed him to maximize support by encouraging those that could not vote on election day to vote beforehand, when it was convenient.¹³⁵

After 2008, the results were clear: like Virginia before it, North Carolina was becoming an increasingly favorable state for Democrats.¹³⁶ But the 2010 midterms and the 2012 election provide a stark counterexample to this claim. In a harsh rebuke of Democratic governing in 2010, a Republican wave rippled across the nation, including North Carolina. Then, in 2012, Republican Presidential nominee Mitt Romney was able to retake the state's fifteen electoral votes for the Republicans. When looking at the campaign, though, this result is interesting. Democrats spent only \$40 million in the state, compared with a whopping \$57 million spent by Republicans. On the flip side, the Democrat field organization effort was again superior to the Republicans, even with the Republican operation at least somewhat improved from 2008. Thus, there was a money advantage for Romney and an organization advantage for Obama. So at the end of the day then, how was Romney able to swing North Carolina back into the red column? In reality, the answer is not that North Carolina was becoming more conservative; rather, the sluggish economy made electoral conditions better for Republicans, enabling a slim Romney

¹³⁴ Branwell Kapeluck, Laurence Moreland, and Robert Steed. *A Paler Shade of Red: The 2008 Presidential Election in the South*, p. 164-8; 173-5.

¹³⁵ Gary Pearce. "Never the Same."

¹³⁶ Branwell Kapeluck, Laurence Moreland, and Robert Steed, 167.

victory.¹³⁷ Still, looking ahead, it was the Democrats that were optimistic about their future Presidential prospects in North Carolina.¹³⁸

Yet although both parties have seen success in North Carolina Senate and Presidential races, Democrats have dominated modern gubernatorial elections, with one recent exception. The first Governor of North Carolina in the new millennium was Democrat Mike Easley, elected to two terms in 2000 and 2004 by comfortable margins, 52 to 46 percent¹³⁹ and 56 to 43 percent,¹⁴⁰ respectively. In 2000, the real battle for Easley was the Democratic nomination. He was an outsider candidate, and like Helms before him, it took his television advertising prowess to overcome opposition of local political organizations and connect directly with voters. Then, in the general election, he defeated former Charlotte Mayor Richard Vinroot by appealing as a moderate and focusing on issues with broad support. In this manner, he maintained Hunt's support among rural whites and African-Americans, as well as the crucial suburban swing voters. As Governor, Easley moved even closer to the middle. In 2005, he stopped going to Democratic party events after a falling out with North Carolinian liberals over the new state party chairman. Legislatively, he continuously bucked heads with the liberal State Senate Majority Leader Marc Basnight.¹⁴¹ But then, when it came time for reelection, Easley was able to use his incumbency to his advantage—no North Carolina governor had ever lost reelection.¹⁴²

In 2008, it was Lieutenant Governor Beverly Perdue's turn at the governorship. Unlike Hunt and Easley before her, Perdue embraced national Democratic candidates, a bold move in a

¹³⁷ Scott Buchanan, and Branwell Kapeluck. *Second Verse, Same As the First: The 2012 Presidential Election in the South*.

¹³⁸ Eamon. *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 320.

¹³⁹ The New York Times. "THE 2000 ELECTIONS: RESULTS; The Races for Governor."

¹⁴⁰ US Election Atlas. "2004 Gubernatorial General Election Results - North Carolina."

¹⁴¹ Christensen. *The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics*, p. 293-7.

¹⁴² Christopher Cooper, and H. Gibbs Knotts. *The New Politics of North Carolina*, p. 130.

state where the pattern was nationally red and locally blue.¹⁴³ But the gamble paid off due to the size of Obama's national victory—his coattails definitely helped her into the office, especially his boost of straight party voting.¹⁴⁴ Perdue also had powerful surrogates on the campaign trail, including Hunt,¹⁴⁵ and she cemented her victory by following the historical trend of going after undecided voters. For Perdue, these were rural white Democrats, and to win over these voters, she pushed a strong anti-illegal immigration message.¹⁴⁶ In the end, television advertising may have again been the decisive factor. Perdue outspent her opponent, former Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory, continually going negative to trounce his record on issue after issue.¹⁴⁷ Still, there is one more important takeaway from the 2008 North Carolina governor race: how Perdue polled in accordance with the Obama-Biden ticket. In the state, Democratic candidates for statewide races generally poll ten or twelve points ahead of their national counterparts. With this trend in mind, it would seem that Perdue would have trounced McCrory in the general election; in actuality, however, she ran almost even with the victorious Obama ticket.¹⁴⁸

After McCrory's 2008 loss, it was generally assumed that he would run again in 2012. Immediately, McCrory carved out a niche for himself with the Moore & Van Allen law firm in Charlotte. His position was structured so he had the flexibility to start another campaign. In 2010, along with the rise of the Tea Party in opposition to President Obama's policies, McCrory travelled the state with Americans For Prosperity preaching for conservative platforms and railing against Obamacare. In this manner, he ran for governor for almost three years before even declaring for a second try. And given a litany of problems in the Perdue Administration, it was

¹⁴³ Carter Wrenn. "Behind the Curtain: Conclusion."

¹⁴⁴ Gary Pearce. "What Happened."

¹⁴⁵ Gary Pearce. "Jim Hunt's Secret Plan Revealed."

¹⁴⁶ Carter Wrenn. "Summation."

¹⁴⁷ Gary Pearce. "What Happened."

¹⁴⁸ Gary Pearce. "Never the Same."

again assumed from day one that McCrory would be the next governor of North Carolina in 2012. And ultimately, this sentiment prevailed. McCrory's finance consultant in 2012, Jonathan Brooks, called the race "more of a coronation than an election."¹⁴⁹

Interestingly, Perdue decided not to seek reelection in 2012, opening the door for McCrory to become the new governor. Her decision was especially interesting given the 100% success rate for incumbent governors seeking reelection in the state, as well as the fact that incumbent governors received substantial advantages in campaign fundraising.¹⁵⁰ With Perdue's decision, the Democrats were at an instant disadvantage—whichever candidate they could find to run would start out polling below McCrory. This polling hole would persist throughout the general election, with McCrory eventually taking the Governor's mansion with a 55 to 44 percent margin.¹⁵¹ Central to McCrory's campaign had been the promise of building a "Carolina Comeback," an economic message that resonated strongly with voters.¹⁵² A strong factor in McCrory's election was also his ability to carry the populous Mecklenburg County, where he outpolled Obama by 103,000 votes, undoubtedly due to his success as Charlotte's mayor. McCrory also carried Wake and Forsyth (Winston-Salem), two more very important urban centers normally won by Democrats. And with his victory, Republicans walked away from 2012 with newfound confidence in statewide politics.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Jonathan Brooks. Interview with Jonathan Brooks. Mr. Brooks has served as the financial consultant for Richard Burr in all of the Senator's election campaigns for Senate. Brooks also assisted Pat McCrory as his finance consultant in 2012. During the 2016 campaign, Brooks served McCrory only as director of his Super PAC, Renew North Carolina.

¹⁵⁰ Jack D. Fleer. "North Carolina Governors: From Campaigning to Governing," in *New Politics of North Carolina*, ed. Christopher A. Cooper and H. Gibbs Knotts, p.130-131. Ironically, only incumbent Republican Governor Jim Martin won reelection without raising more money than his opponent in 1988.

¹⁵¹ Jack D. Fleer. "North Carolina Governors," p. 130-131.

¹⁵² Jonathan Brooks.

¹⁵³ Eamon. *Making of a Southern Democracy*, p. 314-20.

IV. The 2016 Gubernatorial Election in North Carolina

Indeed, the Republican outlook in the state of North Carolina remained rosy after the successful 2012 election cycle. State legislators were, for the time being, locked into politically-gerrymandered districts that guaranteed future electoral success. For the first time since 1993, a Republican sat in the governor's mansion. Republicans controlled nine of thirteen United States House of Representative seats. And with Speaker of the State House Thom Tillis's elevation to the United States Senate in 2014, the party also owned both the state's Senate seats. For the most part, Republicans translated this success to the 2016 election cycle as well. Yet when the smoke cleared, one major blemish lay smeared on the party's record: Governor Pat McCrory's loss to then-Attorney General Roy Cooper. But to fully understand why the incumbent lost in 2016, one must first dive into the details of the race itself—to see when and where cracks started to show in the once “[coronated]” governor's reelection apparatus. This chapter provides the necessary information to fully contextualize the 2016 governor's campaign.

Like most major two-party elections in America, the 2016 Governor's race in North Carolina can be broken into two parts: the primary and general elections. In this instance, the primary elections for both parties bore little significance. However, the general election quickly became the most-watched and closest gubernatorial battle in the nation, attracting the most spending and coverage of the twelve governor races in 2016. At the end of the day, the most intriguing North Carolina election result of 2016 was the outcome for the Governor's mansion. It was certainly the most controversial, with incumbent Pat McCrory (R) refusing to concede to state Attorney General Roy Cooper (D) on election night. Initial returns showed that Cooper led McCrory by around 5,000 votes. As a result, McCrory disputed the returns of 90,000 ballots in Durham County, filed voter fraud complaints in 50 counties, demanded a recount in Durham on

November 11th, 2016, and asked for a statewide recount on November 22nd. At first Durham denied McCrory's request, but upon reviewing the Governor's appeal, the North Carolina State Board of Elections ordered a recount for disputed votes in Durham County. The recount effort continued until December 5th, 2016, when McCrory finally conceded after results showed that Cooper's lead had widened to a final 10,263 votes.¹⁵⁴

In the grand scheme of things, Pat McCrory could have been assumed to have the election in the bag, but he faced a litany of problems.¹⁵⁵ Chiefly among them was his support of House Bill 2, the controversial "bathroom bill" that infuriated Americans nationwide. The law was passed to nullify a Charlotte city ordinance that gave transgendered individuals certain protections, including the right to use whichever bathroom they wished.¹⁵⁶ In the end, though the conservative base in North Carolina supported the bill, many independent voters perceived this bill as ridiculous.¹⁵⁷ For example, in the critical urban county of New Hanover, home to lots of undecided voters and the large city of Wilmington, fallout over House Bill 2 drained the local film economy, angering many voters.¹⁵⁸ And in Wake County, another important urban area with many independents, the law probably tipped the scales in Cooper's favor.¹⁵⁹ All in all, the bill was the biggest factor in McCrory's defeat.¹⁶⁰

Still, there were other factors in the Governor's demise. In Mecklenburg County, McCrory's support for a very unpopular toll road on Interstate 77 generated ire amongst the

¹⁵⁴ Colin Campbell. "Pat McCrory Concedes; Roy Cooper next NC Governor."

¹⁵⁵ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Gordon, Mark Price, and Katie Peralta. "Understanding HB2: North Carolina's Newest Law Solidifies State's Role in Defining Discrimination."

¹⁵⁷ Dee Stewart. Interview with Dee Stewart; Carter Wrenn. Interview with Carter Wrenn; Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

¹⁵⁸ Hunter Ingram. "N.C. Film Industry Adapts to Production Lull as HB2 Lingers;" Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

¹⁵⁹ Dee Stewart.

¹⁶⁰ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

voters in what was in the past a crucial area for McCrory¹⁶¹—he won the county by 3,000 votes in 2012, but he lost by over 130,000 in 2016.¹⁶² Additionally, North Carolina’s controversial voter identification law can provide insight into his defeat. After being overturned by a federal appeals court, the reinstatement of same-day registration and extension of early voting could have very well accounted for the 10,000-vote difference between McCrory and Cooper.¹⁶³ But McCrory was plagued from the start—he never had high approval ratings, showing that voters were always open to an alternative. It also did not help him that the conservative legislation coming through the State Legislature degraded his initial image as a moderate.¹⁶⁴ Ultimately, North Carolinians just did not think McCrory was doing a good enough job as Governor, leading him to pay the price at the polls.¹⁶⁵

The Primary Campaign

The 2016 Republican primary for Governor in North Carolina unofficially began on November 6th, 2012—the day McCrory first won the office and became the governor-elect. In fact, between the fourth quarter of 2012 (which included late October and early November of the 2012 election cycle and the fourth quarter of 2015 (which included the rest of December after McCrory announced his reelection bid), the Pat McCrory Committee disclosed over \$5.4 million in funds raised, not including any outside money the sitting Governor received from the Republican Party and outside groups during this time.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, as Governor, McCrory enjoyed the bully pulpit and continual media exposure throughout these three years. Such is the

¹⁶¹ Dee Stewart.

¹⁶² Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

¹⁶³ Dee Stewart.

¹⁶⁴ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

¹⁶⁵ Carter Wrenn. Interview with Carter Wrenn.

¹⁶⁶ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “Pat McCrory Committee.”

nature of the permanent campaign. As a matter of formalities, then, McCrory finally announced his reelection campaign in an online video published December 1st, 2015 and in a speech at the Salem One commercial packaging plant in Kernersville, North Carolina, the very next day, using the venue to highlight his economic policies.¹⁶⁷ McCrory would continue to emphasize the state's economic success during his administration throughout the campaign.

Despite his incumbency, McCrory went on to receive two primary challengers. A week after McCrory's formal announcement, former State Representative Robert Brawley declared for the Republican nomination. Brawley, from Mooresville—a Charlotte suburb located in the Interstate 77 corridor—ran to oppose the addition of toll lanes on the interstate North of Charlotte.¹⁶⁸ The toll issue had already angered many Republicans in the area, and McCrory had previously hedged on the issue, sending the final decision to the Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization and effectively refusing to take a stand on the toll road.¹⁶⁹ Brawley had developed somewhat of an anti-establishment reputation in the State House, a possible benefit in an election cycle that had veered toward anti-establishment candidates like Sens. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Bernie Sanders (D-VT), as well as real estate mogul (and future President) Donald Trump (R).¹⁷⁰ McCrory's second challenger became Charles Kenneth Moss, a former preacher and vocational school instructor from Randolph County (southeast of High Point). Moss had previously run for the nomination against McCrory in 2012, but he only obtained 1.5% of the overall vote.¹⁷¹ In 2016, Moss again hoped to challenge McCrory from the evangelical right.¹⁷² In addition, both incumbent lieutenant governor Dan Forest and 2014 United

¹⁶⁷ John Hinton. "Gov. Pat McCrory announces re-election bid in Kernersville."

¹⁶⁸ Colin Campbell. "Gov. Pat McCrory gets a challenger in Republican Primary."

¹⁶⁹ Steve Harrison. "Toll lane opponents seek to curb Charlotte's vote on transportation board."

¹⁷⁰ Colin Campbell. "Gov. Pat McCrory gets a challenger in Republican Primary."

¹⁷¹ Colin Campbell. "53 NC legislators lack opponents as filing period ends."

¹⁷² Jim Morrill. "Randleman's Charles Moss a determined GOP candidate for NC governor."

States Senate candidate Greg Bannon declined to run, with Forest seeking reelection and Bannon electing to challenge Sen. Richard Burr (R) instead.¹⁷³

In the end, as expected with an incumbent Governor facing two competitors without statewide appeal, McCrory cruised to the nomination. In the fundraising arena, Brawley and Moss gained little traction. In the fourth quarter of 2015 and the first two quarters of 2016, which marked the primary campaign, Brawley raised a meager \$50,000, \$40,000 of which he infused from his own personal wealth.¹⁷⁴ Moss, on the other hand, raised only \$1,587 for his campaign, all from his own pocket. Over these three quarters, the Moss campaign disclosed \$1,424, which amounted to his filing fee (paid from his monthly social security check), as well as \$163 in monies given to cover gasoline expenses.¹⁷⁵ McCrory, with over \$5 million already raised in the cycle, added over \$750,000 more in the first quarter of 2016. On the issues, Brawley stuck to his toll road and anti-establishment guns, winning him tea party endorsements across Western North Carolina, as well as support from the *Beaufort Observer* in Eastern North Carolina.¹⁷⁶ Meanwhile, McCrory largely stuck to his day-to-day work as Governor, and Charles Moss remained a non-factor other than a few exposes in the press.

Accordingly, election night followed suit. McCrory won with 876,885 votes, or 81.75% of the total; Brawley finished second with 113,638 votes, or 10.59% of the total; and Moss brought up the rear with only 82,132 votes, or 7.66% of the total¹⁷⁷ (a net increase of nearly 70,000 votes since 2012).¹⁷⁸ However, looking closer at the final results reveals two trends worth

¹⁷³ Laura Leslie. “Coleman, Forest to run again for lieutenant governor”; Greg Bannon. “WATCH as I officially file as a Republican candidate for the United States Senate!”

¹⁷⁴ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “Robert Brawley.”

¹⁷⁵ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “Charles K Moss Governor Campaign.”

¹⁷⁶ Robert Brawley. “Robert Brawley for Governor.”

¹⁷⁷ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “03/15/2016 Official Primary Election Results – Statewide.”

¹⁷⁸ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “Official Results.”

discussing. First, Moss, running on the evangelical right, saw a substantial uptick in support from his showing in 2012. Though possibly indicative of the anti-establishment wave sweeping the rest of the nation, Moss's vote increase is more likely due to a less-crowded primary, as he faced other lesser-known evangelical candidates in the 2012 primary, including James Mahan, who ran on returning a daily prayer to public schools.¹⁷⁹

Second, and more importantly, Brawley succeeded in making the toll road a substantive campaign issue. Though McCrory carried all one hundred of North Carolina's counties, Brawley managed to notch heavy support in his home county, Iredell. There, he took 38.63% of the vote and won six precincts—all concentrated in the Southern region of the county along the Interstate 77 corridor.¹⁸⁰ In addition to those six precincts, he carried four more in Northern Mecklenburg County—McCrory's home county—also in the highway's path.¹⁸¹ And in the surrounding counties, namely Cabarrus, Catawba, Gaston, Lincoln, and Rowan, Brawley beat his 10.59% total by between three to five percent.¹⁸² Given McCrory's status as a sitting Republican Governor, his failure to appease Charlotte-area voters on the toll road issue became the most important takeaway from the Republican primary election. In what was projected to be a very close general election, McCrory was still struggling to unify his own party in reliably Republican territory. In fact, after the primary, former Lake Norman Chamber of Commerce Chairman, John Hettwer—a staunch Republican, publicly floated the idea of voting for the Democratic candidate,

¹⁷⁹ Ballotopedia. "James Mahan (North Carolina)."

¹⁸⁰ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "03/15/2016 Official Primary Election Results – Iredell."

¹⁸¹ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "03/15/2015 Official Primary Election Results – Mecklenburg."

¹⁸² North Carolina State Board of Elections. "03/15/2016 Official Primary Election Results – Statewide Map."

Roy Cooper, due to McCrory's stance on the road.¹⁸³ The toll road issue would no doubt again come into play during the general election.

On the Democratic side, the primary too became more of a formality than an actual race. The speculation as to who would challenge McCrory for the governorship began soon after he took office in 2013. Off the bat, Roy Cooper, who had served as the state's attorney general since 2000, was mentioned as a frontrunner. Cooper had already declined the invitation to run for the office in previous cycles, but had consistently been included in polling match-ups against the incumbent since September of 2013.¹⁸⁴ Instead, McCrory's first challengers came in the form of two outsiders: Ken Spaulding, a former State Representative from Durham, and James Protzman, a former city councilman from Chapel Hill.¹⁸⁵ Protzman would drop out only seven months after he declared, officially ending his campaign on October 17th, 2016 and choosing to instead exert his influence through his blog, BlueNC.¹⁸⁶

But as the primary season neared, it became more apparent that Cooper would hop into the race. First, former Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker, a respected Democrat in the populous Raleigh area, filed for Commissioner of Labor on July 8th, 2015, ending speculation he would run for governor.¹⁸⁷ Then, on July 23rd, former Washington Redskins quarterback and moderate blue-dog Congressman Heath Shuler declared that he would forgo a run and stick with his job at Duke Energy.¹⁸⁸ Lastly, on September 21st, State Senator Josh Stein announced his candidacy for Attorney General.¹⁸⁹ Stein, a former colleague of Cooper's, had previously considered running

¹⁸³Greg Lacour. "Could I-77 Toll Lanes Tip the Governor's Race?"

¹⁸⁴ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

¹⁸⁵ Reid Wilson. "Three years out, Democrats eye McCrory's seat."

¹⁸⁶ Rob Christensen. "Protzman drops out of governor's race after 7 months."

¹⁸⁷ Colin Campbell. "Former Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker to run for labor commissioner."

¹⁸⁸ Will Brinson. "Ex-Skins QB Heath Shuler says he won't run for NC governor."

¹⁸⁹ Taylor Knopf. "State Sen. Josh Stein makes formal announcement for attorney general."

for either Governor or Attorney General, but had refused to run against him.¹⁹⁰ With Stein's announcement and \$2.4 million raised between July 2015 and July 2015, then, Cooper's eventual candidacy was almost certain.¹⁹¹ Finally, on October 12th, 2015, Cooper made his intentions clear with an official announcement in Rocky Mount. The Cooper-Spaulding primary was set.

Like McCrory, Cooper enjoyed a significant fundraising advantage over his opponent. Over the second half of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016, the duration of the primary campaign, the Cooper for North Carolina Committee raked in nearly \$4.1 million.¹⁹² On the other hand, Spaulding hauled in only \$26,000 in the same period, with over \$7,000 of the contributions coming from individuals that shared his last name.¹⁹³ But Spaulding had long acknowledged his inability to keep pace with Cooper on the fundraising front. As a result, he started his campaign nearly two years before Cooper declared, taking the time to traverse the state introducing himself to voters as a political outsider. He also hoped to increase his profile by securing a series of debates against Cooper, to which the frontrunner never committed.¹⁹⁴

To win, Spaulding needed to attract atypical Democrat voters—those that would not ordinarily participate in a primary. He also attempted to capitalize on his African American heritage, as African Americans comprised 45% of registered Democrats in North Carolina. To do so, he noted himself as the first serious African American candidate for governor in over forty years and continually criticized Cooper's decision not to retry a Charlotte police officer acquitted by a deadlocked jury for the killing of a young black man.¹⁹⁵ As the primary neared, Spaulding continued to hit Cooper on racial issues. He tied Cooper to controversial court cases involving

¹⁹⁰ Reid Wilson. "Three years out, Democrats eye McCrory's seat."

¹⁹¹ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "Cooper for North Carolina."

¹⁹² North Carolina State Board of Elections. "Cooper for North Carolina."

¹⁹³ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "Ken Spaulding for Governor."

¹⁹⁴ Craig Jarvis. "Spaulding repeats challenge to debate Cooper."

¹⁹⁵ Craig Jarvis. "Spaulding's longshot bid for governor."

laws passed by the conservative-dominated state legislature. As Attorney General, Cooper was often tasked with defending such laws despite his own political opposition to them. Specifically, Spaulding hammered Cooper on North Carolina's voter identification law, which the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals later ruled discriminated against African-Americans with "surgical precision."¹⁹⁶ After Cooper sent an email to supporters on Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2016 comparing his support of voting rights to King's work in the Civil Rights Movement, Spaulding hit back, "you do not dishonor the African American community and other communities by being in court fighting against our right to vote."¹⁹⁷

Despite Spaulding's two year-long campaign, his efforts to associate Cooper with the Republican policies he defended in court, and attempting to capitalize on his African American heritage, Spaulding ultimately came up very short against Cooper in the primary. The result was 710,658 votes, or 68.7%, for Cooper and 323,774, or 31.3%, for Spaulding. However, he did beat Cooper in five counties: Bladen and Columbus in the Southeast portion of the state, as well as Camden, Hertford, and Perquimans in the Northeast region. Except for Camden (a three-point spread), Spaulding's margins of victory in these counties ranged between 9 and 25%.¹⁹⁸ On the whole, Spaulding performed better in these two regions than he did in the rest of the state. Here, his efforts to connect with African American voters paid off, with these two regions boasting large African American populations. This strategy was not effective on a statewide scale, though, as Spaulding ran evenly with Cooper in the metropolitan counties of Durham and Mecklenburg,

¹⁹⁶ Camilla. Domonoske. "Supreme Court Declines Republican Bid to Revive North Carolina Voter ID Law."

¹⁹⁷ John Hinton. "Democrat Ken Spaulding criticizes Roy Cooper for Kind Day email about voting rights."

¹⁹⁸ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "03/15/2016 Official Primary Election Results – Statewide Democrat."

both in which African Americans comprise at least 33% of the total population.¹⁹⁹ Ultimately, Cooper would keep Spaulding's success in mind as he turned toward the general election.

With the Republican and Democratic governor nominations secured, both McCrory and Cooper turned full force toward the general election, though each had basically already done so even before their respective primaries were decided. Rounding out the governor's ballot was libertarian nominee Lon Cecil, a retired engineer from High Point.²⁰⁰ Cecil won the nomination by default after investigative journalist Ken Fortenberry of Lake Norman withdrew his bid in late summer.²⁰¹ Fortenberry had run on a platform of ending the war on drugs, reducing the drinking age to eighteen, and eliminating the state's income tax.²⁰² The presence of a libertarian on the ballot had two impacts. First, in what was projected to be a tight race, even a peripheral third party candidate such as Cecil could turn the race's tide in favor of either major party's nominee. Second, the 2016 election cycle marked an important test for North Carolina's libertarian party. If the party failed to register a 2% mark in neither the Presidential election nor the governor's race, then future libertarian candidates would not automatically appear on statewide ballots.²⁰³

The General Election

Beginnings

With the primary campaign officially in the rearview, McCrory and Cooper turned toward November. However, the candidates had really been campaigning against each other since even before Cooper's declaration the previous October. But despite his incumbency, it

¹⁹⁹ State of North Carolina. "Population in North Carolina Counties by Race as of July 1st, 2016;" North Carolina State Board of Elections. "03/15/2016 Official Primary Election Results – Statewide Democrat."

²⁰⁰ Colin Campbell. "Libertarians look to keep NC ballot status with candidate slate."

²⁰¹ Brian Irving. "Fortenberry withdraws from NC governor's race."

²⁰² Lynn Bonner. "Libertarian candidate for NC governor announces."

²⁰³ Ibid.

would be the McCrory campaign that found itself in an early hole. A Public Policy Polling (PPP) poll in the immediate aftermath found a two-point McCrory advantage, 42% to 40%, with 6% going to Lon Cecil and 12% undecided.²⁰⁴ The passage of the McCrory-backed Connect NC bond on primary election night may have contributed to this small bump, as the bond for nearly \$2 billion in new school campus construction and infrastructure passed with a supermajority of public support.²⁰⁵ Still, McCrory's approval rating remained poor for an incumbent, with 40% approving and 49% disapproving his job as governor.²⁰⁶ By April 1st, though, Cooper enjoyed a slight advantage in the race's polling average, 42.3% to 41.7%. This number would soon widen substantially in mid-April in favor of Cooper before returning to a nail biter by the end of May.²⁰⁷

Moreover, Cooper boasted a beginning financial advantage. Yet this lead was old news. Since the mid-year financial filings in June of 2015, Cooper had maintained a better-positioned war chest. In July of 2015, the Cooper campaign reported \$3 million in cash on hand, having raised \$2.2 million in the first half of the year, while the McCrory campaign announced a more pedestrian \$1.3 million raised toward a total of \$2.4 million on hand.²⁰⁸ And as the primary neared, the fundraising status quo remained unchanged. On February 29th, 2016, the filing date for 1st quarter fundraising, Cooper announced a \$1.1 million quarterly haul, giving him \$5.7 million on hand. McCrory again underperformed his competitor, disclosing \$752,000 in funds raised with only \$4.3 million on hand—a \$1.4 million advantage for Cooper.²⁰⁹ In addition to each campaign's monies, powerful outside groups quickly came to their respective candidate's

²⁰⁴ Tom Jensen. "Trump Could Make Life Hard for Burr in NC."

²⁰⁵ Jane Stancill. "NC bond issue wins handily."

²⁰⁶ Zach Cohen. "McCrory, Cooper Remain Statistically Tied."

²⁰⁷ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

²⁰⁸ Craig Jarvis. "AG Roy Cooper outdrawing Gov. Pat McCrory in fundraising."

²⁰⁹ Zach Cohen. "Cooper Has \$1.4M More on Hand Than McCrory."

aid. Right off the bat, the Republican Governor’s Association announced a six-figure ad buy on behalf of McCrory, who had only launched one television ad throughout the entire primary campaign.²¹⁰ Five days later, it doubled-down on its initial buy by reserving nearly \$4 million in fall advertising markets throughout the state.²¹¹

When it came to the issues, both candidate’s initial strategy reflected much of their previous campaign rhetoric. McCrory continued to tout his “Carolina Comeback,” noting that as governor the state had added twenty thousand manufacturing jobs, lowered taxes, and paid off \$2.5 billion in unemployment insurance debt to the federal government.²¹² He also attempted to attack Cooper by criticizing the lack of specifics in Cooper’s public education plan and by labelling the fifteen-year attorney general as a career politician.²¹³ Cooper countered by arguing that McCrory’s tax breaks had only benefitted the wealthiest North Carolinian citizens and corporations at the expense of popular state programs like public education. Additionally, he took a stand opposing the unpopular toll road in Northern Mecklenburg County, criticized McCrory’s opposition to an anti-discrimination ordinance passed by the city of Charlotte, and attempted to tie McCrory directly to the extraordinarily controversial Republican Presidential nomination frontrunner, Donald Trump.²¹⁴ In fact, the Cooper campaign’s first official advertising buys of the general election hammered home this latter point, claiming “Donald Trump’s divisive rhetoric has no place in North Carolina — but Gov. McCrory says he’ll support him anyway.”²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Zach Cohen. “RGA Launches Six-Figure Digital Ads Against Cooper.”

²¹¹ Zach Cohen. “RGA Reserves \$4M in Fall TV Time.”

²¹² Jim Morrill. “NC governor: McCrory, Cooper win primaries.”

²¹³ Zach Cohen. “RGA Launches Six-Figure Digital Ads Against Cooper.”

²¹⁴ Zach Cohen. “RGA Launches Six-Figure Digital Ads Against Cooper;” Jim Morrill. “NC governor: McCrory, Cooper win primaries.”

²¹⁵ Zach Cohen. “RGA Reserves \$4M in Fall TV Time.”

Party organization also played an early role. In the primary campaign, Brawley and Spaulding had drawn enough attention to the toll road and voting identification issues to hurt McCrory in the Republican-leaning North Mecklenburg region and Cooper in a few counties where the African American demographic remained heavily concentrated. But while McCrory had immediate problems along the I-77 corridor, the North Carolina Republican Party too faced major infighting over the performance of its first African American chairman, grassroots organizer Hasan Harnett. For months, Harnett and the party's establishment wing had fought over numerous aspects of Harnett's job performance, including his anemic fundraising efforts and public criticism of other party leaders. By mid-March, the party banned Harnett from its headquarters and removed his access to email. And finally, on April 30th, the party ousted Harnett and replaced him with former Congressman and previous party chairman Robin Hayes.²¹⁶ Though the party expressed optimism over Hayes' ability to get the party back on track, Republicans had still wasted months fighting in a critical election cycle, no doubt to McCrory's detriment. Cooper, on the other hand, was soon gifted a chance to make up for Spaulding's criticism over his handling of the Republican-backed voter identification legislation.

The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, or the "Bathroom Bill"

"I might be in trouble" – Pat McCrory, May 3rd, 2016

It would be McCrory's opposition to Charlotte's recently passed anti-discrimination ordinance that quickly became the single most contentious issue in the campaign. The controversy began at the February 22nd, 2016 Charlotte city council business meeting when the council adopted an amendment to the city's non-discrimination ordinance in public

²¹⁶ Colin Campbell. "NC Republican Party impeaches its chairman."

accommodations, in place since 1968. Specifically, the modification added “marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression” to the list of protected characteristics in the ordinance.²¹⁷ The amended version of the ordinance, which most-controversially enabled transgendered individuals to use public restrooms associated with the gender to which they identified, had failed as recently as 2015.²¹⁸ In response to Charlotte’s passage of the modified ordinance, McCrory promised an “immediate” state legislative response, but the problem remained that the state legislature was scheduled out of session until April 25th, 2016.²¹⁹ Accordingly, the debate quickly shifted to whether the Republican-dominated state legislature would call a special legislative session to address the ordinance before it went into effect on April 1st. McCrory opposed such a move, citing the financial costs of doing so—\$42,000 per day to operate a special session.²²⁰

By March 22nd, 2016, however, both President of the Senate Phil Berger (R) and Speaker of the House Tim Moore (R) ignored McCrory’s desire to wait to take up the issue and declared a special legislative session for the following day, March 23rd. Each leader had received written requests for such a session from the minimum two-thirds of their respective bodies. The expressed purpose of the session was to “consider bills to provide for single sex multiple occupancy bathroom and changing facilities and to create statewide consistency in regulation of employment and public accommodations.”²²¹ On March 23rd, the special session adopted what became known colloquially as “House Bill 2” or the “bathroom bill,” the Public Facilities

²¹⁷ City of Charlotte. “Meeting Agenda – February 22, 2016.”

²¹⁸ Ely Portillo and Mark Price. “Charlotte LGBT ordinance fails 6-5 in contentious meeting.”

²¹⁹ Steve Harrison. “McCrory: If Charlotte approves LGBT protections, ‘immediate’ state response likely.”

²²⁰ Mark Binker. “McCrory opposes Charlotte bathroom law but doesn’t want a special session.”

²²¹ Tim Moore and Phil Berger. “Joint Proclamation to Convene the General Assembly of North Carolina in Extra Session.”

Privacy and Security Act. The final vote in the House was eighty-two for and twenty-six against, with eleven excused absences, with thirty-two for and six excused absences in the Senate. All eleven Democratic Senators walked out before the bill's passage, and McCrory signed the bill into law later that evening.²²² The entire process took only eleven hours.²²³

The new law prevented Charlotte from enforcing its amended discrimination ordinance by outlawing any city's ability to establish its own anti-discrimination ordinance. Nationally, the bill received an out-pouring of immediate criticism due to the perception that it clamped down significantly on the rights of LGTBQ individuals, especially transgendered persons. But the bill also contained lesser-publicized, equally important measures, including a provision preventing cities from setting local minimum wages.²²⁴ At a high level, then, the passage of the bill could be interpreted as the conservative Republican legislature's attempt to curtail the power and influence of the liberal Democratically-controlled Charlotte city council. And importantly, given the involvement of both McCrory and Cooper in the bill's passage and subsequent legal challenges, it had both major short-term and long-term impacts on the governor's race.

Cooper immediately came out against the law, warning that the Republican decision could have far-reaching economic consequences for the state.²²⁵ By the end of March, nearly one hundred businesses, located both in the state and nationally, along with the two major news outlets in North Carolina, the *Charlotte Observer* and the *News & Observer*, opposed the law as well. Cooper also made McCrory's signature on the law his campaign's chief attack on the governor, releasing campaign material on the subject and creating a petition to repeal the law.²²⁶

²²² North Carolina General Assembly. "House Bill 2."

²²³ IndyWeek. "Eleven Dems Voted for House Bill 2. We Called to Ask Why."

²²⁴ Katie Zezima. "'Not about bathrooms': Critics decry North Carolina law's lesser-known elements."

²²⁵ Zach Cohen. "McCrory Blocks Charlotte Transgender Ordinance."

²²⁶ Zach Cohen. "Business Opposition to McCrory Signature Grows;" Zach Cohen. "Newspapers Come Out Against LGBT Legislation."

At the same time, McCrory also used the law to attack Cooper, as the attorney general refused to defend the law in court despite his charge to do so as the top lawyer for the state.²²⁷ Moreover, it was safe to say that the fallout from the bill had completely altered McCrory's central campaign message. Instead of being able to focus on the positive economic results realized by the state during his governorship, McCrory became absolutely inundated in the House Bill 2 aftermath.²²⁸ It also overshadowed new advertisements highlighting McCrory's signature on a teacher pay increase.²²⁹

The controversy also became the central factor in both candidates' fundraising and advertising efforts.²³⁰ In late April, the Democratic Governors Association jumped into the fray with an ad comparing McCrory to Indiana Governor Mike Pence, who had signed a similarly unpopular, socially-conservative religious ordinance nearly a year earlier.²³¹ And on April 22nd, the group released a six-figure ad buy against the law.²³² National political action committees also got involved. In early May, Freedom for All Americans, a pro-LGBT organization released a television spot slamming the law and highlighting the "millions" in lost economic revenue North Carolina had already experienced as a result.²³³ But when the first advertisement of the Republican Governor Association's expenditure came out for McCrory, it instead attempted to turn the narrative by focusing on Roy Cooper's record on taxation. The \$1 million expenditure noted that over Cooper's career in politics, he had successfully raised North Carolinian's taxes by \$9 billion.²³⁴

²²⁷ Zach Cohen. "Newspapers Come Out Against LGBT Legislation."

²²⁸ Zach Cohen. "HB2 Dislodging McCrory Campaign Strategy."

²²⁹ Zach Cohen. "McCrory Releases Web Ad of Teacher Pay Raises."

²³⁰ Zach Cohen. "McCrory, Cooper Raise Money With HB2."

²³¹ Ally Mutnick. "Gubernatorial Race Heats Up Over HB2."

²³² Zach Cohen. "DGA Launces Six-Figure Ad on HB2."

²³³ Zach Cohen. "LGBT Group Runs TV Ad on HB2."

²³⁴ Zach Cohen. "RGA Ups Current TV Buy to \$1M."

Still, the law hurt McCrory's own fundraising haul, as forty-five major corporate donors to the Republican State Leadership Committee also announced their opposition to House Bill 2.²³⁵

Polling over the next month indicated that voters clearly believed McCrory's support of the bill was a mistake. A SurveyUSA and WRAL-TV Raleigh poll released on April 12th found that only 38% of North Carolinian voters supported the measure, while 50% disapproved of the law. Cooper had also jumped from a two-point deficit to a four-point advantage, garnering 47% support to McCrory's 43%, with Cecil receiving 2% and 8% of voters remaining undecided.²³⁶ Then, on April 20th, an Elon University poll showed Cooper leading 48% to 42%.²³⁷ Next, a PPP poll released on April 25th found similar disapproval on the bathroom bill, further noting that 46% of independents—a critical voting bloc in the state—disapproved of the law. The same poll found a one-point advantage for Cooper, 43% to 42%, with 4% for Cecil and 11% undecided, and it also still showed that McCrory's approval rating to be underwater, with 40% approving of his job as governor.²³⁸ Lastly, a Civitas poll released the same day concluded that 58% of North Carolinians perceived the state as on the wrong track, showing 46% for Cooper, 36% for McCrory, 5% for Cecil, and 12% undecided.²³⁹ Accordingly, Cooper's maintained a 3% advantage in the polling index at the end of April, 44.5% to 41.5%.²⁴⁰

With the passage of House Bill 2 nearly a month in the rearview, the debate over the law shifted toward the inevitable legal battle between North Carolina, the federal government, and outside groups. On Wednesday May 4th, the Department of Justice gave McCrory a May 9th

²³⁵ Zach Cohen. "DGA Launces Six-Figure Ad on HB2."

²³⁶ SurveyUSA. "NC Voters Continue to Wrestle With HB2 Fallout: Majority in State Now Opposes New 'Bathroom' Law in General, But Supports Specific Birth-Gender Provision; Ongoing Economic Toll Impacts 2016 Gov Race, Where Democrat Cooper Now Leads GOP Incumbent McCrory:."

²³⁷ Elon. "Elon Poll: Cooper pulls ahead in N.C. gubernatorial race."

²³⁸ Tom Jensen. "HB2 Deeply Unpopular in North Carolina; Voters Think It's Hurting State."

²³⁹ Civitas. "NC Civitas Poll April 2016."

²⁴⁰ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

deadline to conform to its mandate of non-compliance and non-implementation with the law.²⁴¹ Instead, McCrory elected to pander toward his base and sue the Federal government. He also accused Democratic Presidential nomination frontrunner Hillary Clinton of unnecessarily making a statewide issue a national controversy. Ultimately, the ploy worked in part, as conservatives at the state GOP convention rallied in united support for McCrory.²⁴² His decision, however, did prompt a counter suit from United States Attorney General Loretta Lynch.²⁴³ Fortunately for McCrory, fellow Republican governors came to his aid in opposing the federal government's attempts to control the House Bill 2 situation, probably to some benefit for the embattled incumbent.²⁴⁴

McCrory's narrative attacking the federal government helped eliminate Cooper's three-point polling advantage. On May 24th, a PPP poll found continued opposition to House Bill 2 throughout the state, but noted Cooper and McCrory as tied at 41%, with Cecil taking 5% and 13% remaining undecided.²⁴⁵ Two days later, a Civitas poll found McCrory to lead Cooper, 45% to 40%, with 3% for Cecil and 11% undecided. When it came to explaining the governor's advantage, Civitas attributed the uptick in McCrory support to voter approval in his defending the state against the federal government's attempts to eliminate House Bill 2, along with continued economic gains despite the business response to the law.²⁴⁶ By May 26th, 2016, McCrory again held the edge in the polling aggregate, 43% to 42.8%. Cooper's post-House Bill 2 bump had lasted only one and a half months.²⁴⁷

²⁴¹ Zach Cohen. "DOJ: HB2 Is Illegal."

²⁴² Zach Cohen. "State Sues Feds Over HB2."

²⁴³ Zach Cohen. "DOJ Counter-Sues NC for HB2."

²⁴⁴ Zach Cohen. "McCrory, Other GOP Governors Oppose DOE Guidance on Bathrooms."

²⁴⁵ Tom Jensen. "HB2 Continues To Have Little Support From North Carolinians."

²⁴⁶ Demi Dowdy. "McCrory Regains Lead Over cooper in Latest Civitas Poll."

²⁴⁷ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

At the end of May, then, it appeared as if the news cycle had begun to move on from the House Bill 2 controversy. The polling status quo soon followed, returning to a near statistical tie until autumn. But in reality, the law had substantially changed the 2016 gubernatorial campaign landscape in North Carolina. First, it enabled each candidate to rally their respective base. Cooper seized the opportunity to put aside criticism over his representation of the state's controversial voting identification law in court. McCrory took care to tie the national outcry directly to the Obama Administration and the presumed Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, both of which conservative voters in the state despised. Second, if anything, it continued to drive a wedge between McCrory and his once faithful Charlotte electorate. "Mayor Pat" had previously served as Charlotte's mayor for fourteen years (1995 to 2009). Now he had signed a law bent on curtailing the very power of the city council he used to represent. When coupled with the toll road issue, it was evident that McCrory had yet to take serious steps to maintain a steady stream of Charlotte support besides highlighting continued economic growth. In 2012, McCrory had outperformed the Romney-Ryan Presidential ticket by 47,959 votes in Mecklenburg County, or nearly 10% of his margin of victory over Walter Dalton. Given the close nature of his reelection campaign, these 47,959 votes would be critical in ensuring his reelection.²⁴⁸

Third, in rallying his base McCrory also alienated independent voters, a critical voting demographic in purple North Carolina. Despite having turned Cooper's post-House Bill 2 bump into a slight advantage for his own campaign, McCrory's actions on the bill remained unpopular with independents as the controversy settled. May's PPP polling found that independents favored repeal, 46% to 39%, with only 29% believing the law to be helping North Carolina while 53%

²⁴⁸ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "Official Results 2012."

believed the law was hurting the state.²⁴⁹ It was clear that the bathroom bill had given Cooper an advantage over the independent demographic. Fourth, in the same vein, McCrory's support of the legislation highlighted his relationship with the Republican-dominated North Carolina General Assembly. At the end of the day, it appeared as if McCrory was beholden to the conservative interests of his legislature, as he remained unable to secure any rollback of the bill with General Assembly leaders. McCrory, the leader of state government, was no longer driving North Carolina's agenda. This notion also hurt him in independent-leaning counties along the Interstate 85 corridor, an important region of the state.²⁵⁰

Finally, House Bill Two had directly impacted McCrory's key campaign message of economic growth. During the nearly two-month outrage over the legislation, numerous companies pulled future business from the state, rolled back current business in the state, and decried McCrory's decision. By April 17th, North Carolina had already directly lost between \$40 and \$186 million in revenue because of the law.²⁵¹ On April 22nd, Time Warner Cable News North Carolina estimated that the bill had already cost the state \$77 million in investments and visitor spending, as well as 750 new jobs, including \$14.3 million in revenue to Buncombe County (Asheville), \$46.2 million and 500 jobs in Charlotte, \$5 million in Greensboro, and \$3.2 million in the Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill area.²⁵² And in September, the official price tag of the law rose to \$3.76 billion in lost prospects over the course of twelve years.²⁵³ In total, the state ultimately lost concerts, sporting events, manufacturing, banking, and information technology opportunities, among countless others. All the while, Cooper maintained popular

²⁴⁹ Tom Jensen. "HB2 Continues To Have Little Support From North Carolinians."

²⁵⁰ Alan Greenblatt. "LGBT Battle Underscores the Powerlessness of Being Governor in North Carolina."

²⁵¹ Craig Jarvis. "Gov. McCrory defends NC's HB2 on 'Meet the Press.'"

²⁵² Andrew Sorensen. "HB2 Has Cost NC 1750 Jobs, \$77 Million."

²⁵³ Emery Dalesio. "AP Exclusive: Price tag of North Carolina's LGBT law: \$3.76B."

press for his efforts to save business expansions into North Carolina, including Braeburn Pharmaceuticals.²⁵⁴

Summer: Cooper Snags an Advantage

Though the House Bill 2 news cycle had appeared to relax slightly entering the summer, the law would continue to play a large role in the gubernatorial campaign until election day, and there remains no doubt that it had a sizeable impact on voting behavior. At the same time, however, both campaigns' rhetoric and maneuvering shifted to other issues as well. Overall, the summer months included important markers for the campaign, with the first televised debate on June 24th, results from second quarter fundraising expected shortly after the June 30th filing deadline, and both candidates finally turning toward their respective Presidential tickets for support. For the first time, voters could witness Pat McCrory and Roy Cooper squaring off directly, an event sure to produce important takeaways on demeanor, leadership, and policy stances. It would also become clearer how House Bill 2 had played into the fundraising game, with the bulk of the controversy taking place during the second quarter. Moreover, the roles, if any, of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, each expected to be their party's nominee, would become more apparent.

Cooper became the first gubernatorial candidate to fall in line with his party's presumptive Presidential nominee. After declining to endorse Hillary Clinton in late May, he offered an endorsement on June 6th, less than two weeks later, but only following her clinching the Democratic nomination outright. Immediately, the state Republican party pounced on the endorsement, using the mere notion of another Clinton in office to rile up its base. On the same

²⁵⁴ Zach Cohen. "Cooper Takes Credit for Braeburn Staying in NC."

day, McCrory also endorsed Donald Trump for President, albeit in less enthusiastic fashion. In offering an explanation as to why he decided to support Trump, McCrory only remarked “I’ve stated that I would support the Republican nominee. Anything else?” Clearly, the focus of the incumbent’s strategy would be to tie Cooper to Clinton while maintaining distance from the unpredictable Trump. The Democrats likewise took care to compare Trump and McCrory, but the Cooper campaign did go further in its support of Clinton, asserting “We need thoughtful leaders who will work to move our state and country forward, not pull us apart with dangerous rhetoric and an extreme political agenda.”²⁵⁵

Both McCrory’s unease toward Trump and Cooper’s reservations about Clinton soon showed. One week after his lukewarm endorsement, McCrory did not attend a Greensboro rally for the presumptive nominee, citing a “scheduling” conflict.²⁵⁶ He did, however, attend a joint fundraiser for Trump and the Republican National Committee in Greensboro on the same day, revealing that to at least some extent McCrory would be backing the party’s ticket.²⁵⁷

Meanwhile, on June 20th, Cooper too dodged on whether he would attend an upcoming Raleigh rally with Clinton, commenting that he did support the presumptive nominee but was unsure about stumping for her at the rally two days later.²⁵⁸ The next day, Cooper followed McCrory and elected not to participate in the rally. He too revealed that he would support her to some degree down the road, as he pledged that he “looked forward to campaigning with her in the future.”²⁵⁹ Despite each’s endorsement of their party’s Presidential candidate, then, McCrory and

²⁵⁵ Colin Campbell. “Gov. Pat McCrory offers tepid endorsement of Donald Trump, while Roy Cooper back Hillary Clinton.”

²⁵⁶ Michael Hyland. “McCrory spokesman says he's not attending the rally itself due to a scheduling conflict @WNCN.”

²⁵⁷ *National Journal*. “Hotline Extra for June 15.”

²⁵⁸ NC GOP. “Roy Cooper Dodges Question On Joining Hillary Clinton Campaign Stop.”

²⁵⁹ Colin Campbell. “Cooper, Ross won’t be at Hillary Clinton event in Raleigh.”

Cooper remained wary of how going in whole-hog for Trump or Clinton might impact voting behavior in the state.

Instead, in the lead up to the candidates' first debate on June 24th, both campaigns focused on hitting the other over numerous policy details. The Republican narrative continued to ding Cooper on raising taxes, with the Republican Governor's Association continuing its previous ad buy on the subject. This time, the television spot detailed a story explaining how Cooper had slashed education funding while raising taxes and tuition fees for North Carolina colleges and universities.²⁶⁰ The conservative outside group Faith and Freedom Coalition also attempted to continue shifting the rhetoric surrounding House Bill 2 in McCrory's favor, releasing an ad slamming Cooper for refusing to do his job as Attorney General by rejecting the opportunity to defend the law in court.²⁶¹ And in addition to going negative on Cooper, the McCrory campaign continued to highlight the state's economic growth. On June 7th, the Associated Builders and Contractors of the Carolinas endorsed McCrory, noting the incumbent's work on the ConnectNC bond among other positive economic impacts.²⁶²

The Cooper campaign likewise went negative. First, it emphasized a recurring headache for North Carolina governors—use of state airplanes—which first arose a few years earlier during investigative work into possible corruption within former Governor Mike Easley's administration. To do so, Cooper launched a website called AirMcCrory.com, on which the Democrat's campaign logged occurrences of McCrory using his state plane, and by extension, taxpayer dollars, to attend campaign fundraisers.²⁶³ The Democratic Governors' Association also

²⁶⁰ Republican Governors' Association. "RGA Releases New TV Ad in the North Carolina Governor's Race: 'Taxes & Cuts.'"

²⁶¹ Craig Jarvis. "National group hits Cooper with HB2 TV ad."

²⁶² Zach Cohen. "McCrory Secures Trade Association Backing."

²⁶³ Zach Cohen. "McCrory Attends Trump-RNC Fundraiser."

released a website on taxes, PatTaxedThat.com, to push back on the Republican narrative of Cooper's tax increases by highlighting sixty-seven new taxes McCrory had implemented since taking office.²⁶⁴ At the same time, the North Carolina Association of Educators continued to dock McCrory on House Bill 2's negative impacts on the economy. The group also went further, taking the time to also stress that the governor was "setting our schools back, too."²⁶⁵ But like his opponent, Cooper did not focus all his rhetoric on slamming McCrory. In the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, the Attorney General spent a day or so calling for a ban on gun sales to people on the no-fly list.²⁶⁶ Still, in the lead up to the first debate, Cooper went right back to hammering McCrory, releasing a video filled with promises from McCrory's 2012 campaign and calling the Governor a "hypocrite" when it came to implementing them.²⁶⁷

Polling released right before the debate indicated that despite increased bashing by both campaigns, the race narrative had failed to alter the candidates' statistical tie. A PPP poll released on June 24th found McCrory and Cooper tied at 41% each, with Cecil at 6% and 13% of voters undecided. The poll also noted that McCrory's approval rating had now been underwater for three years in a row.²⁶⁸ Civitas's monthly poll, conducted between June 21st and 23rd, found McCrory at a five-point advantage, 45% to 40%, with 3% for Cecil and 12% undecided.²⁶⁹ However, the Republican-leaning think-tank's results did not change the overall aggregate in the race, with the average still 43% for McCrory and 42.8% for Cooper on debate day.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁴ Zach Cohen. "Teachers Group Airs Anti-McCrory Ad."

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ NC GOP. "Roy Cooper Dodges Question On Joining Hillary Clinton Campaign Stop."

²⁶⁷ Zach Cohen. "Cooper Campaign Video Paints McCrory as Hypocrite."

²⁶⁸ Tom Jensen. "NC Governor's Race Remains Tied; HB2 Still Unpopular."

²⁶⁹ Demi Dowdy. "McCrory Climbs in Favorability, Maintains Lead Over Cooper."

²⁷⁰ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

The debate itself showcased this neck and neck status quo. Billed as a “candidate’s forum,” the first clash between McCrory and Cooper took place at 11 AM on a Friday morning in Charlotte, hosted by the North Carolina Bar Association. Lon Cecil was not invited to the stage. Candidates received time for three-minute opening statements, were asked six questions (three for McCrory, three for Cooper, alternating, with each granted rebuttals to questions they were not asked), and gave closing statements. Unsurprisingly, the questions referenced the hot button issues of the campaign: House Bill 2 (1), gun control (2), Interstate 77 and transportation (3), education and teacher pay (4), the opioid epidemic (5), and the budget (6). And for the most part, each candidate stuck to his respective gun, with no clear winner—though the “very biased and heavily Democratic” audience (according to McCrory) did appear to cheer louder for Cooper.²⁷¹

In their opening statements, responses, and rebuttals, the candidates largely followed their campaign rhetoric. During the openings, McCrory focused on his “Carolina Comeback” while Cooper claimed such a resurgence had not fully materialized due to poor leadership, “an extreme social, partisan agenda,” and tax increases.²⁷² On House Bill 2, McCrory pandered to his base over the bill’s protection of conservative values, and he then attempted to turn the narrative surrounding its negative economic impacts around by focusing instead on the 285,000 jobs added to the state during his tenure as governor. To the contrary, Cooper noted that McCrory has failed to take accountability for the law’s impact and called again for its repeal. The candidates also differed on gun control, with Cooper calling for increased scrutiny and McCrory claiming the crime problem in North Carolina arose from Cooper’s mismanagement of the state’s crime lab as Attorney General. McCrory also attempted to tie Cooper to the I-77 toll road, but Cooper in turn

²⁷¹ Jim Morrill. “McCrory, Cooper clash on House Bill 2, taxes in first debate;” WFMYNews2. “Gov. Pat McCrory vs Roy Cooper In 'First Debate'.”

²⁷² WFMYNews2. “Gov. Pat McCrory vs Roy Cooper In 'First Debate'.”

definitively called for the construction contract's cancellation. When it came to teacher pay and education, McCrory asserted that under his leadership, North Carolina had given the largest teacher pay increase in the nation. Across the stage, Cooper compared himself to popular Democratic education governor Jim Hunt and claimed state money would be better spent outside of private school vouchers. For the most part, the candidates too disagreed on the budget, with McCrory noting strides forward and Cooper arguing the state had only gone backward due to what he perceived as tax breaks. Really, the candidates only agreed on one issue—the importance of combatting the growing opioid epidemic.²⁷³

Overall, reactions to the debate were minimal. Given the week day, morning timing, as well as the lack of a television broadcast, there remained little analysis of the debate. However, the *Charlotte Observer* believed it had seen enough to label Cooper the clear winner. According to the newspaper's editorial board, "If Pat McCrory hadn't fully realized what a heavyweight bout he is in, he does now after Roy Cooper delivered a series of hooks and uppercuts in the first round of their championship fight in Charlotte on Friday."²⁷⁴ Indeed, McCrory came out of the gates his typical, personable self, but by the end he was visibly flustered. Post-debate maneuvering also reflected this sentiment. First, McCrory signaled openness to reworking the Interstate 77 toll road, which Cooper had bashed him on in the debate.²⁷⁵ Second, the Republican legislature had revealed plans for serious amendments to House Bill 2 by the end of June.²⁷⁶ Third, Cooper announced plans to attend a rally with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in Charlotte, signaling new-found confidence that associating with the duo would boost his

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Taylor Batten. "Gov race starts with a flurry."

²⁷⁵ Jim Bradley. "NC governor calls for tweaks to design of I-77 toll lane project."

²⁷⁶ Nick Ochsner. "NC House leadership drafts HB2 changes amid pressure from NBA."

campaign, possibly in light of his debate performance.²⁷⁷ And fourth, in the single post-debate poll released by NBC News, the *Wall Street Journal*, and Marist, Cooper led McCrory by four points, 49% to 45%,²⁷⁸ though McCrory would maintain a 44% to 43.7% advantage in the polling aggregate until mid-August.²⁷⁹

At the mid-summer mark, the Cooper campaign also had reason to celebrate on the fundraising front. Results from the second quarter fundraising cycle, the hot-bed for bathroom politics, showed Cooper had gained a clear upper hand in the money race. He had raised \$5.1 million to McCrory's \$3.2 million, including a maximum \$5,100 from Democratic mega-donor George Soros.²⁸⁰ He also boasted a \$3.1 million advantage in cash on hand, having \$9.4 million to McCrory's \$6.3 million. On the airwaves, this advantage was apparent—Cooper had been airing ads during the summer months, but McCrory's campaign had yet to release its own television advertisements.²⁸¹ In this sense, the real money battle to this point had been among the outside groups, which had to date outspent the campaigns forty-seven to one. Leading the way in spending was the North Carolina Environmental Partnership with \$1.6 million criticizing McCrory's record on environmental policy. The Republican Governor's Association had spent \$664,000 and the Democratic Governor's Association \$558,000, while Americans For Prosperity also boasted heavy spending. To compare, McCrory's team had only spent \$78,000.²⁸²

Trudging full force into July, then, it appeared as if Cooper had gained a slight advantage due to his debate victory. But over the rest of the summer, day-to-day campaign life would follow the same pattern as June, with both sides attacking each other over a variety of issues and

²⁷⁷ Zach Cohen. "Cooper to Campaign With Obama, Clinton."

²⁷⁸ Mark Murray. "Clinton Leads Trump in Diverse Battleground States in New Polls."

²⁷⁹ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

²⁸⁰ A.P. Dillon. "Campaign Finance Report shows Donor To Roy Cooper Is Part In #HB2 Suit."

²⁸¹ Mark Binker. "Cooper out-raises McCrory in governor's race."

²⁸² Zach Cohen. "Outside Groups Outspending Candidates On Air 47:1."

little movement in the polls. Ultimately, however, McCrory had a relatively quiet July. He began the month skipping out yet again on Donald Trump, this time citing a long-scheduled trip out of the state with his wife as the reason he could not attend the presumptive nominee's rally in Raleigh.²⁸³ He also announced plans to skip the Republican National Convention later in the month.²⁸⁴ Yet by the end of the month, McCrory had seemingly come around to Trump, agreeing to stump for his nominee at July 25th rally in Winston-Salem. McCrory's change-of-heart may have been due to Trump's flip-flop on the bathroom bill—choosing to support McCrory's position after previously taking up the Democratic stance.²⁸⁵ Cooper noticed, and took care to release an advertisement tying McCrory to the controversial Trump the same day.²⁸⁶

McCrory too received open support on the campaign trail. On July 12th, his campaign announced that the State Troopers Association had endorsed his reelection, a blow to Cooper, who as Attorney General stood as the state's chief crime boss.²⁸⁷ And on July 20th, McCrory released even bigger news—former Presidential candidate and popular Republican Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin would be joining him the next week. Walker had long received praise from the Republican base due to his strong conservative policies in Wisconsin and for winning a contentious recall election because of those policies. Given the Democratic backlash surrounding McCrory's conservative House Bill 2, then, Walker would be a welcome figure on the campaign.²⁸⁸ In the end, the two hosted a Charlotte fundraiser for high-dollar donors and doubled-down on comparing each's facing of Democratic adversity during their time together on

²⁸³ Jim Morrill. "Donald Trump rally will go on without Sen. Richard Burr and Gov. Pat McCrory."

²⁸⁴ Jim Morrill. "Gov. Pat McCrory not planning to attend GOP convention."

²⁸⁵ *The News and Observer*. "Backstage with Donald Trump before his Raleigh speech."

²⁸⁶ Zach Cohen. "McCrory to Stump for Trump."

²⁸⁷ Zach Cohen. "NBA Still Weighing Pulling All-Star Game."

²⁸⁸ Colin Campbell. "Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker says he'll campaign with Pat McCrory 'plenty.'"

the trail.²⁸⁹ Still, McCrory was not the only candidate receiving support from a popular governor. At the end of the month, Democratic Governor's Association chairman and Connecticut Governor Dan Malloy (D) reiterated the Association's heavy support for Cooper, possibly due to Walker's stumping for McCrory.²⁹⁰

Cooper, on the other hand, spent much of the month on the attack. In early July, he released his campaign's first official ad, highlighting his record on combatting sexual predators and fighting for consumer protection and public education.²⁹¹ He too jumped on the campaign trail with his party's Presidential nominee, joining Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama at a Charlotte rally to slam his opponent,²⁹² even though he too would later announce intentions to skip the Democratic National Convention.²⁹³ At the same time, Cooper's campaign kept up its narrative on McCrory's possible misuse of his state plane, citing documents that McCrory chose to fly to interviews he could have done remotely.²⁹⁴ It also finally released a jobs plan to pushback on McCrory's "Carolina Comeback," emphasizing the Attorney General's desire to expand Medicaid, repeal House Bill 2, and pass a transportation bond, among other positions.²⁹⁵ He followed the plan's rollout with his second television ad, knocking McCrory's economic record.²⁹⁶

However, Cooper's attacks on the incumbent's economic record could not come at a better time for McCrory. On July 19th, the Governor announced the finalization of a transportation infrastructure contract to bring a large CSX railroad hub to North Carolina—a

²⁸⁹ Angelica Alvarez. "Gov. Scott Walker helps McCrory get fundraising boost."

²⁹⁰ Colin Campbell. "Connecticut governor says McCrory is 'telling fibs' about HB2."

²⁹¹ Zach Cohen. "Cooper's First TV Ad Hones In on Sexual Predators."

²⁹² Zach Cohen. "Cooper Slams McCrory at Clinton, Obama Charlotte Event."

²⁹³ Tim Funk. "Roy Cooper will skip DNC; Deborah Ross will go for a day."

²⁹⁴ Jon Camp. "Democrats question cost of McCrory travel for HB2."

²⁹⁵ Roy Cooper for North Carolina. "A North Carolina That Works For Everyone."

²⁹⁶ Zach Cohen. "New Cooper Ad: Election 'Not Just About One Bad Law.'"

construction contract that received widespread praise, unlike the one for Interstate 77's toll road. Despite years of political wrangling, including a grassroots, eminent domain protest in the hub's original site—Johnston County—which temporarily derailed the project, McCrory's announcement delivered a huge economic boon for the state. The new intermodal hub in Edgecombe County was projected to bring 1,500 new jobs to the state in the short term, along with other major economic benefits through increased shipping, as the presence of the hub would undoubtedly lead to amplified shipment capacity coming through the state's major port, Wilmington. In fact, the project was large enough to be labeled by state Commerce Secretary John Skvarla as the most important commerce day in Eastern North Carolina history.²⁹⁷ And McCrory was quick to capitalize on the contract, releasing an online video that used clips of Cooper's own jobs advertisement to turn the narrative in his own favor, replete with byte of former Democratic Governor Easley supporting the project.²⁹⁸

Yet given the close campaign's twisting and turning nature, the CSX hub soon became an afterthought as North Carolina's voter identification law returned to the news in early August. Evidenced by the Democratic gubernatorial primary, the voter ID issue was already an important one in the minds of the state's electorate. Like House Bill 2, it began as a controversial piece of conservative legislation passed through the state legislature and signed by McCrory that then turned into a protracted legal battle. On August 12th, 2013, after the Supreme Court struck down part of the Voting Rights Act in *Shelby County v. Holder*, North Carolina became the first state to take advantage of the ruling and pass a voter identification law based on the decision. The new law, with McCrory's stamp of approval, required voters to present a government-issued ID to

²⁹⁷ CBS North Carolina. "CSX hub to be built in Edgecombe Count, McCrory announces." I was actually on hand for McCrory's Carolina Connector announcement, chauffeuring NC Port Authority Board Member Dan Gurley..

²⁹⁸ Zach Cohen. "Cooper to Skip DNC."

vote, shortened early voting from seventeen to ten days, ended pre-registration for teen voters that would be eighteen on election day, and eliminated same-day voter registration. But although requiring voter identification had polled popularly throughout the nation, the other provisions of the law quickly drew legal ire from liberal and minority groups across America.²⁹⁹

Specifically, such groups contested that the new law would take great strides to suppress the minority—and often Democratic—vote in the state. In April of 2016, Republicans scored the first victory when Federal District Court Judge Thomas Schroeder issued a four hundred and eighty-five page ruling in favor of the law, finding that the law served a “legitimate state interest” to “detect and deter fraud.”³⁰⁰ On July 29th, 2016, however, the Democrats efforts against the law paid off when a three-judge panel from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit ruled unanimously that the law “[targeted] African Americans with almost surgical precision.”³⁰¹ This ruling had an important and immediate effect on the governor’s race. First, it prevented voters from having to show a photo ID at polls in November. Second, it also restored the seven lost days of early voting. Third, it restarted pre-registration for young voters that would turn eighteen by election day. Fourth, it revived same-day registration. And fifth, it enabled out-of-precinct voting. Overall, given the court’s finding that the law discriminated unlawfully against African Americans, the restoration of these voting practices would increase the minority demographic’s representation in the November election. The extent to which this increase

²⁹⁹ Aaron Blake. “North Carolina Governor signs extensive Voter ID law.”

³⁰⁰ Eyder Peralta. “Federal Judge Upholds North Carolina’s Sweeping Voter ID Law.” THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF NORTH CAROLINA. “IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF NORTH CAROLINA Decision.”

³⁰¹ Robert Barnes and Ann E. Marimow. “Appeals court strikes down North Carolina’s voter-ID law.”

occurred would undoubtedly have a large impact on a race projected to be as close as the McCrory-Cooper matchup.³⁰²

In the aftermath of the ruling, both candidates took the issue to the campaign trail. McCrory vowed to challenge the ruling in the Supreme Court.³⁰³ Cooper used the opportunity to appease his primary opponent and refused to defend the law in future arguments as Attorney General.³⁰⁴ But the Supreme Court ultimately voted four to four for the state's request of a stay, cementing the Democratic victory for the time being and ensuring the law would not take effect during the 2016 election cycle. There were two interesting aspects of the court's decision. First, McCrory waited seventeen days to file a petition for the stay, showing the court the state to be in no hurry to defend the law and thus undermining the "emergency" element required to receive a stay.³⁰⁵ Second, the death of conservative Justice Antonin Scalia had prevented North Carolina Republicans from receiving the five-vote threshold required for a stay—on a nine justice court, the state may have indeed succeeded.³⁰⁶ In the end, the Supreme Court did not issue a final ruling on the law's legality until it refused to take up the state's appeal in May of 2017, officially putting the issue to rest nearly half a year after the election had already been decided.³⁰⁷

With the voter ID issue in the rearview, the candidates again turned toward the issue squabbles that had dominated the rest of the summer. On August 3rd, Cooper rolled out an ad pushing back against McCrory's "Carolina Comeback" in a campaign appearance with Senator from Virginia and Democratic Vice Presidential nominee Tim Kaine.³⁰⁸ The ad coincided with a

³⁰² Anne Blythe. "4th U.S. Circuit judges overturn North Carolina's voter ID law."

³⁰³ Eric DuVall. "North Carolina to seek Supreme Court stay of voter ID law."

³⁰⁴ Loretta Boniti. "AG Roy Cooper Will Not Defend Appeal of NC Voter ID Law."

³⁰⁵ Cristian Farias. "North Carolina Took 17 Days To Ask Supreme Court To Rescue Its Voter ID Law."

³⁰⁶ Amy Howe. "North Carolina comes up one vote short for stay in election law case."

³⁰⁷ Adam Liptak and Michael Wines. "Strict North Carolina Voter ID Law Thwarted After Supreme Court Rejects Case."

³⁰⁸ Colin Diersing. "Cooper Launches New Ad."

McCrorry spot going negative on Cooper for the latter's past economic shortcomings during his thirty years in office.³⁰⁹ Less than a week later, McCrorry was out with his own spot highlighting his teacher pay raises, budget surpluses, and tax-cutting policies.³¹⁰ And by the end of August, Cooper had again attacked McCrorry's record on education using an advertisement featuring a teacher testimonial, a week after McCrorry had released his own spot defending his policies on the issue.³¹¹

Meanwhile, Cooper attempted to increase his stock with voters through a television ad featuring home videos of his daughters and a voiceover emphasizing his accomplishments as Attorney General.³¹² In response, the Republican Governor's Association hit back with a spot highlighting the extensive mismanagement of North Carolina's crime lab under Cooper's watch.³¹³ The onslaught continued on August 16th after many police officers walked out on Cooper during a question and answer session at the state convention of the Fraternal Order of Police in which Cooper discussed the mistrial of Wes Kerrick, a Charlotte Mecklenburg police officer, who Cooper decided to prosecute. The group, which had endorsed Democrat Walter Dalton for Governor in 2012, voted soon thereafter to endorse McCrorry.³¹⁴ Overall, through August 18th, the North Carolina governor's race had been the most expensive in the country, with nearly 15,000 aired commercials costing a total of \$7.7 million. Cooper had the advantage, with

³⁰⁹ Pat McCrorry. "Legacy."

³¹⁰ Zach Cohen. "McCrorry, Cooper Release New TV Spots."

³¹¹ Zach Cohen. "Cooper Ad Highlights Teacher Pay Cuts."

³¹² Zach Cohen. "Cooper TV Ad Features Home Videos of Daughters."

³¹³ Republican Governors' Association. "RGA Releases New TV Ad In The North Carolina Governor's Race: 'Failed.'"

³¹⁴ Michael Gordon and Jim Morrill. "Lingering anger over Kerrick case boils up in N.C. governor's race."

\$5.6 million in spending for 8,800 commercials to McCrory's \$2.1 million for 6,100 commercials.³¹⁵

Between the ad barrage and the voter ID result, Cooper seemed to come out the statistical victor. A PPP poll released on August 10th found the Attorney General ahead 43% to 42%, with Cecil garnering 4% and 11% undecided.³¹⁶ On August 12th, the latest NBC News, *Wall Street Journal*, and Marist poll found Cooper outpacing McCrory even further, 51% to 44% with 5% undecided.³¹⁷ Then, on August 24th, a pair of polls from Monmouth University and CNN found an extended Cooper bump—52% to 43%, with 3% for Cecil and 3% undecided—and 52% to 46%, respectively.³¹⁸ By the end of August, Cooper boasted a 5.7% advantage in the polling aggregate, leading McCrory 49.5% to 43.8%.³¹⁹ All the while, McCrory doubled down on his support for the Republican Presidential ticket, hosting fundraisers for Trump in Charlotte³²⁰ and Mooresville;³²¹ introducing Trump at a Wilmington rally³²² and then defending the candidate's controversial second amendment comment about Hillary Clinton,³²³ and lastly, receiving Indiana Governor and Republican Vice Presidential nominee Mike Pence's endorsement at a Raleigh rally toward the end of the month.³²⁴

³¹⁵ Colin Campbell. "McCrory-Cooper contest has the most governor's race ad spending in the country."

³¹⁶ Tom Jensen. "North Carolina Races Tight Across The Board."

³¹⁷ Mark Murray. "Polls: Clinton Running the Table in Key Battlegrounds."

³¹⁸ Monmouth University. "Prez and Senate Races Tight; HB2 Drag on Gov. McCrory Re-Elect Bid."

³¹⁹ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

³²⁰ Jim Morrill. "Donald Trump to headline fundraisers in Charlotte and Mooresville next week."

³²¹ Jim Morrill, Ann Doss Helms, and Ely Portillo. "Supporters line up for Donald Trump rally in Charlotte."

³²² Beth Reinhard. "Donald Trump Backs Strict North Carolina Voter ID Law."

³²³ Colin Campbell. "McCrory blames Hillary Clinton for Trump 'Second Amendment people' uproar."

³²⁴ Colin Campbell and Bryan Anderson. "In Raleigh, VP candidate Mike Pence compares Trump to Reagan."

Bringing it Home: McCrory Attempts to Close the Gap

“You’re about as straight as another trial lawyer who became a politician in North Carolina – John Edwards”

– Pat McCrory, October 11th, 2016

At the beginning of the final two-month push toward election day, it was clear Roy Cooper maintained a slight advantage in the North Carolina Governor’s race. Given the expected close outcome of the race, the fact that Cooper had maintained this advantage for nearly a month was certainly cause for concern in Pat McCrory’s campaign. Looking for a boost, McCrory pulled a short-lived, pro-House Bill 2 ad from the airwaves to tweak the messaging on September 1st, only three days after first releasing the spot.³²⁵ Originally, the ad had used a molestation victim to denounce President Obama and Cooper for supporting forcing children to use the same bathroom as an individual who claims to be the opposite sex. But it quickly became apparent that the ad’s message was toxic to independent voters—a critical demographic McCrory needed to win.³²⁶ As a result, McCrory tweaked the spot to bring the ad more in line with his message of robust education policies.³²⁷

McCrory also doubled down on his criticisms of Cooper’s handling of crime. On September 7th, the RGA came out with a new television ad again slamming Cooper’s management of the state’s crime lab.³²⁸ A week later, McCrory followed with his own blistering spot criticizing Cooper for what was described as a pile-up of unanalyzed rape kits at the crime lab.³²⁹ Unsurprisingly, his campaign rolled out a fourth law endorsement—this time the North Carolina Sheriff Police Alliance—two days later to further emphasize his campaign’s work to

³²⁵ Zach Cohen. “SCOTUS Blocks State Voter ID Law.”

³²⁶ Zach Cohen. “Pat McCrory’s Road Gets Tougher.”

³²⁷ Zach Cohen. “McCrory Tweaks HB2 Ad Messaging.”

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Pat McCrory. “New TV Ad, ‘Proof,’ Exposes Roy Cooper’s Failure To Fix Crime Lab.”

keep North Carolinians safe. Along with the endorsement announcement, he also joined Test400k, a nonpartisan group calling for reform to rape kit testing throughout the nation.³³⁰ Cooper immediately released an ad defending his management of the crime lab, but WRAL-TV (whose owner had donated to the Cooper campaign) rated the ad with a “red light” on its fact checking scale, a sign that Cooper’s defense remained somewhat dubious.³³¹ It appeared as if McCrory had finally found a place to consistently hit Cooper to his advantage. By the end of the month, McCrory had only continued the barrage, releasing a video purporting a Cooper flip-flop on the state’s new body camera legislation requiring police officers to wear body cameras in the aftermath of a controversial police shooting in Charlotte.³³²

On the campaign’s other hot issues, the candidates continued their war of attrition. McCrory continued to hit Cooper on his similarities to Hillary Clinton, this time drawing comparisons to Clinton’s infamous private email server.³³³ The accusations followed another WRAL-TV report that indicated Cooper had sent just sixteen emails from his state email during his fifteen-year tenure as Attorney General.³³⁴ Specifically, McCrory had hoped to use the report to raise the transparency issues inherent in Clinton’s case to Cooper’s emails, but the allegations ultimately went nowhere. At the same time, McCrory received more bad economic news from the bathroom bill fallout, as the NCAA announced on September 12th that it had decided to pull seven championship events from the state because of McCrory’s failure to repeal the law.

³³⁰ Pat McCrory. “Pat McCrory Receives Fourth Major Law Enforcement Endorsement.”

³³¹ Mark Binker. “Fact Check: Is it true Cooper ‘fixed the problems’ at the crime lab?”

³³² Pat McCrory. “Roy Cooper On New Body Camera Legislation: ‘I Support It.’”

³³³ Pat McCrory. “Governor McCrory To Attend Charlotte Candidate Forum Hosted By NC Association of Community College Trustees.”

³³⁴ Tyler Dukes. “Despite decades in office, Cooper leaves faint email trail.”

Cooper, on the other hand, avoided going negative for the time being, expending his own resources to highlight his campaign promise of increased teacher pay and improved education.³³⁵

But while the candidates dug in on old issues, a new issue finally simmered to a boil, as McCrory's environmental record became a full-fledged campaign vehicle for the first time. The controversy stemmed from the Dan River coal ash spill over two years prior. In early February 2014, employees at the Duke Energy Dan River Steam Station in Eden, North Carolina discovered coal ash to be leaking from an underground storm sewer into the Dan River. Eventually, the EPA determined that over 39,000 pounds of coal ash and nearly 27 million gallons of ash pond water had leaked into the river. The environmental fallout from the spill was tremendous, with concerns ranging from adverse effects on wildlife safety and ecosystem services to contaminated drinking water for humans.³³⁶ McCrory, who had been employed by Duke Energy for twenty-eight years before entering politics, quickly became the spokesperson and regulator for the disaster and its ensuing cleanup.

Given McCrory's ties to Duke Energy, controversy quickly followed. In the disaster's immediate aftermath, the state legislature created the Coal Ash Management Commission, which was tasked with overseeing the Administration's removal of the company's coal ash ponds throughout the state. In response, McCrory vetoed the measure, believing the legislature's attempts to appoint such a commission—even though he too could appoint seats—were unconstitutional. The legislature ended up overriding his veto and the issue finally played out in the North Carolina Supreme Court, which sided with McCrory and led to the Commission's disbanding in March of 2016. In this manner, control over the coal ash clean up returned squarely to McCrory's administration, which continued to draw ire due to perceptions that the

³³⁵ Zach Cohen. "NCAA Pulls Sports Championships Over HB2."

³³⁶ United States Department of the Interior. "Dan River Coal Ash Spill."

governor dragged his feet in punishing his former employer.³³⁷ So by May, the legislature had sent a nearly identical bill to McCrory's desk, again creating the Commission and showing that McCrory lacked the ability to control his own state legislature.³³⁸ McCrory vetoed the bill in early June, but in doing so, he cited concerns about the new law's ability to provide residents living near coal ash ponds access to safe drinking water.³³⁹ And by the end of June, the legislature had reached a compromise with the governor, eliminating the commission and ensuring permanent water supplies for households near coal ash ponds by October of 2018, while preventing Duke Energy from having to close all of its coal ash ponds.³⁴⁰

To this point, the coal ash issue had largely remained an intra-party battle between McCrory and his legislature, with Democrats bashing both for their efforts. But the safe drinking water issue brought coal ash into the governor's race. In July, state toxicologist Ken Rudo testified as part of a lawsuit deposition that his boss, state public health director Randall Williams, had lied to residents near coal ash ponds that their well water was safe to drink, despite knowing the water to be contaminated with a recognized carcinogen.³⁴¹ When the testimony became unsealed in early August, accusations immediately flew that the order to mislead residents came directly from McCrory himself.³⁴² These charges led the Southern Environmental Law Center to subpoena McCrory's chief of staff and communications director to determine what role McCrory had played in reversing the warnings.³⁴³

³³⁷ Bruce Henderson. "Duke Energy must dig up ash, at least for now."

³³⁸ Bruce Henderson. "N.C. Coal Ash Management Commission disbanded as risk hearings underway;" Craig Jarvis. "Deconstructing latest NC coal ash controversy."

³³⁹ Craig Jarvis. "McCrory vetoes NC coal ash bill."

³⁴⁰ David Boraks. "Lawmakers Compromise With McCrory On Coal Ash Cleanups."

³⁴¹ Michael Biesecker. "Testimony: Health director covered up cancer-causing water in North Carolina."

³⁴² Craig Jarvis. "Top aides to be questioned about coal ash well water warnings."

³⁴³ Ibid.

Cooper's campaign too jumped on the coal ash issue. In early September, the Attorney General released a scathing ad insinuating that the governor's team had pressured health officials to lie about the safety of drinking water.³⁴⁴ The League of Conservation Voters' Conservation Votes political action committee also hopped on, spending \$700,000 on a television ad detailing news reports that McCrory's administration had softened fines levied on Duke Energy and acted to delay the ash cleanup to the utility's benefit, while also doubling down on Rudo's claims that the administration had been complicit in issuing false assurances to coal ash pond residents.³⁴⁵ In response, McCrory's campaign released a somewhat vague television spot, during which a man describing himself as a coal ash pond resident places the blame for the delayed clean up squarely on Cooper and the Democrat's shoulders.³⁴⁶

And it was not just the coal ash issue on which outside groups piled. Overall, September saw a massive uptick in outside spending on the race. On the 21st, the NRA officially backed McCrory, handing the governor the support of the nation's largest organization for defending 2nd amendment rights, long a hallmark conservative issue.³⁴⁷ Then, on the 26th, the state chapter of the powerful Koch brothers backed Americans for Prosperity pledged at least \$100,000 in mail and digital advertising aimed at convincing the state's voters of voting against Cooper. Meanwhile, Planned Parenthood's political arms rolled out a \$1 million campaign opposing Sen. Richard Burr, Trump, and McCrory in their respective races, including a video slamming McCrory's record on women's health issues.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁴ Zach Cohen. "Cooper, McCrory Launch Dueling Coal Ash Ads."

³⁴⁵ Zach Cohen. "AFP Pledges Anti-Cooper Effort."

³⁴⁶ Zach Cohen. "Cooper, McCrory Launch Dueling Coal Ash Ads."

³⁴⁷ National Rifle Association. "NRA Endorses North Carolina Governor McCrory."

³⁴⁸ *The Washington Times*. "Planned Parenthood, conservatives enter NC governor's race."

But if anything, the maneuverings in September did little to shift the race's polling. A Quinnipiac University poll released on September 8th showed a continue trend toward Cooper, with the Attorney General receiving 51% of the poll's support to 44% for McCrory and showing a 52% to 43% margin for Cooper among independents.³⁴⁹ On the 22nd, the *New York Times* and Siena poll found Cooper to even be outperforming Hillary Clinton in the state, with 50% support to McCrory's 42% and 8% voting for other candidates or undecided.³⁵⁰ PPP's September poll also declared similar results in Cooper's outpacing of Clinton, with 46% for Cooper, 41% for McCrory, 2% for Cecil, and 11% undecided.³⁵¹ Even both of North Carolina's university polls, High Point and Elon, asserted Cooper ahead of the incumbent—49% to 41% with 3% for Cecil, 7% undecided, and 1% refusing to respond in High Point's poll and 48% to 44% with 3% for Cecil and 6% undecided in Elon's final poll of the month.³⁵²

All hope was not lost, however, for McCrory. Mid-month's Civitas poll found the governor leading Cooper 45% to 43%, with 1% for Cecil and 9% undecided.³⁵³ Later in the month, a Fox News poll similarly showed McCrory leading, 46% to 43% with 3% for Cecil, 7% undecided, and 1% voting for another candidate.³⁵⁴ And perhaps most importantly for McCrory, the mid-September Elon poll detailed him winning 48.7% to 46%, with the governor opening up a massive, twenty point lead over his challenger in the ever-important independent voting demographic, 60% to 40%.³⁵⁵ Still, by Elon's late-September poll, this margin had shifted

³⁴⁹ Quinnipiac University. "QU Poll Release Detail."

³⁵⁰ Nate Cohn. "Clinton and Trump Tied in North Carolina Poll, With Sharp Educational Divides."

³⁵¹ Tom Jensen. "Presidential Race Tied, Cooper Up in NC."

³⁵² High Point University. "HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY POLL MEMO RELEASE 9/27/2016 (UPDATE)."

³⁵³ Demi Dowdy. "New Civitas Poll Shows Trump and Clinton in Dead Heat in NC."

³⁵⁴ Fox News. "Fox News Poll: North Carolina."

³⁵⁵ Elon University. "North Carolina: A Controversial Law and Extremely Close Races."

slightly in favor of Cooper, 51% to 49%,³⁵⁶ and with just over one month to go until election day, Cooper's advantage in the polling aggregate stood at 3.6%, 47.8% to 44.2%. McCrory had only managed to close the gap 2.1% since the end of August.³⁵⁷

As Cooper's advantage continued into the pivotal month of October, McCrory was running out of time to convince voters to bequeath him four more years. However, October contained many opportunities for the incumbent to do so with two televised debates scheduled and the ever-present threat of an October surprise. Indeed, an October surprise soon formed, but it would not be in the form of a traditional candidate bombshell. Instead, it came as a natural disaster—Hurricane Matthew. The storm would ultimately pause the campaign briefly, as well as provide a platform for McCrory to showcase his leadership abilities to the electorate. Besides the debates and the hurricane, October also marked the end of the financial third quarter, which would give a glimpse of the final fundraising standings before election day. And as the race continued to near, the news media (though at this point its bias was crystal clear) finally began offering its own endorsements in the race.

Before the first debate, scheduled for October 11th, the status quo from September largely carried over into October. Cooper sought to extinguish criticisms on his management of the state crime lab in a new television advertisement featuring North Carolina sheriffs praising his handling of the lab's problems.³⁵⁸ Meanwhile, McCrory continued to double down on his message of economic growth, releasing a spot highlighting the state's job growth, tax cuts, and budget surpluses during his tenure in office.³⁵⁹ Outside groups also piled on for McCrory. In early October, the Freedom Partners Action Fund released an online video docking Cooper, but

³⁵⁶ Elon University. "A Post-Debate Bump in the Old North State?."

³⁵⁷ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

³⁵⁸ Mark Binker. "Cooper ad says McCrory 'playing politics' with crime lab."

³⁵⁹ Pat McCrory. "Pat McCrory Focuses On Economic Results In Latest TV Ad."

did not put any money behind the effort.³⁶⁰ The Institute for Faith and Family also dumped \$215,000 on ad buys supporting House Bill 2 in the Raleigh media market.³⁶¹ Still, Cooper maintained a heavy advantage in total advertising spending. Through October 3rd, the candidates and supporting groups had spent a total of \$19.5 million on a total of 42,000 television advertisements. But Cooper and his allies had outspent McCrory and his supporters nearly two to one, \$12.6 million to \$6.9 million, including a candidate spending advantage of \$7.9 million to \$4.6 million.³⁶² It was more than apparent that Cooper held a large, cushioned lead in the money race.

Leading up to the debate, Cooper continued to hit McCrory, insinuating in an economically-themed ad that he, unlike McCrory, would choose to focus on the economy rather than become embroiled in social issue controversies.³⁶³ McCrory went negative in a more blatant way, running an ad featuring Raleigh attorney Gene Boyce, who had successfully taken Cooper to court in a fourteen year-long case where Cooper ended up having to apologize to Boyce for defaming him in an attack ad.³⁶⁴ Yet despite each candidate's maneuverings, the polling continued to show a Cooper bump. In early October, Bloomberg, Quinnipiac University, WRAL-TV and Survey USA, as well as High Point University found Cooper ahead to varying degrees: Bloomberg 50% to 44%;³⁶⁵ Quinnipiac 48% to 46%;³⁶⁶ WRAL-TV and Survey USA 48% to 44% with 2% for Cecil and 6% undecided;³⁶⁷ and High Point 48% to 41% with 3% for Cecil and

³⁶⁰ Zach Cohen. "First Freedom Partners Attack on Cooper Targets Taxes, ACA."

³⁶¹ Mark Binker. "Social conservatives air pro-HB2 ad."

³⁶² Jim Morrill. "Roy Cooper's team outspending Gov. Pat McCrory nearly 2-1 on TV."

³⁶³ Zach Cohen. "Cooper in Ad Says He Won't Focus on Social Issues."

³⁶⁴ Pat McCrory. "New TV Ad, 'Reputation,' Slams Roy Cooper For Dirty Political Attacks."

³⁶⁵ John McCormick. "Clinton, Trump Beck and Beck in North Carolina: Bloomberg Poll."

³⁶⁶ Quinnipiac University. "QU Poll Release Detail October."

³⁶⁷ SurveyUSA. "Clinton, Trump Neck-and-Neck in NC; Burr and Ross Just as Close in Senate Match-up; Can Cooper and HB2 Flip Governor's Seat to Blue?"

8% undecided.³⁶⁸ By debate day, Cooper’s lead in the aggregate had widened to 48.6% to 44.0%.³⁶⁹

Still, the candidates would be forced to tackle one more crisis before they reached the debate stage. On September 28th, Tropical Storm Matthew reached hurricane intensity in the Atlantic Ocean. It made landfall as a Category 1 hurricane on October 8th, just South of McClellanville, South Carolina.³⁷⁰ And for the next two days, the storm caused significant damage and flooding across the eastern half of North Carolina. Immediately, 680,000 residents went without power.³⁷¹ Nearly sixty miles of Interstate 95 shut down due to flooding.³⁷² In the end, the hurricane killed twenty-six North Carolinians and resulted in \$1.6 billion in property damage.³⁷³ McCrory had preempted the storm by declaring a state of emergency across North Carolina, with special attention to the sixty-six counties in the Eastern part of the state.³⁷⁴ In both the upcoming debate and ensuing weeks the hurricane would undoubtedly become an election issue—an October surprise on which neither candidate had counted.

The debate on Tuesday, October 11th marked the first official, televised clash between Cooper and McCrory, as the June event had been a smaller event tailored toward the North Carolina Bar Association. NBC’s Meet the Press host Chuck Todd moderated the debate, which was also aired on radio due to the fact that hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians remained without power because of Hurricane Matthew. The two candidates stood on stage behind

³⁶⁸ High Point University. “HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY POLL MEMO RELEASE 10/11/2016 (UPDATE).”

³⁶⁹ RealClearPolitics. “North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper.”

³⁷⁰ Stacy R. Stewart. “NATIONAL HURRICANE CENTER TROPICAL CYCLONE REPORT: Hurricane Matthew.”

³⁷¹ Beau Minnick. “As Raleigh recovers from Matthew, power outages could last a week in NC.”

³⁷² Jason DeBruyn. “Dam Breached: Sixty Miles of I-95 Closed In Matthew’s Aftermath.”

³⁷³ Jay Price. “Road To Recovery Remains Long For Cities Hardest Hit By Hurricane Matthew.”

³⁷⁴ Amir Vera. “Gov. Pat McCrory declares state of emergency for all 100 counties in North Carolina.”

podiums, and each was given the opportunity to make an opening statement. McCrory used his to make public service announcements regarding the emergency response to Hurricane Matthew, attempting to showcase his leadership abilities and appear “governor-like.” He then transitioned, using his response to the storm as a comparison to his propensity for “problem-solving” throughout his first term. Cooper, on the other hand, touched briefly on the hurricane before launching into attack lines asserting that McCrory had taken the state backwards both economically and in education.³⁷⁵

Next, Todd wasted no time getting into the meat of the issues, asking McCrory first about House Bill 2. The governor’s response centered on emphasizing the law as a liberal creation, categorizing his response as a defense of conservative values. Cooper called the law an economic disaster. Debate over the issue quickly turned to the law’s impacts on North Carolina business, with McCrory getting the last word in criticizing the Democratic response as government overreach. Second, Todd asked Cooper why voters should not reelect McCrory because of the state’s economic gains. The Attorney General claimed that McCrory had been overstating the state’s actual progress, while the governor countered with statistics regarding increased job growth, slashed unemployment, and budget surpluses. He also dinged Cooper for being in big business’s pocket by highlighting Cooper’s fundraising efforts with Goldman Sachs. Effectively, the state economy had dominated the first third of the debate.³⁷⁶

The moderator then turned toward the issue of education, where the candidates went back and forth over the facts behind North Carolina’s teacher pay rates. During the ensuing debate, McCrory attempted to nail Cooper on his recent statement to decrease the state’s disaster relief fund—a fund now very necessary due Hurricane Matthew’s devastation. Cooper parried by

³⁷⁵ C-SPAN. “North Carolina Governor's Debate, Oct 11 2016 | Video | C-SPAN.org.”

³⁷⁶ C-SPAN. “North Carolina Governor's Debate, Oct 11 2016 | Video | C-SPAN.org.”

discussing a legislature bill McCrory refused to veto that removed \$500,000 from the disaster relief fund to defend House Bill 2. The back and forth had deteriorated to accusations regarding each candidates' trustworthiness, after which McCrory and Cooper briefly discussed whether the governor had added further abortion restrictions during his term in office until the debate essentially reached a stalemate.³⁷⁷

Following the abortion discourse, Todd moved to an issue that McCrory had repeatedly tried to hit Cooper on in his campaign advertisements: crime. The first question on the topic referenced the mismanagement of the state crime lab. Cooper tried to defend his record of improving the lab's conditions, but McCrory lambasted his opponent, citing the proliferation of municipality crime labs as evidence his reforms were not working. Furthermore, the governor claimed he had been unable to get Cooper's help on reforming the issue, and even went so far as to insinuate that Cooper was merely using the lab to the benefit of his trial lawyer friends. The second question asked broadly about the recent Charlotte police shooting and more narrowly about the use of body cameras on police officers. Overall, the candidates did not disagree that much on the issue, though McCrory did note that most law enforcement groups had endorsed him. The debate ended with a cautious effort on both contenders' parts to carefully navigate the controversies of each party's Presidential candidate, along with short jousts on the voter identification law and Medicaid expansion. In closing, Cooper reiterated his central opening and economic message—McCrory has only taken the state backward. McCrory again highlighted his idea of a "Carolina Comeback" and reemphasized his leadership by discussing his ongoing disaster relief responsibilities.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ C-SPAN. "North Carolina Governor's Debate, Oct 11 2016 | Video | C-SPAN.org."

The debate was at once brutal and exhausting. Yet both candidates had remained composed under pressure and delivered personal and political blows to the other. With only one week until the next, and last, debate, not much changed on the campaign trail. Cooper doubled down on House Bill 2 as an economic disaster and slammed McCrory for calling Trump a “role model” during the previous debate.³⁷⁹ But the Attorney General did pick up three powerful news media endorsements in the debate’s aftermath. The first was that of the *Winston-Salem Journal*, the fourth largest publication in the state.³⁸⁰ The second was that of the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, an unsurprising endorsement given the area’s liberal tendencies.³⁸¹ The third was an even bigger blow to McCrory. His hometown, and the state’s most prominent, newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer* endorsed Cooper on October 14th. With the endorsement, it marked the first time the paper had refused to endorse McCrory in the governor’s twenty-five years in elected office.³⁸²

But McCrory was not quite at a loss for good news. In fact, post-debate polling showed that either McCrory’s handling of Hurricane Matthew, his debate performance, or both had enabled him to substantially cut into Cooper’s polling lead. On October 13th, a NBC News, *Wall Street Journal*, and Marist poll found the Attorney General’s lead down to one point, 49% to 48%.³⁸³ The next Monday, the latest CNN poll showed Cooper’s lead had shrunk to just two points, 49% to 47%, down from six points in its August poll.³⁸⁴ On the day of the final debate, a WRAL-TV and SurveyUSA poll found a similar margin for Cooper—47% to 45%, but noted the

³⁷⁹ Zach Cohen. “New Cooper Ad Features Sports Losses Following HB2;” Zach Cohen. “NBC/WSJ: Cooper, McCrory Separated by 1 Point.”

³⁸⁰ *Winston-Salem Journal*. “Decision 2016: Restore responsibility to the governor’s office.”

³⁸¹ *Asheville Citizen-Times*. “Our view: A change of direction needed in Raleigh.”

³⁸² *The Charlotte Observer*. “Why we’re not endorsing Pat McCrory for the first time in 25 years.”

³⁸³ Mark Murray. “Poll: Clinton Ahead in North Carolina; Virtual Tie in Ohio.”

³⁸⁴ CNN. “CNN Poll: North Carolina October.”

Attorney General still maintained more support among moderates and independents.³⁸⁵ A Civitas poll conducted over the same period even showed a four point McCrory lead, 46% to 42%, with 2% for Cecil and 10% undecided.³⁸⁶ By October 19th, Cooper's lead in the aggregate stood at only 0.5%, 47.3% to 46.8%.³⁸⁷ Meanwhile, McCrory's support groups remained active on the airwaves, with the RGA releasing a post-debate spot claiming that Cooper's handling of the crime lab had made North Carolinian women "less safe."³⁸⁸

With the polling gap closing, the stakes for the third and final gubernatorial debate were higher than ever. This time, the clash, hosted and televised by two moderators from WRAL-TV, Laura Leslie and David Crabtree, would also feature the libertarian candidate, Lon Cecil. The three candidates sat behind tables on the stage, with Cecil on the left, Cooper in the middle, and McCrory on the right. None of the three was given the opportunity to make an opening statement, but every candidate was allowed a chance to answer each question. The questioning began over Hurricane Matthew recovery efforts. McCrory again pointed to his own leadership on the matter and continued his attempts sticking Cooper to efforts to reduce the state's rainy day fund. He also eventually flipped the rhetoric to emphasize the state's economic advances under his tenure. Cooper countered by highlighting his previous disaster relief efforts as State Senate Majority Leader and once more hit McCrory over the legislature's move to take \$500,000 out of the disaster relief fund for the defense of House Bill 2. Last, and as it would soon seem to be, least, Cecil failed to offer any substantive remarks on the issue and appeared unorganized on stage.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁵ SurveyUSA. "Battle for Every Vote in Tarheel State: Clinton/Trump, Burr/Ross, McCrory/Cooper All Neck-and-Neck As Early Voting Nears Start."

³⁸⁶ Civitas. "Civitas Institute North Carolina October 2016 Survey."

³⁸⁷ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

³⁸⁸ Republican Governors' Association. "RGA Releases New TV Ad In North Carolina: 'Less Safe.'"

³⁸⁹ C-SPAN. "North Carolina Gubernatorial Debate, Oct 18 2016 | Video | C-SPAN.org."

The second question focused on the coal ash problem that had found its way into the campaign in the late summer and early fall. Cooper immediately centered his response on the allegations that McCrory and his administration had misled North Carolinians as to the safety of their drinking water. Cecil commented that he believed deconstructing the coal ash ponds was the right policy yet remained too costly for the state. McCrory spent his time tying Cooper to Duke Energy, which he claimed endorsed Democrats and donated to Cooper's campaign, while also asserting that it was Cooper's office that was charged with overseeing the coal ash ponds and had never expressed concern before the spill two years prior. In rebuttals, Cooper noted his environmental group endorsements while McCrory discussed his fight with the legislature to ensure residents received the best water safety deal possible.³⁹⁰

The debate then turned to the campaign's chief issue: the state economy. When asked about the state's economic progress under McCrory, Cecil remarked that the governor had done an excellent job save his burdensome new taxes. McCrory and Cooper proceeded to launch into their usual economic growth and decline talking points, touching every base from budget surpluses to education to House Bill 2. The two ended the discussion trying to tie each other to big business. Naturally, the debate turned to House Bill 2 from there. In addition to the candidates' typical points, Cecil, the libertarian, called for the law's repeal. Cooper noted that despite many businesses leaving the state because of the law, he had single-handedly convinced Braeburn Pharmaceuticals to remain in the state. McCrory and Cooper then descended into the gutter on the issue, a jostle that ended when McCrory called for Cooper to resign his position and apologize for what McCrory perceived as "disrespect."³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ C-SPAN. "North Carolina Gubernatorial Debate, Oct 18 2016 | Video | C-SPAN.org."

The remainder of the debate was less heated. The candidates spared yet again over the state crime lab's management, with Cecil agreeing with McCrory that issues pervade the lab. McCrory and Cooper hit each other briefly on the issue of government transparency, before they again turned to the issue of abortion restrictions. And when asked about his leadership abilities despite never having held public office, Cecil emphasized his military experience in Vietnam, his refusal to accept big money donations during his campaign, and his lifetime of experience in the private sector. McCrory and Cooper then squabbled momentarily over teacher pay and education spending, each making their trademark points. In closing, Cecil brought out his true libertarian colors, calling for new state revenue sources like a medical marijuana tax. Cooper stuck to his narrative that McCrory's policies had hurt the state and that he was uniquely positioned to rebuild North Carolina's reputation. On the other hand, McCrory doubled down on his crisis leadership and the state's economic gains during his tenure. Besides the addition of Cecil, the third debate really remained simply a repeat of the second.³⁹²

The results of the final debate showed two candidates desperately looking for an upper hand over the other. With three weeks until election day, both contenders had clearly descended into gutter politics, as the WRAL-TV showdown ended replete with personal attacks.³⁹³ The sprint to the finish line would feature one more fundraising checkpoint, with third quarter numbers expected at the end of the month. Outside groups also amped up spending slightly, and the candidates themselves began to stick more closely with their respective national tickets, both of which too zeroed in on North Carolina in their own final campaign pushes. The polling also stayed well within the margin of error.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Matthew Burns. "Final gubernatorial debate gets personal."

By late October, outsiders gunned at the North Carolina governor's race from all angles. President Obama cut a radio advertisement for Cooper the week of October 17th.³⁹⁴ The same week, the DGA injected a fresh \$1 million into Cooper support.³⁹⁵ On October 26th and 28th, the RGA released pro-McCrory television spots slamming Cooper on Medicaid expansion and rising health insurance premiums, attempting to reach the nerves of those opposed to Obamacare.³⁹⁶ The N.C. Values Coalition also came to the governor's aid with an ad connecting the bathroom bill with registered sex offenders.³⁹⁷ The Koch brothers-backed Freedom Partners Action Fund also re-upped its "We Can't Afford Roy Cooper" spot with a \$500,000 backing.³⁹⁸ And the candidates too released last-minute ads. On November 2nd, McCrory dropped a television advertisement trying to connect Cooper's email habits to the controversial practices of Hillary Clinton.³⁹⁹ Two days later, both Cooper and McCrory were out with competing spots on the crime lab's management.⁴⁰⁰

Ultimately, when it came to campaign finance, Cooper won the battle. The Attorney General raised \$8.9 million in the third quarter, outpacing McCrory by nearly \$3.6 million. He also outspent the governor \$17.6 million to \$10 million.⁴⁰¹ Both candidates' last ditch efforts also included numerous campaign stops with Donald Trump and the Clintons, respectively. On the last Saturday before the election, McCrory appeared at a Trump rally in Wilmington.⁴⁰² In late

³⁹⁴ Ed O'Keefe and Paul Kane. "On the airwaves, Obama is stepping up for down-ballot Democrats like never before."

³⁹⁵ Zach Cohen. "DGA Shores Up State Party With \$1M."

³⁹⁶ Republican Governor's Association. "RGA Releases New TV Ad In North Carolina: 'Hurting.'"

³⁹⁷ Jim Morrill. "New NC 'bathroom' ad was used before – in Texas;" Republican Governors' Association. "RGA Releases New TV Ad In North Carolina: 'Refused to Fight.'"

³⁹⁸ Jonathan Swan. "Koch network back on air in two states."

³⁹⁹ Pat McCrory. "McCrory Campaign Slams Cooper Over Emails In New TV Ad, 'Downfall.'"

⁴⁰⁰ Zach Cohen. "McCrory, Cooper Run Competing Ads on Crime Lab."

⁴⁰¹ Zach Cohen. "Cooper Outraises, Outspends McCrory in Q3;" Zach Cohen. "Cooper Raised \$8.9M in Q3."

⁴⁰² Zach Cohen. "Cooper Narrowly Leads Two November Polls."

October, Cooper campaigned with former President Bill Clinton in Rocky Mount.⁴⁰³ Then, on Friday November 4th, he appeared with President Obama at rallies in Charlotte and Fayetteville.⁴⁰⁴ And on the eve of the election, Cooper attended two North Carolina Democratic Presidential ticket rallies—one in Raleigh with Clinton and one in Charlotte with Kaine.⁴⁰⁵ Finally, the election was in the hands of North Carolina’s voters. But if the polls had anything to say about the race’s outcome, then Roy Cooper would emerge the victor. Of the ten polls released after the final debate, Cooper led McCrory in all but one.⁴⁰⁶ Even in that one Monmouth poll, McCrory only boasted a meager 1% margin over his challenger.⁴⁰⁷ On the day of the last polling aggregate tally, November 7th, Cooper boasted a 2.2% margin, leading McCrory 48.4% to 46.2%.⁴⁰⁸

The 2016 Gubernatorial Election in North Carolina

Holding true to expectations, the McCrory-Cooper bout was literally too close to call. At 1:53AM on November 9th, Cooper led the incumbent 48.97% to 48.86%, or by around 5,000 votes, with 100% of the precincts reporting.⁴⁰⁹ There were 4,711,014 total votes cast.⁴¹⁰ Immediately, Cooper declared victory. McCrory, however, refused to give up, asserting that a result could not be determined until the completion of county canvasses to be conducted on November 18th.⁴¹¹ The governor’s campaign team also disputed 90,000 ballots from Durham

⁴⁰³ Zach Cohen. “Siena, PPP, Monmouth Show Tight Race.”

⁴⁰⁴ Zach Cohen. “McCrory, Cooper Run Competing Ads on Crime Lab.”

⁴⁰⁵ Zach Cohen. “Cooper Narrowly Leads Two November Polls.”

⁴⁰⁶ RealClearPolitics. “North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper.”

⁴⁰⁷ Monmouth University. “Prez, Gov Races Close; GOP Edge for Senate.”

⁴⁰⁸ RealClearPolitics. “North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper.”

⁴⁰⁹ Zach Cohen. “Cooper Declares Victory, But It’s Too Close to Call.”

⁴¹⁰ North Carolina State Board of Elections. “11/08/2016 OFFICIAL GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS – STATEWIDE.”

⁴¹¹ WITN. “Canvass of votes must be completed before winner announced for governor.”

County due to what it called “potential irregularities.”⁴¹² Clearly, the race was far from over—a recount was almost certainly on its way, and both campaigns anticipated looming legal battles.⁴¹³ After all, it was the closest statewide race in the country during the 2016 election cycle.

Things quickly got ugly. By November 16th, McCrory’s team had filed voting complaints alleging fraud in twelve counties, including Durham. Many of the concerns, lodged also in Halifax, Wake, Franklin, Vance, Edgecombe, Guilford, Northampton, Nash, Robeson, and Warren counties, claimed irregularities in handwritten absentee ballots. A preliminary investigation in Bladen County also indicated at least one-hundred and sixty-seven absentee ballots cast in the county had been written by only seven people.⁴¹⁴ The governor ultimately filed over fifty voting complaints. And on November 22nd, two weeks after election day, he formally requested a recount.⁴¹⁵ The North Carolina State Board of Elections granted the request on November 30th, but only for the 94,000 disputed ballots in Durham County,⁴¹⁶ where concerns arose as the sudden, late-night release of those ballots switched McCrory’s 60,000-vote lead to a 2,500-vote deficit.⁴¹⁷ In a show of American democracy, the governor acknowledged he would concede should the partial recount maintain the current result.⁴¹⁸ And on Monday, December 5th, when the recount showed no change, he did just that—nearly one month after election day.⁴¹⁹ Roy Cooper was certified the governor, with 2,309,157 votes or 49.02% of the vote, Pat McCrory finished second with 2,298,880 votes or 48.8% of the vote, and libertarian Lon Cecil

⁴¹² Pat McCrory. “Statement on Gubernatorial Race.”

⁴¹³ Amber Phillips. “The North Carolina governor’s race still isn’t over. And it’s about to get even uglier.”

⁴¹⁴ Craig Jarvis. “McCrory team: Election protests filed in 12 counties.”

⁴¹⁵ Valerie Richardson. “N.C. governor seeks recount amid voter-fraud complaints, won’t concede.”

⁴¹⁶ Richard Fausset. “Partial Recount Ordered in North Carolina Governor’s Race.”

⁴¹⁷ Amber Phillips. “The North Carolina governor’s race still isn’t over. And it’s about to get even uglier.”

⁴¹⁸ Richard Fausset. “Partial Recount Ordered in North Carolina Governor’s Race.”

⁴¹⁹ Colin Campbell. “Pat McCrory concedes; Roy Cooper next NC governor.”

finished a distant third, with 102,977 votes or 2.19% of the vote.⁴²⁰ The final margin between McCrory and Cooper was only 10,277 votes. Donald Trump and Richard Burr, both of which had carried the state on each's way to election and reelection, outpaced McCrory by 63,000 and 96,000 votes, respectively.⁴²¹

⁴²⁰ North Carolina State Board of Elections. "11/08/2016 OFFICIAL GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS – STATEWIDE."

⁴²¹ Rob Christensen. "Why NC's first GOP governor in a generation lost – Christensen."

V. Why did Pat McCrory Lose his 2016 Reelection Campaign?

When politicians lose elections, media coverage speculates about why they lost. For many politicians, the answer is simply that they identified with the wrong party. This is the case when a candidate loses in a “safe” district or state—one in which a single party dominates campaigns and elections. For much of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the “safe” explanation dominated North Carolina politics, with few exceptions. As evidenced in Chapter 1, outcomes traditionally followed a pattern where Democrats controlled statewide offices and North Carolina’s Congressional delegation. But as the twentieth century progressed, this “safe” account changed as Republicans saw increased success in statewide elections: first at the Presidential level, next in the Senate with the election of Jesse Helms, and later with the Council of State, where the Democrat edge dropped off considerably. By the dawn of the 2000s, Democratic dominance in the state was no longer a foregone conclusion.

Modern day North Carolina resembles a center-right state. Republican political consultant and self-proclaimed “data guy” Paul Shumaker describes the Tar Heel State’s ideology on a two-hundred-point scale, with the most liberal voters in the state scoring a -100, the most conservative voters in the state scoring a +100, and a North Carolina moderate scoring a 0. Using this scale, he has made a career of tracking voters. Today, he postulates that, in North Carolina, Democrats average a -25 score, Republicans average a +78 score, and unaffiliated voters average a +20 score.⁴²² Yet despite its Republican leanings, Democrats maintained strong electoral success in the Gubernatorial races of 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2016. Though McCrory’s victory in the 2012 race gave Republicans new hope for the beginnings of total conservative

⁴²² Paul Shumaker. Interview with Paul Shumaker. Appendix of Interviews available at the end of this chapter.

dominance, his loss in 2016 proves that winning statewide still requires positioning as close as possible to that +20-unaffiliated voter.

The conventional wisdom analysis of McCrory's loss easily explains that House Bill 2 cost the state's first Republican governor of the twenty-first century his job. Shumaker places House Bill 2 as a +78 to +100 issue—far away from the +20-sweet spot.⁴²³ Other election polling data from the race notes that independent and unaffiliated voters despised the law. Clearly, it moved the governor further to the right than most other issues in the race. Bathroom politics also dominated the airwaves from April of 2016 through election day. In fact, to this day, the state continues to draw ire over the legislation, and journalists in both state level and national newspapers attributed McCrory's loss to the bathroom bill. In a race decided by almost 10,000 votes, House Bill 2 obviously could have flipped the election in Cooper's favor. Longtime Democratic aide and strategist Gary Pearce called it the single-most important factor in McCrory's defeat.⁴²⁴ All other interviewees, when asked about the law, and most of the time without being prompted, described it as a significant factor in the race.

However, the conventional wisdom argument that depicts House Bill 2 as the downfall of Pat McCrory fails to encapsulate the full picture. Some journalists and news outlets, including Rob Christensen of the *News and Observer*, as well as the *Charlotte Magazine*, correctly point out some of the other contributing factors in McCrory's defeat. For starters, the Interstate 77 toll issue presumably cost McCrory more votes than Cooper's margin of victory in North Mecklenburg alone. The interviews conducted for this thesis also point out numerous other flaws in McCrory's strategy from day one. These shortcomings, both personal and political, deserve mention in any discussion surrounding the election's outcome. Ultimately, a deeper dive into the

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

race reveals that Pat McCrory faced a litany of problems beyond House Bill 2. Given the 10,000-vote margin, it would be the combination of all these that led the incumbent toward defeat.

The Conventional Wisdom Argument: House Bill 2 Nailed McCrory's Coffin Shut

The Charlotte Observer and *The News and Observer* editorial boards summed up McCrory's loss before the official results were even certified. *The Charlotte Observer* characterized the "stench of HB2" as the straw that broke the camel's back. Though the opinion piece points out several other McCrory missteps, including the Voter ID debacle and his handling of the coal ash spill, the interview research described in the next section raises important questions about the actual significance of the other problems the *Observer* cites. The editors correctly identify that the North Carolina electorate perceived "that McCrory was out of his league," but they are wrong in identifying his "[steadfast defense of] the discriminatory and unpopular legislation" as the "[culmination]" of the governor's problems.⁴²⁵

While *The Charlotte Observer* noted other factors, *The News and Observer's* board jumped straight to House Bill 2 as the key to Cooper's victory. The paper cited the bathroom bill as the "quick answer" to McCrory's loss, referring to the legislation as "infamous." Moreover, the piece harped in detail on the results of the law:

Reaction was swift, and devastating: the loss of millions of dollars in concerts, convention and conference business, withdrawal of companies who were planning expansions, loss of the NBA All-Star Game and other NCAA and ACC sports events.

The editorial even went beyond the economic impacts to make it clear it believed that Roy Cooper had succeeded in painting House Bill 2 as a "disaster" for North Carolina.⁴²⁶ Ultimately, many other news organizations piled on the House Bill 2 bandwagon. In these assertions, North

⁴²⁵ *The Charlotte Observer*. "McCrory was in over his head, and voters knew it."

⁴²⁶ *The News and Observer*. "McCrory missed the Republican tide."

Carolina's two major news sources were joined by the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, *Slate*, and many other media outlets.

What's more, as noted earlier, other longtime North Carolina politicians too placed extra emphasis on the role of House Bill 2 in the governor's defeat. Gary Pearce, an aide and strategist to the titan Jim Hunt, a contributor to North Carolina's *Talking About Politics* blog, and one of the most respected political thinkers in the state, portrayed the bathroom bill as the biggest factor in the race and took the position that the law ultimately cost McCrory reelection.⁴²⁷ While it is impossible to identify exactly how many votes swung on the issue, or any of the other issues in the campaign, I wager that the real "biggest factor" in the race was the root underlying cause of not only House Bill 2 but also the other missteps quoted in the *Observer* editorial and throughout my interviews.

A Complete Picture: How the Interviews Alter the Conventional Narrative

Interviews with veteran operatives and politicians in the state of North Carolina suggested that McCrory's troubles have a deeper cause. *News and Observer* political journalist Rob Christensen perhaps best explained what had really happened to McCrory. Christensen has covered North Carolina politics for the *N&O* for over forty years. He noted that the governor had sailed into office on the heels of incumbent Democrat Beverly Perdue's decision to retire during the 2012 election cycle. He also claimed that McCrory was the perfect candidate for governor in North Carolina due to his center right image in the state, popularity in the Charlotte area, political personality, and young age relative to other North Carolina politicians. At the same time, however, Christensen believes that McCrory lacked two key knowledge bases going into

⁴²⁷ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

his inauguration. First, Mayor Pat had no executive background. As mayor of Charlotte, he worked in a “weak” mayor scheme where the city manager executed the actions of city government while the mayor and the city council merely provided policy direction. And as a longtime employee at Duke Energy, McCrory worked mostly in a public relations capacity—he did not run a large department. Second, McCrory did not know how state government operated. Instead of learning, Christensen pegged the governor as an individual that “did not know what he did not know” and would not listen to advice on how to improve.⁴²⁸

When combined with his lack of executive experience, McCrory’s inability to understand state government quickly became the root cause for nearly every problem during his administration. When McCrory came into office, the legislature, under the control of Rockingham’s Phil Berger, was already running the state. Thus, these conservative Republicans felt as if they did not need McCrory to get their policy proposals into law. Moreover, the legislative leaders had “no respect for McCrory.”⁴²⁹ This lack of respect stemmed from the ideological divide between the conservative legislature and the moderate McCrory. For instance, while the mayor of Charlotte, McCrory had supported a mass transit program—a relatively non-liberal position in the area supported by most businesses. Yet the legislature saw this stance as a very liberal issue and did not support McCrory’s position at all. Ultimately, McCrory never bridged this gap—one that all governors are expected to navigate with the same precision delineated by role models like Jim Hunt. According to Christensen, such navigation requires political smarts, but “McCrory was not up to that task.” It also did not help the governor’s cause that when it came to policy issues, McCrory stuck largely to talking points while the legislature

⁴²⁸ Rob Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

knew the technical details backwards and forwards. And on issues like abortion, McCrory had even campaigned one way and attempted to legislate another way.⁴³⁰

When asked why he thought this to be the case, Mr. Christensen commented further on his perception of the governor. Christensen claimed that McCrory was not very smart, did not work hard, was not disciplined, was too “ego-oriented,” “lacked basic skillsets” for leadership, could not work well with others, and never thanked anyone for their efforts on his behalf. The latter character trait was particularly salient among fundraisers, who were not even getting their phone calls returned. By not “keeping the team happy,” McCrory led fundraisers to “[sour] on him” when he failed to keep his network alive. Christensen also stated that he believes McCrory lacked “command presence” and “gravitas,” two important traits for any leader to possess. All in all, Christensen boiled these issues down to a “lack of political savvy” identified by even early McCrory supporters. By 2016, the governor’s popularity in Charlotte had worn off, leading *The Charlotte Observer* to endorse Cooper over its hometown politician because of McCrory’s “political bait and switch.” Yet despite McCrory’s numerous flaws, Donald Trump nearly carried him into office, and was the only reason the governor got as close as he did to reelection.⁴³¹

Dr. Donald Schroeder, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Campbell University, also identified similar problems to those discussed by Christensen. Dr. Schroeder, who taught and researched primarily in the field of political philosophy, has long been fascinated by campaigns and elections and advised Campbell’s College Republicans chapter for years. At its core, Schroeder believes that McCrory suffered from “an inability to sell himself” and “an inability to project himself positively.” This created many problems for McCrory with his own legislature. When it came to dealing with legislators, McCrory did not know how to properly

⁴³⁰ Rob Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

network. Schroeder also claimed that McCrory's executive skills had become disconnected in his transition from mayor to governor, which did not help this problem. This networking issue manifested itself when McCrory tried to take the reins of government despite having failed to form meaningful relationships with the conservative legislature. As a result, the legislators were not motivated to reelect McCrory, a stance compounded by the fact that Republicans controlled enough seats to override the governor's vetoes anyway. And when elections are as close as the McCrory-Cooper bout, a little enthusiasm can go a long way. Such enthusiasm had propelled Trump into office, but even in the Trump realm, "McCrory was not seen as a huge Trump enthusiast."⁴³²

Bits and pieces from other interviews also picked up on similar themes. Gary Pearce noted that McCrory had come across as weak to voters because it was the legislature that was really running the government in North Carolina. He noted two important results of this image. First, McCrory had lost his moderate appeal because of the conservative policies going through the system. Second, because of the legislature's dominance, McCrory never had a high approval rating—it was like voters were searching for an alternative the entire time.⁴³³ Republican political consultant and contributor to the *Talking About Politics* blog, Carter Wrenn, noted that McCrory had failed to control the media's commentary on his administration. Accordingly, voters had gotten to know the governor based on these accounts, not McCrory's own narrative.⁴³⁴ Schroeder even went so far as to identify two examples of McCrory's lack of savvy. First, McCrory had hired numerous staffers from outside the state despite the immense amount of loyal, homegrown talent available to the governor from North Carolina. Second, McCrory had

⁴³² Don Schroeder. Interview with Don Schroeder.

⁴³³ Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

⁴³⁴ Carter Wrenn. Interview with Carter Wrenn.

failed to effectively rely on technology during his reelection campaign, an important oversight considering the increased role of technology in every ensuing election cycle.⁴³⁵

Meanwhile, Roy Cooper had managed to dot his I's and cross his T's throughout the race. Wrenn, who came up in North Carolina politics as the mastermind behind some of Jesse Helms' most famous (or infamous) television advertisements, commented that Cooper benefited from good television advertising.⁴³⁶ Despite Cooper's lack of dynamo, Christensen claimed that Cooper served as the perfect foil to McCrory, as the Attorney General had worked his way up in state government and knew how it operated. This made him an acceptable alternative to McCrory, belied by Cooper's popularity in the Eastern half of the state and the fact that voters generally like Attorney Generals because they are tough on crime. At the end of the day, Cooper fit the mold of governor that North Carolina voters had always elected—from Jim Hunt to Jim Martin.⁴³⁷ Schroeder also hypothesized that Cooper succeeded because he was better connected to his own party and succeeded at projecting himself more positively than McCrory.⁴³⁸ He was joined in this hypothesis by Republican consultant Paul Shumaker, who stated that Cooper was able to oppose Republicans without getting moved to the left by his party. As a result, he remained a center right politician in a left of center party. For instance, Cooper was helped here by the lack of a real, liberal primary challenger, which might have been due in part to the strength of his network within the Democratic Party.⁴³⁹

Ultimately, McCrory's lack of executive experience, inability to understand state government, and character flaws brought him down to Earth in the policy arena. Because of

⁴³⁵ Schroeder.

⁴³⁶ Carter Wrenn. Interview with Carter Wrenn.

⁴³⁷ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴³⁸ Schroeder.

⁴³⁹ Paul Shumaker. Interview with Paul Shumaker.

these factors, he faced tremendous messaging problems during the 2016 election cycle. The brunt of these issues concerned the North Carolina economy while others touched on more specific and less overarching policies and missteps. Taken together, three economic problems—House Bill 2, the Interstate 77 toll road, and the loss of film industry tax credits in New Hanover County—hurt the governor enough to land Cooper in office. The interviews indicate that the outcome of the race hinged on McCrory’s handling of these three issues, as each’s presence in the campaign narrative downplayed and contradicted the governor’s central campaign message of a “Carolina Comeback.” Still, the other pressure points in the campaign deserve analysis, for each certainly could have contributed a significant number of flipped votes to the razor thin margin. Such points discussed by interviewees include the role of the voter identification law, the state crime lab, the debates, Hurricane Matthew, coal ash, Moral Mondays, and the traditional issue of education.

Both Rob Christensen and Dr. Donald Schroeder estimate that House Bill 2 hurt McCrory because of the image the law gave the governor, not because of any policies contained within it. Christensen called signing the bill a huge political mistake, characterizing it as “one of the largest political blunders [he had] ever seen.” In this sense, McCrory became the symbol for the law.⁴⁴⁰ Dee Stewart claimed the law’s effect was felt primarily in two areas: Mecklenburg and Wake Counties. Given the bathroom bill’s proximity to Charlotte, it damaged McCrory in his own hometown.⁴⁴¹ Yet Paul Shumaker believes that the issue was even more damaging to McCrory in Wake County than in Mecklenburg. In all the polling Shumaker conducted on behalf of his clients in the lead up to election day, Wake County was the only place House Bill 2 ever registered as influencing the outcome of a race. Interestingly, Shumaker noted that every

⁴⁴⁰ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen; Schroeder.

⁴⁴¹ Dee Stewart.

candidate that took the issue off the table in the area won reelection and outpolled McCrory, including Sen. Tamara Barringer from Wake County.⁴⁴² Christensen too asserted that a full repeal would have ultimately helped the governor.⁴⁴³

Interviewees gave mixed reviews when questioned about why the bill wounded the governor to the extent it did. Shumaker described the bathroom bill as McCrory's ideological flaw, commenting on how it moved McCrory further and further to the right on his two-hundred-point-scale and away from the unaffiliated voter sweet spot.⁴⁴⁴ Dr. Tom Eamon, Professor of Political Science at East Carolina University and author on North Carolina politics, added that voters tended to associate McCrory with the legislation because the governor came across as “wishy-washy” when it came to explaining and defending the law in the media. Eamon too noted that signing the law hurt McCrory because of the image it gave him—one that clearly denoted a lack of strong leadership as the state reeled from the bill's economic fallout.⁴⁴⁵ Somewhat differently, Schroeder took an alternative approach in explaining House Bill 2's effects. He blamed the result on both McCrory for letting the legislation override his positives and the media for over-emphasizing the issue in the press.⁴⁴⁶ At the end of the day, McCrory campaign finance consultant in 2012 and Super PAC director in 2016, Jonathan Brooks, perhaps best portrayed the true effect of the law on McCrory's campaign, claiming, “House Bill 2 did not beat McCrory, but had it not been there, he would have won.”⁴⁴⁷

While House Bill 2 hit McCrory hard in Wake County, the Interstate 77 toll road issue hurt the governor equally in his hometown of Charlotte. Nearly all interviewees, except for Dr.

⁴⁴² Shumaker.

⁴⁴³ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴⁴⁴ Shumaker.

⁴⁴⁵ Tom Eamon. Interview with Tom Eamon.

⁴⁴⁶ Schroeder.

⁴⁴⁷ Jonathan Brooks.

Eamon, took the stance that the toll road cost McCrory dearly in Mecklenburg County. Dee Stewart commented that the road tipped Mecklenburg, which had swung toward McCrory by 3,000 votes in 2012, more toward Cooper.⁴⁴⁸ Christensen too noted that it had an effect in the County.⁴⁴⁹ But it was again Shumaker that provided the overwhelming weight of evidence in detailing why exactly the issue was McCrory’s central economic flaw during the 2016 election season. Shumaker began his assertion by noting how the heart of the I-77 issue cut through the strength of the Republican vote in North Mecklenburg County. He described how it affected his clients in the area tremendously, one of which elected not to seek reelection despite winning a contentious primary during which the toll road became the central focus of the campaign. Next, Shumaker wagered that McCrory did not recognize the political fallout from the issue. When the governor’s ConnectNC transportation bond passed in March of 2016, the package included significant funding for many infrastructure projects in North Carolina but did not touch the toll road issue. This greatly angered the Republican base in the area.

But what was the true effect of the toll road issue in the Charlotte region? In all of the conventional analysis depicted by the press, one news outlet flew under the radar in differing from the norm. At the end of 2016, *Charlotte Magazine* came out with a piece entitled “The Real Reason Why McCrory Lost.” In the article, its author, Greg Lacour, showed based on election results that roughly 12,069 voters in North Mecklenburg switched their allegiance from McCrory in 2012 to Cooper in 2016—barely enough vote flips to account for the entire McCrory-Cooper margin. According to Lacour, in 2012, the governor won all thirteen North Mecklenburg precincts on his way to routing Walter Dalton. In 2016, Cooper carried five of these precincts, flipping 7,950 votes in the process. Though McCrory carried the other eight polling locations, he

⁴⁴⁸ Dee Stewart.

⁴⁴⁹ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

lost an additional 4,119 votes to Cooper in the process. Thus, the toll road issue *could have* carried enough votes in 2016 to turn the tide of the election toward Cooper—it remains impossible to tell if those votes swung on that one issue alone.⁴⁵⁰ And just like in Wake County with House Bill 2, McCrory remained on the wrong side of the issue. Shumaker ended his description of the issue’s effects by noting that one of his clients, Davidson Senator Jeff Tarte, had gotten on the right side of the issue, outpolling McCrory in his district by more than Cooper’s margin of victory in the process.⁴⁵¹

But while House Bill 2 and the Interstate 77 toll road consumed the narrative in depicting the Wake County and Mecklenburg County results, a third economic issue quietly damaged McCrory in New Hanover County, home to North Carolina’s coastal metropolis: Wilmington. Gary Pearce was the first interviewee to mention the demise of the New Hanover film industry tax credits as a critical factor in the election.⁴⁵² Rob Christensen too noted that the loss of the tax credits hurt McCrory in the area.⁴⁵³ Yet again, it was Paul Shumaker that brought to light the true effects of the issue on the race. He noted that in battleground North Carolina, New Hanover County has become a must-win county for Republicans seeking statewide offices. Though he stated outright that the role of the tax credits had not provided enough votes to flip the whole margin like the toll road had, he did assert that a significant number of votes in the McCrory-Cooper margin had hinged on the issue. The proof? In 2016, New Hanover was the only county Cooper carried that his fellow Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Deborah Ross did not win.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁰ Greg Lacour. “The Real Reason Why McCrory Lost.”

⁴⁵¹ Shumaker.

⁴⁵² Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

⁴⁵³ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴⁵⁴ Shumaker.

Ultimately, the presence of these three economic issues in the race undermined McCrory's central message of a "Carolina Comeback." While the economic recovery was going well in the state's booming city economies, rural voters were not feeling the same bump. According to Christensen, "[McCrory's] message did not register across large swaths of North Carolina." When Cooper targeted these voters with campaign advertising geared toward this notion, he prevented McCrory's "Comeback" from taking hold. At the same time, House Bill 2's economic fallout was working directly against McCrory's evidence of economic growth. Even Donald Trump campaigned on how bad things were throughout the national economy. Trump commanded more attention than McCrory, so McCrory's positive message also got lost in the sea of Trump's negativity. In this situation, Trump was the "believable" candidate—not McCrory.⁴⁵⁵ Shumaker took a slightly different approach in explaining why McCrory's "Comeback" did not register with voters. He again pointed to the key unaffiliated voting bloc in the state, which he claimed was less concerned about the economy during the 2016 election cycle because they are very mobilized—moving around makes such voters less beholden to one state's economy. Instead, the "Comeback" only helped McCrory with his base, while the unaffiliated, college-educated voters focused primarily on Obamacare as an issue in 2016. Shumaker called the key divergence here the "education gap."⁴⁵⁶

McCrory also suffered beyond his economic problems. However, the extent to which other issues played an important role in his defeat was met with mixed responses from the interviewees. Chief among these issues was the impact of the Voter Identification law. Dee Stewart and Gary Pearce asserted that the 4th Circuit's decision to strike down the law gave Cooper a boost, with Stewart claiming it came in the form of voters registering on election day,

⁴⁵⁵ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴⁵⁶ Shumaker.

which he believed were more-likely-than-not Democrats. Additionally, Stewart blamed what he perceived as an activist court system for helping Cooper win election.⁴⁵⁷ Dr. Schroeder too joined this group, noting that the Democrats effectively communicated its side of the issue to its base, which angered voters and therefore motivated African-Americans to turn out in greater numbers. Conversely, Christensen and Shumaker were convinced the opposite was true: that the law had no effect on the election. Shumaker described the law as “not relevant” to the outcome because at the end of the day, African-American voting intensity was down in 2016, meaning that the issue had not single-handedly motivated increased turnout.⁴⁵⁸ Christensen went so far as to say that if anything, the 4th Circuit’s decision may have benefited Republicans, as shortened voting hours went into effect upon the court’s reversal.⁴⁵⁹

The role of the coal ash issue also received mixed marks. Dr. Eamon and Christensen claimed that the controversy ultimately hurt the governor due to his past and present ties to Duke Energy, which they believed painted McCrory in a bad light on the issue.⁴⁶⁰ Frank Holleman, the Senior Attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center responsible for the Center’s coal ash litigation efforts against the state, described McCrory’s problems with the issue as “a self-inflicted wound.” Yet Mr. Holleman noted that the reality on the issue was that it began long before the McCrory Administration stepped foot into office. Still,

The way that the governor and his appointees reacted to coal ash pollution ultimately became an issue in the election...one mistake after the other...one improper action after the other by the governor and his staff and the Department of Environmental Quality created problems for McCrory...if they had simply enforced the law, then this would not have been a negative issue for the McCrory Administration.

⁴⁵⁷ Dee Stewart; Gary Pearce. Interview with Gary Pearce.

⁴⁵⁸ Shumaker.

⁴⁵⁹ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴⁶⁰ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen; Eamon.

Holleman, given the Southern Environmental Law Center's status as an apolitical organization, stopped short, however, of commenting on whether the problems McCrory incurred from the issue mattered in the race.⁴⁶¹ Shumaker did comment, and his resolute response towed the line closest to coal ash's real impact. According to the data-driven consultant, coal ash registered as a liberal issue in the first place. Thus, it did not matter to the unaffiliated voting group enough to mobilize these voters in Cooper's direction.⁴⁶²

Beyond the Voter Identification law and the coal ash debacle, the interviewees deemed four issues as non-factors in the race: the state crime lab, the debates, the Moral Monday movement, and education policy. When it came to the state crime lab, Christensen noted that the rape kit commercials added an emotional element to the race, but that the crime lab's presence as a hot-button topic was merely smart for McCrory and not helpful for Cooper—it had no significant impact.⁴⁶³ Christensen and other interviewees also downplayed the role of the debates in changing voters' minds, noting that state-level debates attract small, and often partisan, audiences. And in one instance, a gubernatorial debate occurred when most of Eastern North Carolina remained without power due to Hurricane Matthew.⁴⁶⁴ On the results of the Moral Monday movement in motivating and generated Democratic turnout, Christensen agreed that the movement engaged voters, but he stopped short in claiming that it helped Cooper beyond just the margins, especially considering the cause had fizzled out before the election cycle really started to roll.⁴⁶⁵ Finally, the interviewees' responses to the role of education were surprising given the issue's traditional dominance of the North Carolina political landscape. Christensen wrote

⁴⁶¹ Frank Holleman. Interview with Frank Holleman.

⁴⁶² Shumaker.

⁴⁶³ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

education off as a non-factor, believing it did not motivate many voters toward Cooper and away from McCrory.⁴⁶⁶ On the flip side, Schroeder asserted the issue was a factor, but only for state legislators, not for McCrory's campaign. Instead, he commented that he felt McCrory could have exploited the issue more to his advantage, which might have resulted in a positive boost to the governor's reelection strategy.⁴⁶⁷

Taken together, these numerous issues spelled trouble for McCrory in the fundraising arena. According to Brooks, the governor faced difficulty keeping up with Cooper's fundraising after House Bill 2 went through the legislature. Evidenced by the strength of the Bernie Sanders' Presidential campaign's ability to rake in millions in small dollar—\$20 to \$30—donations, this strategy worked in Cooper's favor as well after national scrutiny rained down on McCrory and the legislature. Because of the unpopular legislation, Brooks believes that Cooper found himself overnight the recipient of hundreds and thousands of dollars from both in-state and out-of-state donors due to the prowess of the Democratic “painfully effective” digital fundraising apparatus, ActBlue. Meanwhile, McCrory, without such an organization in place, was left stonewalled by the cash influx, and despite posting solid fundraising numbers at every remaining quarter, was never able to recover from his financial deficit.⁴⁶⁸

In the commentary offered by the interviewees on the race, only one issue registered as a positive for McCrory: the governor's handling of Hurricane Matthew. In a cynical sense, Christensen noted that bad hurricanes are good for governors because such natural disasters provide a mechanism for incumbents to showcase leadership abilities. When Hurricane Matthew wreaked havoc on Eastern North Carolina, McCrory did just that.⁴⁶⁹ Schroeder characterized the

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Schroeder.

⁴⁶⁸ Jonathan Brooks.

⁴⁶⁹ Christensen. Interview with Rob Christensen.

governor's handling of the storm as "outstanding," but continued in saying that he believed McCrory could have done more to make the hurricane an even bigger positive for his campaign.⁴⁷⁰ In measuring the hurricane's actual effect on the outcome, polling in the lead up to election day showed that McCrory had closed the gap significantly in the month after Matthew's landfall.⁴⁷¹ And without official data to back up his assertion, Eamon suggested McCrory's handling of the storm response gave him a 3% bump statewide⁴⁷²—a large boost, just not enough to save his "doomed" campaign.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷⁰ Schroeder.

⁴⁷¹ RealClearPolitics. "North Carolina Governor – McCrory vs. Cooper."

⁴⁷² Eamon.

⁴⁷³ Dee Stewart.

VI. Conclusions

By digging deeper into the events surrounding the 2016 governor's race in North Carolina, it becomes apparent that Pat McCrory's loss goes well beyond the conventional narrative that House Bill 2 cost the governor his office. Importantly, this analysis shows that a plethora of factors, from personality to policy stances, led to McCrory's demise. Yet personality and policy are mixed in ways that make it almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. In McCrory's case, personality informed policy stances, and policy stances informed personality—it was like the two fed into one another. During this race, the conventional narrative focused too much on the policy aspects of McCrory's defeat. It skipped over the more nuanced story that explains McCrory's shortcomings through anecdotes on the governor's personality. However, a politician's success derives equally from both—Jim Hunt's achievements as governor drew as much from his likeability as a person as it did his policy initiatives. By skipping these personality points, the media missed half of the big picture. And without delving thoroughly into the toll road issue (among other issues), the media undoubtedly ended up missing even more than that.

Still, there is more work left to be done; more stones left unturned. Future work on this topic may include further commentary from Democratic operatives. It might also incorporate available data and model such data to draw numerical conclusions. If the 2016 outcome is to be considered in the context of the 2020 governor's election, then the Supreme Court's decision on North Carolina redistricting policy will also play a central role in informing strategy. A follow up paper should also discuss these issues as they stand today: what is the status of House Bill 2 in North Carolina? What became of the Interstate 77 toll road issue? What ended up happening to the voter identification law? Film tax credits in New Hanover County? Did the coal ash mess

finally get cleaned up? To fully complete work on this election topic, these questions, among others, must be answered.

Finally, this thesis serves as a reminder that fellow college students should not be shy about contacting active political operatives as part of any research project. At the end of the day, these individuals were surprisingly open to an honest conversation about the real issues with a curious student. And as demonstrated by this thesis, such individuals can offer commentary on a subject other sources cannot, thus providing for a more complete account.

Appendix 1: Complete Interview Transcriptions

This appendix contains the compilation of my notes from each interview. It is organized by interviewee, with other information given on the interviewee's current title, the interview's date, and whether the interview was conducted in-person or over-the-phone. Please note that none of these conversations have been recorded—these “transcriptions,” if you will, represent my notes from each interview, with actual quotations from interviewees denoted by quotation marks. All interviewees were given the opportunity to approve their transcript.

Mr. Dee Stewart – Political Consultant, The Stewart Group

Interview conducted December 1st, 2016 over the phone

Opening Thoughts

2016 was a solid year for Republicans in North Carolina, with Richard Burr winning reelection to the United States Senate and Donald Trump carrying the state on his way to the White House. The Republican majorities in the legislature stayed the same as well.

McCrory would have won reelection if not for House Bill 2 and the toll road issue. These hurt him in the critical Charlotte area. The throw out of the voter identification law and the ensuing legalization of same-day registration also played a large role in his defeat. The voters registering on election day were most likely voting for Democrats. The takeaway here is that federal courts are out of control. We have activist courts helping elections. In the future, redistricting decisions will be very important. This time around, however, court decisions cost McCrory his governorship.

Overall, the policy formula has been successful for Republicans in the state legislature – raising teach pay and tax reform for businesses. The toll road issue tipped the critical suburban area of Charlotte more toward Democrats than normal. House Bill 2 also tipped Wake County more toward Cooper. Wake is another critical suburban area.

What are your thoughts on the Trump victory?

I always thought Trump would win North Carolina. The Republican base turned out to be more motivated by him than Hillary's Democratic base. This Trump electorate was not just Republicans; it also included some independents and Democrats, although it is impossible to quantify how many.

What are your thoughts on Burr's Senate reelection?

As for the Senate, Burr will retire in six years, setting up another Republican to take the reins. Deborah Ross was a bad candidate with a poor record. Paul Shumaker's strategy for Burr was to make Ross look like this bad candidate, and it worked. Television advertisements against Ross were the most effective. Direct mailings and digital ads were also great.

Do you have additional thoughts on McCrory's loss?

McCrory's strategy got the governor as close as it could have, but he was doomed. No one helped Trump at all—he had a poor ground operation. All of his press came for free through the mass media.

What was the key to Jesse Helms' success?

Jesse Helms won his elections using television advertisements. He also raised a lot of money through direct mail. But today, the state is not really the same as it was during the Helms and Hunt years. I would recommend reading the *Helms vs. Hunt* book on the 1984 Senate race, as well as *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms*.

How has the state's swing vote shifted over time?

The swing vote used to be the Eastern portion of the state. Now it is suburban white women in the Interstate 85 corridor. This includes unaffiliated, soft D, soft R women in those fourteen counties. Eastern North Carolina no longer has the population numbers to make it the critical swing vote. Counties to look at include Johnston, Wake, Orange, Durham, Alamance, Rowan, and Gaston.

Still, we could easily see results like those in 2008 again – enthusiasm for Obama and Kay Hagan winning on his coattails. The same thing happened for 2016 Republicans on Donald Trump's coattails.

Why have Democrats maintained a historical hold on the governorship?

For around twenty years, the Democrats controlled the North Carolina governorship. They had better candidates and ran better campaigns. For Cooper to be successful, he will have to use the bully pulpit with the same level of skill that Jim Hunt did. Democrats will need to raise large sums of money through Cooper to be successful in 2020. They can use this money as a springboard for redistricting lawsuits and candidate recruitment.

Who are the rising stars in North Carolina politics?

As for Republicans, Dan Forest will be the next Republican running for Governor in 2020. Richard Hudson could run for Governor in 2020 or Senate in 2022. Democrats do not have very many rising stars—there is not a deep bench.

What will be the key to future success in coming elections?

Advertising will continue to be huge in North Carolina. There will be more money in each new election cycle than in the previous one. There will probably also be a recession in the next four years, which will be difficult for Republicans to overcome. Hopefully the recession will hold off until after Trump's first term.

Do you foresee any changes to the Presidential nominating process?

There will be no rule changes to the nominating process. Trump will control the party machinery.

What is the future of North Carolina as a battleground state?

North Carolina will continue to be a battleground where enthusiasm for candidates will be the key. It remains to be seen if a Presidential candidate can win the general election without taking North Carolina.

Mr. Darryl Nirenberg – Former Aide to Jesse Helms; Chief of Staff 1991 to 1995

Interview conducted December 2nd, 2016 over the phone

What was your relationship with Senator Helms?

I joined the staff of the Senate Agriculture Committee in 1983. Helms was Chairman until 1987. I then joined the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as General Counsel and worked under Helms. I ended up as his Chief of Staff in the personal office from 1991 to 1995. This was when I really worked with North Carolina.

What were the keys to Helms' electoral success?

The Congressional Club, with Tom Ellis as his political strategist. Helms and Ellis won the primary for Reagan in 1976, which was a huge event in Reagan's political life. It gave him credibility and led to his nomination four years later.

For Helms, direct mail fundraising was key. It effectively communicated his message to his base, as well as voters who weren't getting news from national sources. It educated prospective voters.

The Reagan recession would hurt Helms in 1984. The tobacco economy was also not doing too well. Still, Helms had a big job on the Hill as Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

Helms also pioneered the use of the tracker. His campaign employed operatives to follow Hunt around and discover the governor's inconsistencies. Hunt was running as an education governor, and we could undermine this position. While Reagan was running against a weak candidate in Mondale, we were running against a very popular governor. Hunt had a fundraising advantage, and given his job, he was always in the state.

There were a few campaign changes between 1990 and 1996. Mandy Grunewald was Harvey Gantt's campaign manager in 1990. Helms' campaign did a couple things that year. First, he pioneered the war room to draft an immediate response to whatever Gantt was saying about him. Second, his team launched the white hands ad. The media was obsessed with this advertisement. It was a diversionary tactic, as the core ad being run hit Gantt on becoming a millionaire by leveraging his political position for an FCC license. This is what voters were really seeing.

By 1996 Helms' operation had changed somewhat. I think it set him up better. Money was now coming from elsewhere, but direct mail was still a huge portion of his money.

How did Elizabeth Dole win in 2002?

Dole had three advantages in 2002. First, she had a political persona with instant press recognition and a knack for fundraising. Second, she had Helms' record. Their relationship went back years—he introduced Bob Dole to her family. Third, her opponent, Erskine Bowles, did not have political skills. He was not the best candidate.

What is Helms' impact today?

Well, the candidates in the state are still fighting over the independent vote. Political innovations from these campaigns also still hold today. North Carolina is a difficult state in which to run. There are at least four media markets. The other Senate seat also keeps flipping. These Senators were never really known for anything; they needed to have a big personality.

Why did Burr win reelection in 2016?

Richard Burr is a very skilled politician. He is very grounded—he stays low key and has a common man feel. Burr needed to turn out Helms' base, the Jessecrats, which are conservative, white Democrats that vote Republican in national elections. He attracted swing voters through his policies in D.C. Honestly, he did better with swing voters than Trump did. Burr also had educated white females voting for him while Trump carried him with the conservatives. I think his comment toward the end of the campaign about putting a bullseye on Hillary Clinton's back played right toward Trump's base and helped him.

Interview conducted December 5th, 2016 over the phone

What made Jim Hunt so successful as a Governor?

Hunt had a strong vision for the state. He focused on creating jobs, improving education, and making new opportunities available to people. His political skill came naturally. He was a great talker that inspired people. He was also an exacting leader that made people want to do better.

As governor, he fundamentally changed state government by getting the governor veto power and the ability to run for reelection. Governors have the power to set the state's agenda.

How did Hunt impact the Democratic governors of the 21st century?

Hunt set the mold for Democratic governors of the 21st century. His four terms were instrumental in North Carolina's history. Because of Hunt's efforts, the state's economy was better prepared for the new century. Easley stayed Hunt's course on education. Perdue also stayed on the same track. Even McCrory, a Republican, did through his efforts on teacher pay.

Since Hunt left office, conservative Democrats have shifted away from the party. After the rise of Howard Dean, Easley shifted away from his progressive side. McCrory also shifted away from his conservative side. You should check out my blog post from December 5th on Roy Cooper.

Why did McCrory lose the 2016 governor's race?

House Bill 2 was the biggest factor in this race. It ultimately cost him the election. McCrory came across as weak because really the legislature was running things. He lost his moderate image because of the policies the Republicans shoved through the system. McCrory also never had a high approval rating. Voters were looking for an alternative all along. The demise of the film industry in Wilmington and New Hanover also played a role. McCrory lost Mecklenburg by over 130,000 votes this time. Urban county independent women in the Interstate 85 corridor were the swing voters. We will need to identify the Trump-Cooper voters and the Johnson-Cooper voters. Who were these people?

Why did Trump carry North Carolina?

Battleground polling was wrong this time around. National polling was right. Trump voters were more motivated than Clinton voters, which is like what happened with Obama in 2008. Also, the voter identification law gave Cooper the victory. With 10,000 votes being the margin, though, there were probably many other factors.

How did Richard Burr secure reelection?

Trump's coattails handed Burr his victory. All politics is national. It takes something exceptional to break this string. Cooper and Josh Stein will have this challenge as they assume their new offices. This was also not the race people cared about. The story was Trump, and to a lesser extent, House Bill 2 in the governor's race.

What are the next steps for Democrats?

Teacher pay increases will continue to be an important policy stance. Cooper must effectively use the power of the bully pulpit to set the agenda and dominate the policy debate. He now has this advantage over the legislature. Josh Stein will be in the same boat. Ross might run again. Grier Martin could also be a candidate in the future.

What are the next steps for Republicans?

Dan Forest is the next big Republican candidate that we will see. They are in for four years of tough battling with two different visions between the legislature and Cooper. North Carolina will continue to be a battleground state for at least the next eight to ten years.

Mr. Carter Wrenn – Strategist for Jesse Helms; Contributor to Talking About Politics blog

Interview conducted December 5th, 2016 over the phone

What were the keys to Senator Helms' success?

Helms was an outsider. He was also partly a demagogue. The Senate is a soapbox, and Jesse used it to talk about the issues he cared about. Helms was ahead of the curve when it came to television and direct mail. He came in during the 1970s with Reagan, and initially, the major issue was communism.

Republicans did not have much influence in NC until 1972. Democrats remained dominant and were composed of conservative Democrats and progressive Democrats. Helms brought these conservative Democrats into the Republican party. They were called the Jessecrats.

In 1978, his strategy shifted to reaching people by media. He raised \$7 million in 1977-78. Helms was always ideological. His races were usually conservative versus liberal. Except in 1983, when we spent between \$4 and \$5 million against Hunt and it did not help at all in the polls. Then we came up with the "Where do you stand, Jim?" advertising campaign and Helms went up ten points in three weeks. The character criticism of Hunt as a flip-flopper worked. 1990 was also a conservative versus liberal ideological campaign, with Gantt as a liberal.

How did Trump carry the state?

Trump is a post-ideological candidate. A lot of working class voters who did not support Romney supported Trump. The *News and Observer* noted seven counties that went for Obama but not Trump. The white collar voters were different – some who supported Romney did not help Trump. Some of those voters went to Clinton, but a lot went to third party candidates. There was also a lack of African American turnout. Exit polls show it dropped from 23% in 2012 to 19% in 2016. African American turnout was down nationally, but it was down more in North Carolina due to a lack of enthusiasm for Democratic candidates.

Why did McCrory lose?

McCrory conceded earlier today. Cooper had good television advertising. While Pat was Governor, people got to see a log of him through media he could not control – like press conferences and newspaper stories. And that wasn't always favorable. Together, these aspects led voters to decide that Pat was not best for the job.

Why did Burr win reelection?

Deborah Ross was a liberal candidate. Trump's boost also helped Burr. When undecideds broke for Trump that helped Burr.

Who are the rising stars in the Republican party?

Dan Forest is the biggest rising star. Richard Hudson and Tim Moore also have strong fundraising. Phil Berger Sr. is also a rising star.

Who are the rising stars in the Democratic party?

Roy Cooper and Josh Stein have the bully pulpit. Grier Martin and Anthony Foxx could also be future candidates.

What was the swing vote in 2016?

Interstate 85 corridor female voters were the big swing vote in 2016. Democratic registration dropped while Republican registration plateaued. Independents are a rising swing vote.

Final Thoughts

Suburban and independent voter growth has made North Carolina a classic swing state. Almost any statewide race can be competitive. It can go either way. Electing a Democratic governor and a Republican President and Senate candidate in the same year, that's not a surprise. It could happen again.

Interview conducted December 18th, 2017 in person

Opening Thoughts:

Pat McCrory was the perfect candidate – a center right politician in a center right state. He had a great personality, he was from Charlotte, and he was younger relative to other North Carolina politicians. These characteristics were great assets. The only reason he lost in 2008 was because of the Obama Presidential tide. He won in 2012 because Governor Beverly Perdue (D) got out when she realized she could not win. The big questions that remains is, why did he lose in 2016?

Overall, many Republicans, including most of the Republican legislature leadership, believed that he was not a good governor. He did not know how state government worked, and he did not have an executive background. When he was mayor of Charlotte, he worked in a “weak” mayor scheme – the city manager was responsible for executing the actions of city government while the mayor and the city council were responsible for directing policy. Moreover, when he was with Duke Energy, he did not run a large department. He was more of a public relations guy than anything. Meanwhile, Roy Cooper had worked his way up in state government; he knew how it operated. McCrory’s biggest weakness was that “he didn’t know what he didn’t know,” and he did not listen. This led him to make many mistakes that could have been avoided, and when compared to the other two Republican governors of the state, Jim Holhouser and Jim Martin, McCrory was the “worst.” All in all, this boils down to two things:

1. He had no executive background
2. He did not know how state government operated

Generally, legislatures are invested in making governors from their own party look good. But the North Carolina legislature under the control of Phil Berger had “no respect for McCrory.” They were already running Raleigh; as such, McCrory did not really need to do much. He did not know the issues, and he stuck largely to talking points. Thus, he could not navigate a legislature that knew policies backwards and forwards. There were also ideological issues. All of the Republicans were conservative, “movement” Republicans safe in their individual gerrymandered districts. McCrory had run statewide and came in with a coalition of independents, conservative Democrats, and center right business Republicans. This somewhat mirrors the national rift between McConnell and Trump. Many of these conservative Republicans also believed that McCrory was not a true conservative. In Charlotte, he had supported mass transit, which was a relatively non-liberal position supported by most businesses. The legislature saw this as a very liberal issue and did not buy McCrory’s stance at all. Overall, governors are expected to navigate the different factions of the legislature. Jim Hunt was able to bridge this gap all the time as governor, but McCrory could not. This task requires political smarts, and “McCrory wasn’t up to that task.”

McCrory also lacked what the marines call “command presence.” He never had a “gravitas,” meaning when someone walks into a room, they would not be able to tell he was the governor, though obviously, they knew who was governor.

At the end of the day, all his problems added up. He was all over the map on many issues. Take abortion – he campaigned one way, legislated another, and then went back and forth. This upset everyone, as abortion is a tough issue. One stance cannot win everyone. Most of the time, candidates just take their abortion position and stick with it, knowing it will alienate some voters. McCrory did not do this. He also campaigned as a moderate, but he was pushed very far to the right by the legislature. House Bill 2 was a huge political mistake for McCrory. The legislature had previously seen the gay marriage ban pass overwhelmingly statewide. They had no idea they could lose on House Bill 2. It was not about transgendered people, but it was about the loss of NCAA games and other economic opportunities. In a sense, McCrory became the symbol of it. It was “one of the largest political blunders I’ve ever seen,” and it cost him the governorship. He also got hurt by the loss of Wilmington’s entertainment subsidies and the Charlotte toll road. All the while, Trump nearly carried him into office, and Trump’s performance in the state was the only reason McCrory got as close as he did. It’s almost a justice of sorts – he only lost in 2008 because of Obama’s coattails, and he only came close to winning in 2016 because of Trump’s. It’s amazing how he was not popular in a state where the Republicans also controlled the legislature. He was also the perfect candidate.

Why did McCrory never figure out the legislature?

Honestly, it’s hard to write this, but McCrory was not very smart. He also did not work really hard at it—he was not disciplined, just like he was never disciplined in Charlotte. He never drilled down on the issues. He was “ego-oriented,” “lacked basic skillsets” for leadership, could not work with other people, and never thanked his staff or the legislature for their efforts on his behalf.

Why did Roy Cooper win?

This was not a huge victory for Cooper, per say. At the end of the day, he was just an acceptable alternative. People like Attorney Generals because they are tough on crime. He also carried some of the Eastern North Carolina vote, which was helpful. He was not necessarily a dynamic candidate, but his positions helped him with moderates and independents.

Why did McCrory’s campaign of a “Carolina Comeback” not work with voters?

There are three points here. First, people were not feeling the comeback, which Cooper tried to hit on in his campaign messaging. The recovery was going well in cities, but not in rural areas. For broad swaths of voters, it just did not register. His “message did not resonate across large swaths of North Carolina.” Second, House Bill 2 worked against McCrory’s message because of the lost opportunities resulting from it. Third, Trump campaigned on how terrible things were. Voters paid more attention to him than they did McCrory—Trump’s message was “believable” to a lot of voters.

Why did Cooper win the fundraising battle?

McCrory was not a good politician. Fundraisers were not getting their calls returned. They never got thank you notes. He was not “keeping the team happy.” He did not keep his network alive, so many fundraisers “soured on him.” Ultimately, he demonstrated a “lack of political savvy.”

What role did the coal ash issue play?

It hurt him due to his deep ties to Duke Energy. I am not entirely sure his administration is entirely culpable for this issue, so he may have been unfairly criticized. That being said, he was particularly vulnerable because environmental policy had shifted to a pro-business stance, which highlighted his Duke ties.

What role did the voter identification law play?

It might have actually helped Republicans because shortened voting hours went into effect for this election cycle.

What role did Cooper’s handling of the state crime lab play?

It is hard to know the effect. But McCrory did need to raise a question of Cooper’s competence, and this issue did just that. It was smart for McCrory and certainly not helpful for Cooper. The rape kit portion also added an emotional element to the race. Still, it is hard to measure the effect.

What role did the debates play?

The debates had almost no impact. Very few people watch the debates other than partisans to begin with.

What role did Hurricane Matthew play?

In a cynical sense, bad hurricanes are good for governors. They give governors the opportunity to help people and appear like executives. It helped McCrory.

What effect would repealing House Bill 2 had on the race?

It would have certainly helped McCrory. It’s an extraordinary for an incumbent Republican to lose when Republicans are winning everywhere else. This showed that people had really “soured” on McCrory. I have an anecdotal story that fits here. One of my friends goes to a very conservative church near Winston-Salem. He’s a big Republican. He went around asking people what they thought about Trump and got raving reviews prior to the election. When he asked the same people about McCrory, they responded that they basically had already written him off.

Discuss McCrory’s different outcomes in Mecklenburg County across 2008, 2012, and 2016.

It’s becoming more and more difficult for Republicans to win the area. It’s more about mobilizing the large number of Republican voters in the area though. For instance, Thom Tillis is from Matthews, which is in the area. In 2012, “Mayor Pat” was popular in the area. By 2016,

that popularity had worn off. They thought they were electing “Mayor Pat,” but he got pushed to the right. In the end, he was a whole different animal than Mayor Pat. House Bill 2 really hurt him here, as did the toll road. Center right Republicans can do well in the Mecklenburg and Wake counties. The legislature was more Jesse Helms-esque.

What explains McCrory’s gradual loss of newspaper endorsements?

These large statewide papers tend to be more liberal. They initially saw him as a moderate in the Holhouser, Martin form, but they ultimately thought he pulled a “political bait and switch” on them—they did not like his conservative streak.

Which North Carolina politicians does Pat McCrory parallel?

The only one I can think of is Beverly Perdue. Though she understood state government, she was not particularly effective. She also had bad polling numbers, and she would have been defeated had she run for reelection. Some of this had to do with the fact she governed during the recession. She also did not come across as gubernatorial, and she too had a “gravitas” problem. She was also dominated by the Republican legislature, though she was of the other party.

What are the takeaways from a journalistic perspective?

McCrory ranks among the worst governors I have covered. The fact that the election was close is not startling. Few states in the country have elections this close. North Carolina is winnable for both parties. Gallup measures states ideologically, and North Carolina always falls in the middle. In the South, only Virginia and Florida are more liberal – Virginia because of the D.C. suburbs and Florida due to the influx of immigrants from other places.

Were you surprised by the outcome?

At the beginning of 2016, I had McCrory pegged for reelection despite his problems. But in the closing weeks, I thought Cooper would win, and was somewhat surprised McCrory almost pulled it out.

What should I keep in mind as I go about this project?

Roy Cooper is the governor North Carolina has always elected. He’s a moderate Democrat from the East. This, however, is the past model. Pat McCrory is the model going forward. He is urban and appeals to urban voters. It’s important to note that Cooper-esque candidates have traditionally won these governor races.

What was the role of Art Pope in all of this?

He was a former legislator, and he once lost the race for Lieutenant Governor. He has deep ties to the libertarian Koch network. Ultimately, he is a wonk, and he brought much-needed expertise to the McCrory administration as budget director. He did also push him to the right though. I don’t know what Art would say about McCrory personally, but I do believe he was disappointed

in his performance as governor. Also, adding a comparison between McCrory and Jim Martin. Martin was sharp and had good people around him. McCrory was not sharp, and he did not surround himself with good people for the most part.

What impact did Moral Mondays have in all of this?

The Moral Monday movement was aimed just as much at the legislature as it was McCrory. The legislature got the heat because they were the policy driver here. It mobilized a lot of voters protesting the conservative policy changes. It engaged more individuals in the political process and helped Cooper on the margins.

What role did education policy play?

Education was not a driving force in this campaign. McCrory had made enemies in education (teachers), but he also had support (charter schools). It was not a huge motivating factor.

Interview conducted December 18th, 2017 in person

Why did Pat McCrory lose?

First, he lost due to House Bill 2, although I do not know why this became an issue. It tainted the state, despite the fact it only excluded a very small yet vulnerable group of people. McCrory signed it even though he did not have much of anything to do with its passage. He thus became the symbol for it, and people did not like the law. He also did not have the luxury of running for reelection in a gerrymandered district.

Second, he was not liked or respected by legislative leadership. He did not know how to network. His executive skills became disconnected in his shift from mayor to governor. The legislature leaders wanted to be the leaders, and they were not about to let McCrory take the reins when he did not develop relationships with them. North Carolina has a weak governorship. Governors only recently received the ability to run for reelection and veto legislation. I know several legislators wonder why McCrory never asked more of them. McCrory also knew that if he vetoed anything, then he would get overridden. This happened a couple of times. Moreover, the legislature was not highly motivated to reelect McCrory. They liked Lieutenant Governor Dan Forest, and they were thus motivated to reelect him. When elections are this close, enthusiasm matters a lot. Trump had lots of enthusiasm behind him, but “McCrory was not seen as a huge Trump enthusiast.” Just look at my Facebook. One Facebook partisan I am friends with—a legislator’s wife actually, one of the first to come out for Trump—posted all the time about Trump. She never posted about McCrory.

Why did Roy Cooper win?

Roy Cooper was not a particularly good candidate, but he was better connected with his party.

What role did Hurricane Matthew play?

McCrory did an “outstanding job” of handling the hurricane. However, he did not know how to fully exploit this management to his advantage, so it ultimately hurt him.

What were the other issues of impact?

I would say it’s less about issues. People vote on the basis of a vague apprehension of the candidate’s quality. McCrory let House Bill 2 override all positives from issues like his management of Hurricane Matthew. House Bill 2 was an overreaction by Tim Moore and the legislature, which led to sports and entertainment cancellations. Overall, it’s amazing how trivial the actual issue itself is.

Education funding was an issue in this campaign. It affected other Republicans too due to an accusation that the legislature had slashed education funding when in fact they had increased it. McCrory was not able to manage this issue as effectively as other candidates. I remember a town

hall meeting where Rep. David Lewis got accosted by a teacher that complained the legislature had taken public funding and put it toward private schools. He could defend his stance well in this setting. As a statewide issue, McCrory did not get the chance to defend himself. He could have exploited this issue better.

I do not think the toll road and Wilmington entertainment subsidies really affected the outcome. There were certainly those that felt strongly about the coal ash issue, but they were already voting Democratic anyway.

What were McCrory's biggest problems?

McCrory suffered from “an inability to sell himself” and an “inability to project himself positively.” He also could not network with legislators. Despite the role of the issues, the biggest factor for voters is how they size up candidates as people.

What should I look for here as a student of North Carolina politics?

Voting behavior. I know the ANES has a voting behavior survey available online. Voters used to vote solely based on party identification, but this has shifted. Now, voting is much more based on short-term orientation, hence the constantly shifting. The only factor that has consistently popped up is candidate orientation – “a vague apprehension of what a candidate is like as a person.” Lewis and Bill Rabon are liked as people, which leads voters to see their actions, no matter how partisan, in a more positive light. McCrory was not impressive as a speaker, and his personality was not good enough to be a defining characteristic.

On the other hand, Cooper had a strong party backing, and the issues tended to go his way. He projected himself more positively to voters, and he had McCrory on the defensive all the time. The mass media also covered this race more than any statewide race for a state government office. There is a bias in this media, especially with all the major newspapers now being owned by McClatchy. This media overemphasized House Bill 2, the negative result of which McCrory got the brunt of.

North Carolina is a very red state if Republican candidates can avoid becoming tainted. 2012 was a very typical election for the state – Republicans were winning almost everywhere. Gerrymandering has also become an art form. Computer programs can predict election outcomes down to the precinct. Such technology was used to draw the North Carolina districts.

What was the role of the voter identification law?

The voter identification law motivated African-Americans to turn out in greater numbers. Democrats effectively communicated their messaging that requiring identification to vote suppressed the African-American vote, which angered them and turned out more to the polls.

What in this race would you look at from an academic perspective?

I would look at how media coverage of House Bill 2 affected perceptions of Pat McCrory.

What parallels do you see between McCrory and other recent governors?

Four years of Perdue was enough to hand the 2012 election to McCrory. Perdue was a terrible governor, and she was intensely disliked. She would even get booed when making appearances at college football games. McCrory did not have to be a good candidate to defeat her. Voters also had a bad taste of Democrats, especially the Jim Black and Mike Easley corruption scandals.

When it came to governing, McCrory had a lot of managerial ability, he just could not project his positives. I wonder why he did not work harder to affect media coverage and his relationships with legislators. He also hired staffers from outside the state, even though North Carolina has some of the best political people out there. This is especially true when it came to the voter identification law issue. I consulted with North Carolina law firm Ogletree Deakins on the issue. This firm is predominantly composed of North Carolina people. They got the state a victory in a federal district court in North Carolina, and they had a strong track record influencing the 4th Circuit. McCrory hired an outside firm, and the state ended up losing the case in the 4th Circuit.

What are the lessons to be learned from the race?

For one, rely more on homegrown talent. These talents developed out of the Helms years. Second, politics used to be an art, but now it is technology. Statewide candidates need to rely on this technology. McCrory did not. He tried to transcend it and was not good at it.

What politicians would you compare McCrory to?

George H.W. Bush. He was a nice guy, but had an inability to project his positives, and it resulted in a Bill Clinton presidency. Trump was a real positive for McCrory. He brought lots of people to the polls that voted Republican. Clinton was also a positive for McCrory. Democrat turn out was not that great in 2016. Had Hillary Clinton been able to mobilize the Democratic base, there might have been a different outcome. At the end of the day, McCrory could not win independents as effectively as a statewide Republican needed to win.

Mr. Frank Holleman – Senior Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center

Interview conducted on December 19th, 2017 over the phone

How did coal ash become an issue in North Carolina?

First, we are a non-profit, so we are not involved with elections. “The way that the governor and his appointees reacted to coal ash pollution ultimately became an issue in the election.” Our goal was not to make it an issue, but looking back, you can see that it was.

In 2011 we looked into enforcing existing environmental laws throughout the Southeast to get utilities to clean up coal ash because state and federal governments were not taking appropriate actions. Our work began in South Carolina, and we had succeeded on this front by 2012 and 2013. At the time that we began our endeavor, there was a different governor in North Carolina. We had a big presence in North Carolina and wanted to address the issue because Duke Energy has stored a tremendous amount of coal ash throughout the state. North Carolina is one of the biggest states for coal ash pollution. During the Perdue administration, the DEQ resisted our efforts to force the state to implement existing groundwater pollution laws.

In the first half of 2013 we sent three notices of intent to bring suit in North Carolina under the Clean Water Act. The DEQ, now run by a McCrory appointee, chose not to cooperate with us in going after Duke Energy. The state then worked hand in glove with Duke to prevent Duke from having to clean up its coal ash. This continued throughout 2013. At the same time, we were fighting both Duke Energy and the state of North Carolina. Meanwhile, we were securing settlements in South Carolina. This issue looked conspicuously different in North Carolina, where the press was covering it pretty heavily, in part because of McCrory’s past relationship with Duke Energy.

Things changed immensely in February of 2014 with the Dan River coal ash spill occurred. The press noted that the DEQ and the McCrory administration had worked together to prevent implementation of the laws. The spill thus was an illustration of this overarching problem. It was very easy to understand this whole thing because McCrory was a longtime employee of Duke Energy. It became a “huge public liability” for the McCrory administration and for Duke Energy.

A week later the Associated Press published a long expose on how Duke Energy and the McCrory administration worked together to prevent enforcement of the law. Political cartoons in the state also covered this issue heavily in their drawings. These obviously only have meaning if readers have knowledge of the underlying issue, which they did in this case given the press coverage.

Meanwhile, the issue of groundwater contamination became problematic for those with wells near coal ash sites. The administration first told the families not to drink the water due to contamination, but without any change in law, flipped this stance in 2016 and told the residents they could drink the water. This created a huge controversy. We thus took depositions of state officials that had been involved in this decision-making process. The state officials laid out a pattern of wrongdoing by political operatives. In response, the administration attacked a state

toxicologist in the press, which led his boss, the state epidemiologist, to resign because she couldn't continue to work for a dishonest administration.

Overall, this is evidence of “one mistake after the other” and “one improper action after the other by the governor and his staff and the DEQ.” This created problems for McCrory. “If they had simply enforced the law, then this would not have been a negative issue for the McCrory administration.” Instead, he fought enforcement throughout his time as governor. The public lost faith in the administration over this and its opponents made use of this issue. There was no reason this had to be a negative for the McCrory administration – “it was a self-inflicted wound.”

The water contamination issue came to a head when the legislature and the governor felt like they had to take some steps to force Duke Energy to act. They passed the Coal Ash Management Act which included a provision for testing the wells around coal ash sites between 1,000 and 1,500 feet from a coal ash lagoon. The testing was done by the DEQ, with the HHS responsible for notifying people about water safety. At some point, the warnings switched, and Thomas Stith called toxicologist Ken Rudo a liar during a nighttime press conference. We wanted to see what Stith based his statement on, so we deposed him. What I gathered from the deposition was that Stith had not read Rudo's deposition when he made his charge. He said he had simply misstated what the deposition had stated. You would have to read Stith's deposition to get it just right. He had talked with the governor about some of these things.

Where does the issue stand today?

Coal ash has continued to be a major issue. By the end of 2016, we obtained court orders and settlement agreements requiring Duke Energy to excavate eight of its fourteen coal ash sites in North Carolina, leaving six sites “hanging.” In 2017, we have had orders from federal judges finding that Dominion in Virginia and the TVA in Tennessee had violated the Clean Water Act as well. The SELC has continued to file new proceedings against Duke Energy in federal court to enforce the Clean Water Act and the coal combustion rule, and we are in the midst of that litigation today. Duke has spent millions in positive television advertisements to increase PR, and it has been making lots of charitable contributions in an attempt to rebuild its brand. This will not work until it does thing on coal ash.

The SELC has totally changed the utility's point of view on coal ash. It was going to continue using un-lined pits. Now, utilities are excavating over 90 million tons of coal ash in riverfront sites and Duke Energy is an admitted environmental criminal.

Mr. Paul Shumaker – Political Consultant, Capitol Communications, Inc.

Interview conducted on December 20th, 2017 in person

Why did McCrory lose?

McCrory lost because of three factors. Well, really, two factors, but the third might have also played a role. I'll start in reverse order. The first problem was the loss of film industry tax credits in New Hanover County. This really happened in 2013 and 2014, and Tillis paid a price here as a result. He only carried the county by one hundred votes. This county must be carried to win statewide. This was the only county that Cooper carried that Clinton and Ross did not win. The film industry had departed to Georgia as a result, and ultimately, this issue was not enough to flip the margin, but when the outcome is 10,000 votes, it certainly hinged on it.

The second problem was the Interstate 77 toll road issue. The heart of this issue cuts right through the strength of Republican votes in Northern Mecklenburg County. One of my clients, Charles Jeter, almost lost his primary because of this issue, and he later withdrew before the general election. This issue also affected my other clients in the area significantly. The governor did not recognize the political fallout of this issue. He had sold it as the only option to fix the traffic problems in the area. But when the massive transportation bond came out of the legislature and went to the ballots, it included money for many other transportation projects, but not this one. Voters got angry about that—they were thinking, there is money for other projects, but we are getting stuck with toll roads? Look at the Jeff Tarte's North Carolina Senate district. Tarte got on the right side of this issue and outpolled McCrory by more than the margin of victory. This issue cut McCrory directly with his base in North Mecklenburg.

The third issue was House Bill 2. And believe it or not, this issue was a Wake County issue. In all our polls conducted on the issue, Wake County was the only place it ever registered as having an effect. Senator Tamara Barringer from Wake County was one of those that initially supported the law, but she later got behind repeal. She was reelected and outpolled McCrory, Trump, and Burr in Wake County as a result. In Wake County, this issue was driven primarily by the Northern Republicans that had relocated there. Fiscal conservatives, social moderates. McCrory injected this issue into the race and never took it off the table. Those that took it off the table won reelection and outpolled McCrory.

He did not admit his mistakes, so voters did not forgive him. None of our polls ever showed McCrory above water. About three weeks out, we started to see a bump for Trump and Burr after the October Comey reports. McCrory always lagged both these candidates. It was endemic of the personality of the candidate. He never acknowledged the fundamental roots of the two key issue problems he had.

Was Cooper a better candidate?

Cooper was and is a candidate all about opposition to Republicans. I call him an "Andy Griffith aw-shucks" candidate. He's a right of center politician in a left of center party. He was certainly

helped by the fact that he did not have a big primary challenger that would have certainly moved him to the left. As a result, he was able to stay in the middle.

What should be looked at in polling surrounding the race?

When looking at polls, go straight to the cross tabulations. Look at how Burr and Trump were performing relative to McCrory, as well as how the unaffiliated vote and the geographic breaks in RDU and Mecklenburg were turning out. Also go to the state legislature website and look at voting breakouts by legislative district. Look at Tillis in 2014 versus McCrory in 2016, especially in the Interstate 85 corridor and the Eastern part of the state. You can see rural people breaking more toward McCrory but these Interstate 85 voters going more toward Tillis. This can be attributed to red voter growth in these areas and population shifts over the last eight years.

When I look at voter orientation, I consider it on a scale, from -100 (liberal), to +100 (conservative). Zero is in the middle and marks moderates. Over the last twenty years, I have consistently found the NC GOP to be at +78. This is achieved through filtering—are voters somewhat conservative or very conservative? I have found NC Democrats to be around -25. Unaffiliated voters lean +20 to the right. Deborah Ross, Burr's Senate challenger, was -35 on the left, so she was more liberal than the average voter in the NC Democratic party. House Bill 2 polled between +78 and +100. It was a very conservative issue, and thus it was an ideological issue in this race. By defending it over and over, McCrory moved himself further to the right and farther away from the unaffiliated voter sweet spot. This was especially true in Wake County. The Interstate 77 toll issue, on the other hand, polled much more closely to the unaffiliated +20 to the right, making it an economic issue in the state. House Bill 2 was the ideological flaw for McCrory, and the toll road issue was the economic flaw.

What were the roles of other issues, like coal ash?

As an issue, coal ash skews heavily to the left off the bat. If anything, it would have moved Cooper further to the left. By taking a stance against Duke Energy, McCrory could have moved him back toward the unaffiliated voters. Let's say coal ash is -70 to the left and House Bill 2 is +60 to the right in the voting universe. If McCrory goes to the left on coal ash and to the right on House Bill 2, it creates a 30% sweet spot in the middle. This would have been a less than 50% equation for the governor, which is far from ideal.

What about the voter identification law?

That law was not relevant in this election cycle. There is no indication that it influenced the Democratic vote or suppressed Democratic voters. Clinton ultimately failed to influence the Democratic vote. The problem in polling is that media organizations do not invest enough in good analysis. They just take the overall numbers because they are easy to digest. But if you look more closely, you can get the real results. Take early voting, for instance. There were numerous media reports showing increased numbers of early voting unaffiliated individuals before the election. But in reality, when you compare these numbers with unaffiliated registration, it was down. Numbers were up but intensity was down. The same holds true for the African American vote. Early voting results showed a 19% turnout for 2016, down from 23% previously. This can

make a big difference in final outcomes. One also has to look at polling breakdowns. I saw polls with 8% Hispanics surveyed. Hispanics only make up 3% of the North Carolina electorate, so these results would have been inflated as well. All in all, once I look at the actual numbers in polls, I can draw a conclusion as to the actual margin. Looking at polls this way, Burr had a three to five point margin right before the election even though polls had him even with Deborah Ross or at a +1 advantage.

Why was the “Carolina Comeback” not effective for McCrory?

Unaffiliated voters have more education, higher incomes, and are very mobilized. They move around a lot. They were less concerned about the economy due to these factors. Their primary economic concern was Obamacare during the 2016 election? The Carolina Comeback only helped McCrory reinforce his base. It did not help him among this key voting group. I call this problem the education gap. McCrory failed to perform well with college educated voters.

Dr. Tom Eamon – Professor of Political Science, East Carolina University

Interview conducted December 20th, 2017 in person

What are the differences between the 2008 and the 2012 elections in North Carolina?

Between 2008 and 2012, Obama did not decline in the state, and he did not do as well nationwide as he did in 2008. That was the reason for the gap closing in North Carolina. The urban vote in the five major cities – Charlotte, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Durham – stayed roughly the same. North Carolina was a Democratic target in 2012, but it was less so a target than states like Florida.

Pat McCrory was a stronger campaigner in 2008 than he was in 2012. In 2008 you have all the major newspapers endorsing Obama and McCrory. In this sense, Perdue had an upset victory over McCrory in 2008. This was mostly due to Obama's coattails. "He was very lucky in 2012." The foremost factor in 2012 was his luck. Bev Perdue was the most mediocre governor in North Carolina history. In 2012, most everyone assumed she was going to run, but in the end, she decided not to run. By the time Dalton had hopped in the race, he did not have a chance. Perdue not running was the number one factor in a decisive McCrory victory. Perdue as an incumbent would have been able to raise more money than Dalton.

How should I focus on documenting McCrory's administration?

Concentrate on the state's move toward the right as propelled by the legislature and Phil Berger. Look at the policies the legislature was promoting. They were attempting to minimize the government's role in education and provide a tax break for businesses. Discuss how these initiatives were at the behest of the legislature. This creates a paradox. Typically, the past weak governors of North Carolina still had a lot of influence and could drive the state's agenda. Why did McCrory not have this influence? Find certain examples of that and relate them to the general atmosphere.

What was the role of African American voters in 2016?

Black voters are liberal on civil rights issues and conservative on moral issues. They voted overwhelmingly for the defense of marriage amendment when it came to the ballot. This is the difference between the Moral Mondays and their stance on gay marriage. Read the actual House Bill 2 to look for the other aspects of the law that are less talked about.

How has Roy Cooper been as a governor?

Cooper has been pretty overtly to the left than any governor we've had. I could see him winning again, but he needs to go back to his image as a moderate.

What about Wilmington and Asheville?

Obama did well in Buncombe County (Asheville) and Cumberland County (Fayetteville). Asheville pulls Buncombe to the left on the whole. It's important to note how well Obama did in Cumberland County and Orange County (Chapel Hill). Cumberland is home to one of the largest military establishments in the country, yet it still votes heavily Democratic. This is despite the military not being heavily associated with Democrats. There is a substantial minority population in Cumberland. New Hanover (Wilmington) is always very tight for Republicans, but it swings more Republican than any of the other major city areas. There is lots of race polarization here. Migrants are also making traditional Republican strongholds, like wealthy Charlotte areas, become more liberal. New Hanover might almost be a bellwether. There is a balance in that county. It is closely contested due to conflicting forces there. Some argue the film industry tax credits played an important role there. I would look to see how Obama performed there.

What about the toll road issue?

I doubt the toll road made a lot of a difference, but the counter argument is that when a race is decided by 10,000 votes, anything can make a difference. Others might tell you otherwise, however. In two of the three elections, McCrory managed to lose his home county.

Durham is perhaps the biggest Democratic stronghold in the state. The affluent areas are very Democratic and the county boasts a significant minority population.

What will we see in 2020?

Will Pat McCrory run? It sure looks like he might. He has name recognition. Dan Forest is also very attractive from a personality standpoint. So much of what happens in 2020 will depend on the Presidential election. If Trump is unpopular, then a Democrat will win.

What happened to McCrory in 2016?

Voters as people are not always logical. When people thought about McCrory, they associated him with House Bill 2. He was "wishy-washy" on this issue. Some might say he fumbled. He was simply not in control of this issue. The image part of the whole thing hurt him a lot. He did not come across as a strong leader. The hurricane helped him a lot toward the end. It's hard to prove exactly what effect it had because polls cannot necessarily be constructed to show the affected counties. This evened out the polling more toward the end. By my intuition, and there is no way to measure this, I would say the hurricane helped McCrory by about three percentage points statewide. At the end of the day, it was not the issue of House Bill 2 that hurt McCrory the most. It was the image that it gave him.

What about the coal ash issue?

This issue certainly tainted McCrory because of his close ties to Duke Energy. It plays with a limited number of voters. Really it plays with those that live close to the coal ash ponds. The effect was pretty minimal.

What was the fundraising role in all of this?

Democrats might just be better at fundraising across the state. As for advertising, there was so much advertising that many people probably tuned it out. There were very few undecided voters – most made up their minds on McCrory and Trump fairly quickly and stuck to their guns.

Interview conducted January 12th, 2018 over the phone

What was your involvement with Pat McCrory’s election campaigns?

I have worked with Richard Burr as his financial consultant. After the 2010 cycle, Richard called me and asked that I unplug his Senate finance infrastructure and plug it into the McCrory for Governor campaign. I was the only principal person going out of Burr world and into the 2012 race. I was Pat’s finance guy during the 2012 campaign. During the reelection, then, I was in the unique position of having two clients on the ballot statewide at the same time. It is impossible to do my job for two people at the same time. Ethically, I had to give Richard the right of first refusal on my services, and he wanted me on his team. McCrory was not too happy, but he understood that I needed to work for Richard. I was not officially involved in McCrory’s 2016 campaign, but I was involved with the efforts of a SuperPAC, a 501c4 organization, acting on his behalf.

What can you say on the record about what happened to McCrory in 2012?

When McCrory lost in 2008 to Perdue, everyone knew that he was going to run again. Perdue’s Administration was plagued with problems from day one. She was damaged goods going into the cycle. Pat was successful in carving out a niche for himself with Moore & Van Allen in Charlotte. This was his de jure position. De facto, his position was structured so that he would have the time and space to start another campaign. He went to work for Moore & Van Allen in 2009, and in 2010, during the birth of the Tea Party in response to Obamacare, Pat travelled the state with Americans for Prosperity. It was a very organized effort. He was preaching for conservative platforms, especially repealing Obamacare. He basically ran for governor for three years.

In 2011, he did not declare until late into the year. We did have a campaign apparatus in place, however, that acted primarily as a finance unit. From day one, the expectation was that McCrory was probably going to be the next governor. At a Burr fundraiser in Charlotte in 2010, Burr called him the next governor of the state in a very public forum. Late in 2011, Perdue was having tremendous fundraising difficulty. This was coupled with her troubles in executing the duties of the office. One day, Jack Hawke, McCrory’s top advisor, called me in Washington and told me Perdue had dropped out of the race. I had to cancel all my meetings and go back to North Carolina to restructure the campaign.

This left Walter Dalton at a severe handicap, because it generally takes all of eighteen months to run for governor. He had to put together a gubernatorial campaign together from scratch with a very limited timeline. This furthered the sentiment that McCrory was going to win, which led to fundraising success. A race like this does not happen often. The messaging we used in 2012 was a lot about building a Carolina Comeback. We did not really know what this was at the time, but with McCrory as the messenger, it resonated with voters. “From day one, it was more of a coronation than an election.”

How did the 2012 cycle affect the 2016 cycle?

When McCrory assumed office in 2013, a typical governor would have been thinking about reelection from the get-go. Instead, McCrory and his people thought they were going to do big things and they did not worry about the reelection until 2015. This was wasted time in my view that would have been helpful. There is a direct correlation between financial resources a candidate has and their ability to win. He could have been in vastly better shape had there been some emphasis from the beginning in reloading the financial apparatus.

How did you transition out of McCrory's team?

Toward the end of the 2012 race, Jack and I talked and came up with the idea of putting together a 501c4 Super PAC between the election and the inauguration. I said, "we're crazy if we don't do this." Basically, every other governor in every state had one. With a 501c4, an incumbent governor would have the ability to raise unlimited corporate dollars with no disclosure about where it came from. This would be very good for the governor. Jack got really excited about it quickly. We formed Renew North Carolina, which is now defunct.

Our plan was to raise money around the inaugural ball, which is a huge social event every four years in Raleigh and sponsored by the Raleigh Junior League. It's basically an opportunity for the Junior League to make a lot of money from businesses in exchange for advertising opportunities surrounding the ball. The Junior League wanted a non-compete with McCrory, so we went into an all-out war over our efforts to create another event the next night in order to raise money. It got so bad that the Junior League called Pat's family. I was able to convince the family to do the event because I explained to them that we could raise over \$1 million for Pat's reelection. They agreed finally, and we raised \$1.7 million that would not have been raised otherwise. It was the first time a 501c4 was deployed in North Carolina.

After the inauguration, I left McCrory's campaign and became the director for the Super PAC. Raising campaign money and raising corporate money are two very different things. Now, legal work is being done to dissolve Renew North Carolina, and there is no money in its accounts.

How was the Super PAC involved during 2016?

We had regional fundraising events around the state. To keep it legal, I had to sign a firewall agreement that prohibited me from using any messaging and strategy that related to McCrory and the reelection. The same thing applied to McCrory. He could have no role in the operations of the 501c4. We didn't get close to this line. We would send requests for the governor to appear at Renew North Carolina functions through his scheduler. Prior to those, he would have no idea of our events. He would come to the events, speak, and then go on his way.

In the summer of 2013, McCrory found himself at odds with the legislature, particularly Phil Berger and Thom Tillis, over several issues. Renew North Carolina brought numerous television ads statewide to boost support for McCrory's agenda. Paid media did not happen again until 2016.

What explains Cooper's fundraising prowess?

It didn't kick in until House Bill 2 happened. An inherent problem we have as Republicans is that we are very good at high dollar fundraising but not at low dollar fundraising outside of direct mail. Democrats have a digital fundraising apparatus, ActBlue, which is very powerful. The vast majority of Cooper's contributions were in \$20 and \$30 increments. Cooper found himself overnight the recipient of hundreds and thousands of dollars from in-state and out-of-state efforts by ActBlue. Republicans do not have anything like this as of now. It's painfully effective, I've got to confess.

What else do you have to say about 2016?

I agree with Paul's comments on the toll road and film tax credits. "House Bill 2 did not beat McCrory, but had it not been there, he would have won."

Appendix 2B1

This appendix depicts the three regions of North Carolina: the Mountains, Piedmont, and the Coastal Plain. For many years in state politics, a divide in voting behavior has been apparent between the Coastal Plain and the Piedmont, as highlighted by V.O. Key Jr. in *Southern Politics*.

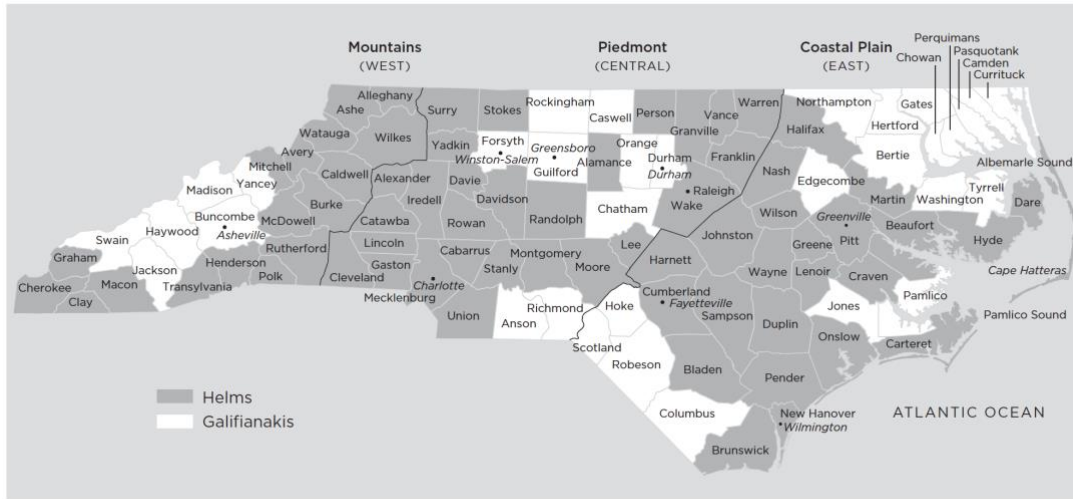


Source: *NCPedia.org*

Appendix 2B2

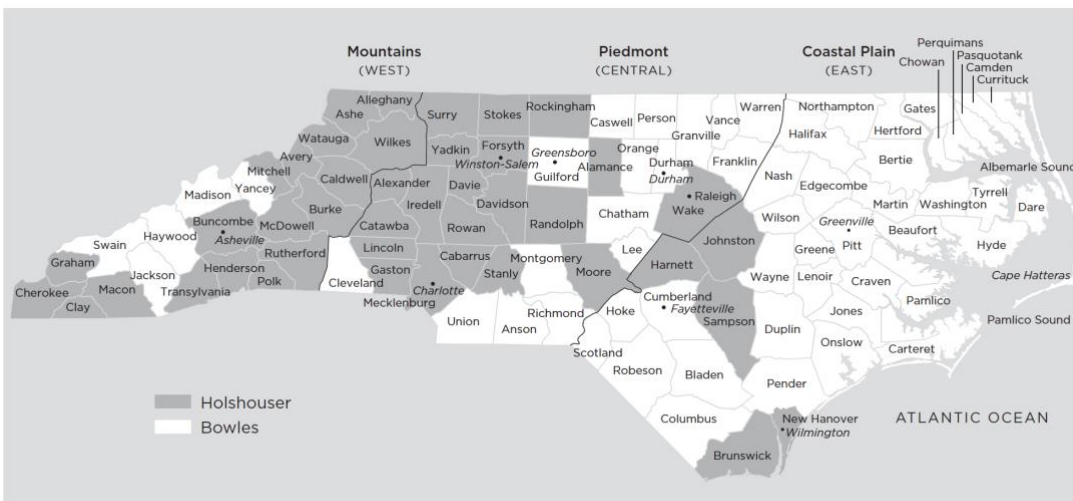
This appendix attempts to further contextualize the East-West voting divide by showing the electoral results for both Jim Holhouser and Jesse Helms in 1972. Helms achieved so much success because he was able to bridge the East-West divide and move Eastern Democrats, or “Jessecrats,” into his fold.

Helms



Map 5. Results of the 1972 senatorial election—Democrat Nick Galifianakis versus Republican Jesse Helms

Holhouser



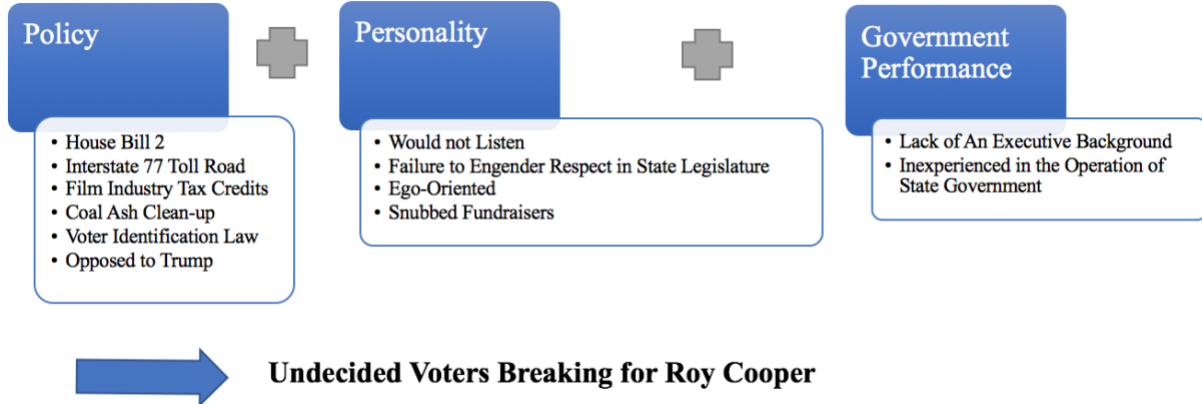
Map 6. Results of the 1972 gubernatorial election—Democrat Hargrove “Skipper” Bowles versus Republican Jim Holhouser

Source: The Making of a Southern Democracy

Appendix 2B3

This appendix visualizes the many factors that influenced voters toward a decision to vote against Pat McCrory and for Roy Cooper.

Voter Evaluation of Governor Pat McCrory



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