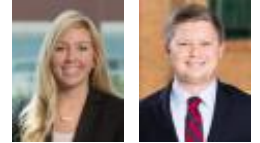


2024 North Carolina Primary Election Recap – Grassroots Candidates Show Strength in Numbers

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As attorneys and professionals, Ward and Smith's government relations team watches with keen interest those who are elected, or might be elected, to the legislative, executive, and judicial branches in North Carolina state government. Primaries and general

elections, especially in 2024, can be confusing and full of contradictions.

But, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." To make democracy work, it helps to have an idea of who is running for what office.

We hope you find this analysis of the March primaries informative. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you if you have a legal, lobbying, or government relations goal or concern.

Overview

On Tuesday, March 5th, North Carolinians ventured out to the polls to cast votes in the Super Tuesday Primary—the first time the Tar Heel State has been featured in the marquee primary day. Turnout for this primary was below that of the 2020 election, with only 24% of registered voters casting ballots.

President and Governor

Some may point to the fact that primaries at the top of the ballot, Presidential and Gubernatorial, were not seen as very competitive as President Biden and former President Trump garnered 87% and 73% in their respective primaries. Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson and Attorney General Josh Stein also won their primaries handily, with Stein bettering former North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Mike Morgan by over 55 percentage points and Robinson defeating current State Treasurer Dale Folwell by over 45 percentage points.

North Carolina Council of State

Further down the Council of State ballot, State Senator Rachel Hunt (daughter of former Governor Jim Hunt)

won the Democratic nomination for Lieutenant Governor and will face the winner of the runoff primary in the Republican contest between Hal Weatherman (former Chief of Staff to Lieutenant Governor Dan Forrest) and Jim O'Neill (current District Attorney for Forsyth County).

Weatherman and O'Neill competed in a crowded primary against nine other candidates, including current Rep. Jeffery Elmore and former Sen. Deanna Ballard, in a race most observers expected to end in a runoff. Notably, O'Neill faced Josh Stein in the 2020 Attorney General race, losing to Stein by a mere 14,000 votes in that contest, displaying statewide electability that he will need should he defeat Weatherman in the May 14th runoff.

The contest to replace Stein as Attorney General was also set during the primary, as Congressmen Jeff Jackson and Dan Bishop forego their seats in Washington to run for the post. Jackson defeated Durham County District Attorney Satana Deberry in the Democratic primary, while Bishop, known for his popularity with grassroots conservatives, ran unopposed in the Republican primary.

Rounding out the most talked about Council of State Races, incumbent Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler and incumbent Insurance Commissioner Mike Causey both cruised to victory over their primary challengers. Causey will face State Senator Natasha Marcus from Mecklenburg County in the General Election, while Troxler seeks another four-year term against political newcomer Dr. Sarah Taber in the post that Troxler has held since 2005.

Grassroots Candidates Upset

While many races at the top of the ballot were seen as foregone conclusions, there were some notable surprises in races from the Council of State to the North Carolina House and Senate and even Congressional primaries that demonstrated the strength of grassroots campaigning.

Superintendent of Public Instruction

The most notable upset of the evening came in the race for Superintendent of Public Instruction. North Carolina is unique in educational administrative structure, as we elect a statewide superintendent, but also have a State Board of Education consisting of members appointed by the Governor, setting up a sometimes-tense power-sharing structure.

In that race, incumbent Superintendent Catherine Truitt was defeated by political newcomer and homeschool parent Michele Morrow by over four points. While Morrow has never held elected office, she did run unsuccessfully for a seat on the Wake County School Board in 2022. Morrow ran a strong grassroots campaign, attending GOP events throughout the state and garnering support from voters by touting key electoral issues surrounding education which have been on the top of voter's minds coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite high-profile endorsements from legislative leaders, Truitt becomes the first Council of State incumbent to lose in many electoral cycles.

Commissioner of Labor

The grassroots strength was also on display in the race for Commissioner of Labor, where current incumbent Commissioner Josh Dobson elected not to run for reelection and instead endorsed his former General Assembly colleague Rep. John Hardister (R-Guilford), who has served as NC House Majority Whip for three terms at the General Assembly.

Hardister faced three other candidates in the primary, most notably attorney Luke Farley, who received the endorsement of former Commissioner of Labor and "elevator queen" Cherie Berry. Like Morrow, Farley centered his campaign around grassroots outreach to high-propensity Republican primary voters.

In the end, Farley would best the four-candidate field, garnering nearly 37% of the vote, which saved him from a runoff and secured him a spot on the General Election ballot against Charlotte City Councilman Braxton Winston.

North Carolina State Auditor

The State Auditor Republican primary was another example of a successful grassroots mobilization strategy, as State employee and CPA Jack Clark secured a spot in the May 14th runoff against UNC-Chapel Hill Board of Trustees member Dave Boliek.

That contest also included former State Sen. Jeff Tarte (R-Mecklenburg), who finished a distant fourth, roughly 70,000 votes behind Clark. The winner of the contest between Clark and Boliek will go on to face current Auditor and former Wake County Commission Chairwoman Jessica Holmes, who was appointed by Governor Cooper following the resignation of former State Auditor Beth Wood.

Holmes made history as the first African American woman to serve on the Council of State in North Carolina.

Congressional Primaries

Following the latest round of Congressional redistricting in North Carolina, many new candidates emerged to run in newly drawn districts that differ greatly from those of the 2022 election.

Unlike previous cycles, all but one of the new congressional districts strongly favors one party over the other, giving the primary winners in each contest a near-guarantee they will be sworn into Congress in 2025.

The one exception to that rule is the First Congressional District, currently held by Rep. Don Davis in the rural, northeast portion of North Carolina. Davis will face military veteran Laurie Buckhout, who defeated Sandy Smith in the Republican Primary for NC-1, in what will certainly be the most competitive Congressional General Election.

Congressman Wiley Nickel from Wake County and Congresswoman Kathy Manning of Guilford County declined to run for reelection, as their districts were redrawn to heavily favor GOP nominees in the General Election.

Congressmen Jeff Jackson found himself in a similar situation in his district and instead elected to run for Attorney General as we referenced above. With Congressman Dan Bishop also leaving Washington for the AG's race, and longtime Rep. Patrick McHenry announcing his retirement, five of North Carolina's fourteen Congressional districts had no incumbent for the March 5th primary.

Exploring the results around the state, Speaker Tim Moore (R-Cleveland) handily won his race against Jeff Gregory, gaining 75% of the vote in a district west of Charlotte.

With similar margins, incumbent Reps. Chuck Edwards, Virginia Foxx, Richard Hudson, and Deborah Ross cruised to victory and we expect will survive the General Election given the partisan makeup of the districts.

Incumbent Reps. Greg Murphy, Alma Adams, and David Rouzer did not have primary opponents.

Moving to competitive primaries, attorneys Kelly Daughtry and Brad Knott advanced to the runoff through a

crowded fourteen-candidate field for District 13, which includes parts or all of piedmont counties Johnston, Harnett, Lee, Caswell, Person, Granville, Franklin, and Wake.

In the District 6 race, which encompasses the I-85 corridor from Greensboro to Mecklenburg County, lobbyist Addison McDowell gained the endorsement of former President Trump in a race that pitted him against former Congressman Mark Walker, as well as former candidates Bo Hines and Christian Castelli.

The endorsement clearly had a powerful impact, as McDowell catapulted from an unknown candidate to the lead votainer, securing 26% percent of the vote to Walker's 24%. That portion is not above the 30% threshold to secure the nomination and avoid a runoff, but in a surprising turn of events, on March 13th, Walker announced he would not be calling for a runoff against McDowell and instead would be taking a position on Trump's presidential campaign.

In the 8th District, which comprises parts of Mecklenburg, Union, Cabarrus, Anson, Stanley, Montgomery, Richmond, and Robeson Counties, eight candidates put their names on the ballot, including current Rep. John Bradford (R-Mecklenburg), former Union County Commissioner Allan Baucom and Pastor Mark Harris.

Some political observers may remember Harris from the 2018 election cycle, where due to a ballot harvesting controversy surrounding a political operative working for the Harris campaign, election officials had to conduct a re-do of the primary for which Harris was not the eventual candidate.

None of that history seemed to matter to voters, as Harris defeated the five other candidates, getting over 30% of the vote to avoid a runoff, and all but ensuring he will be the next Congressman from the 8th District.

Finally, in the 10th District race to replace Congressman Patrick McHenry, military veteran and businessman Pat Harrigan defeated current North Carolina House Rep. Grey Mills (R-Iredell) as well as three other candidates with 41% of the vote.

Harrigan also ran for Congress in the 2022 cycle against Jeff Jackson in the previously drawn 14th district, but with new lines and a different district, Harrigan will be heading to Washington in 2025.

Notable North Carolina General Assembly Results

As with the Congressional Districts, the districts for the North Carolina House and Senate have been redrawn since the last election.

While we may not see the direct impact of those new lines in the primary election, there were many surprising results coming out of the March 5th primary.

Most notably, longtime Rep. George Cleveland (R-Onslow) was defeated by ECU student Wyatt Gable in the Jacksonville-centric House seat. Cleveland was seeking his eleventh term in office and is a chairman of multiple influential committees.

Similarly, but on the other side of the aisle, multiple moderate Democratic members faced primaries from their left.

State Sen. Mike Woodard (D-Durham) was defeated by Sophia Chitlik by a wider than expected margin, while Rep. Michael Wray (D-Northampton), also in his tenth term, was defeated by a mere 35 votes by Rodney Pierce, as of March 18th. Rep. Wray has understandably requested a recount.

Moving further west, current Rep. Kevin Crutchfield (R-Cabarrus), who is currently serving his first term in the House, was defeated by candidate Brian Echevarria.

Not all primary challengers to sitting members of the General Assembly were successful though, as Reps. Tim Reeder (R-Pitt), Allen Chesser (R-Nash), Shelly Willingham (D-Edgecombe), and Cecil Brockman (D-Guilford) all bested newcomer opponents in their own primary challenges.

With the exception of Rep. Brockman, each of the other incumbents won with very comfortable margins.

Looking Ahead

As we approach November's General Election, a key local race stuck out to us as potentially notable for the future.

In the Mecklenburg County Commission race, longtime incumbent Pat Cotham was defeated in her reelection bid. Pat is the mother of former Democratic and now Republican House member Rep. Tricia Cotham, whose party switch in Spring 2023 garnered national headlines as it gave General Assembly Republicans enough votes to override the Governor's veto.

Many have speculated about whether Rep. Cotham's switch had an impact on her mother's electability. Rep. Cotham did not have a primary opponent on March 5th and will face Nicole Sidman in what will likely be the most expensive and closely watched General Assembly race in the state.

One parting thought as we conclude our analysis of the primary results: the GOP will have two statewide runoff races for Lieutenant Governor and State Auditor, while the Democratic candidates for those races are already set, leaving those candidates time to raise more money and campaign while the GOP potential nominees continue to battle it out in a statewide runoff.

What impact, if any, will that have in the General Election?

What impact will unaffiliated voters have in the May 14th runoff, where they can still participate?

These are questions that only time can answer, but your Ward and Smith Government Relations team is watching closely.

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