

Democracy North Carolina

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STUDY SHOWS VOTERS IN NORTH CAROLINA ARE MORE INDEPENDENT, URBAN AND NON-WHITE

A new county-by-county analysis of North Carolina voters points to dramatic shifts in the past decade that will likely influence campaign strategy for hot elections this year for Richard Burr's US Senate seat and for control of the General Assembly.

"The growth of urban and suburban counties and surge of independent voters means the political parties must scramble to win elections with a smaller share of reliably loyal voters on their side," said Bob Hall of the election watchdog group Democracy North Carolina. "Stereotypes of the Republican rural conservative and the straight-ticket, African-American Democrat are giving way to a more complex profile of the North Carolina electorate."

The numbers tell the story. For example, while the registration rolls of Democrats and Republicans have grown by 11% and 16% respectively since 2000, the number of voters choosing to not affiliate with any party soared by 83%. In fact, the 627,500 new unaffiliated voters are over half of the 1,162,000 voters added during the decade. [Some voters move away or die as new ones register, so the focus here is on the net change.] **See complete data table at <http://www.democracy-nc.org/downloads/NCVoterReg2000-2010.xls>**

Unaffiliated voters now make up nearly one fourth [23%] of the 6.1 million registered voters in the state, compared to about one in seven voters [15%] in 2000.

Similarly, while the number of white voters increased by 572,500 or 15% to 4.46 million, the number of African American voters jumped by 383,500 or 41% to 1.32 million. More than half the increase in voters of color for the decade came in 2008, when Barack Obama won the Democratic primary and general election. While 83% of adult whites are now registered, the figure is now 87% for people of color. But contrary to the portrait of blacks as loyal Democrats, 21% of the non-whites who registered in 2008 signed up as Unaffiliated.

Accurate figures for Latino voters are hampered by changing questions about race and ethnicity on voter registration forms over the decade; ethnicity was not asked until 2002. As of Jan. 2, 2010, there were 72,750 Hispanic/Latino voters, a substantial jump from 41,900 at the beginning of 2008. One third are now registered as Unaffiliated, 46% as Democrats and 20% as Republicans.

Democrats can be thankful for the 2008 registration surge; more than 90% of their net gain in members for the decade came during that one year. Still, Democrats lost their overall share of the electorate, going from 50.6% of registered voters 10 years ago to 45.4% now, the first time in a century that the party has started a decade with less than half the state's registered voters.

The 2008 election also showed the growing muscle of the state's urban counties, which will likely be the key focus in the 2010 U.S. senate race. The seven most populous counties in the state now have 37% of all the registered voters. In 2008, those seven counties (Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford, Forsyth, Cumberland, Durham and Buncombe) gave Barack Obama, Kay Hagan and

Beverly Perdue a lead of more than 300,000 votes each, enough to overcome the rest of the state's majority support for their Republican opponent.

The next 13 counties in size have 22% of the state's voters, and 11 of them strongly favored Republican statewide candidates in 2008. They include Gaston, Union, Cabarrus, Johnston, Onslow, Davidson, Iredell, Catawba, Alamance, Randolph and Rowan.

Together, these 20 counties account for 60% of the state's voters, and they are expected to be the central battleground for the U.S. Senate contest in 2010.

Young voters age 18 to 25 now make up 12% of the electorate, an increase from 10% a decade ago, and they provided significant energy in the 2008 election. However, there is no guarantee they will be engaged in the 2010 election: While 60% of the state's registered young voters turned out in 2008 [compared to 70% of all voters], Democracy NC found that only 4% voted in the cities with November 2009 elections [compared to 16% of all eligible voters].

Overall, the number of registered voters has increased 24% over the decade, while the adult population only climbed 19%. But the pace of new registrations has slowed considerably. In the past four months [mid-September to mid-January], the rolls have grown by only 19,000 voters. During a similar period two years ago, 60,000 voters were added to the rolls.

The decade begins with 84% of the voting-age population registered, up from 81% in January 2000. Democracy NC estimates that about one million citizens are currently not registered to vote, or 15% of the eligible population.

[It's difficult to get precise numbers on how many eligible adults are not registered in North Carolina, because (a) the voter registration rolls are inflated with some people who have moved away and (b) the voting-age population includes non-citizens. Data for some counties can show a high registration rate, or even more registered voters than resident adults, particularly the counties with a significant university or non-citizen population or where the local board of elections conducts infrequent mailings to identify voters who have moved. The chart with this release calculates the Voting-Age Population minus Registered Voters to produce each county's "VAP Unregistered," but these numbers should be treated as approximations because of the imprecise nature of the underlying data.]

Other highlights in the data assembled by Democracy North Carolina from the State Board of Elections and State Data Center:

- Wake County now has more adults than Mecklenburg County – and more unregistered voters.
- Seven of the 10 counties with the fastest growth of Unaffiliated voters are along the coast, no doubt fueled by Northerners who are unsure how they align with local party politics.
- Cumberland, Onslow and Wayne – the state's three big military counties with chronically low voter participation – are among the 10 counties that posted the biggest increases in their registration rates, with 13 to 20 percentage point gains compared to the statewide 3 point gain.
- Statewide, Democrats added 10,600 more registrants than Republicans during the decade, thanks to gains in the big counties, particularly in 2008. Republicans have added more members than Democrats since 2000 in 79 of the 100 counties, but in five counties Democrats surpassed Republicans by 167,000 registrations – Mecklenburg, Wake, Guilford, Durham and Cumberland.