

Next in Line...

Who will lead the state in the next century? Its volatile political landscape hinges on the 2000 elections.

Lottery, Education Loom Large In Wide Open Governor's Race

By ALICIA GADDA
Staff Writer

For the last eight years, Gov. Jim Hunt has ruled North Carolina politics.

But now his throne is up for grabs, and political analysts say the five front-runners will have a tough time convincing voters they have what it takes to fill the shoes of the state's most conspicuous political staple.

With 13 candidates having filed for the governor's race, five men have emerged as major contenders.

Attorney General Mike Easley and Lt. Gov. Dennis Wicker are the Democratic opponents.

Former N.C. House Speaker Leo Daughtry, former legislator Chuck Neely and former Charlotte mayor Richard Vinroot are the Republican front-runners.

Thad Beyle, UNC-Chapel Hill political science professor, said the next governor would come from this group of white, middle-aged, male lawyers in a state that has never had a female or minority executive.

And when the May 2 primaries arrive, pundits say the Democratic and Republican primaries will be wide open races. "No particular candidate comes to this race with an overwhelming advantage," said Jack Fleer, a Wake Forest University political science professor.

Although candidates harp on their ideals and grassroots backgrounds, Beyle said the future of the state could depend on their takes on major issues — the budget, education and the lottery.

North Carolina's recent economic hardships, caused by tobacco woes and bad weather, could play prominently in the election. "I think probably by the time we're all through, money's going to be the major issue," Beyle said.

Jay Warsaw, spokesman for Daughtry, said Daughtry hoped to streamline governmental operations to save money and create new rural jobs.

"As someone who's been successful in business, Leo Daughtry wants to use those business principles to make government more effective," Warsaw said.

Suzanne Moss, Neely's spokeswoman, said tax cuts were a major part of his family-oriented plan.

Easley said he felt that taxes needed to be more evenly distributed and that North Carolina should wait to lower taxes until recent economic problems were resolved. "It's important that none of us start cutting taxes until we know what's going to happen," he said.

Wicker spokesman Marc Stinneford said Wicker did not plan to raise taxes. "Wicker thinks he can carry out his plans without increasing taxes by modernizing state government," he said.

Aside from fiscal matters, Fleer said "education and keeping the money going to improve education," would be the major issue.

Wicker said he hoped to get additional financial aid, including scholarships, for N.C. college students.

But many gubernatorial candidates say, like the man they hope to succeed, they are more concerned with primary education, which still lags behind many other states.

Vinroot spokesman Chris Neeley said he would make sure all education money went directly to classrooms.

A major part of Wicker's campaign is to improve N.C. education, including expanding the preschool program Smart Start initiated by Hunt.

"Wicker hopes to take the state to a new level in education," Stinneford said.

In a recent speech at the UNC-CH School of Law, candidate Neely took an alternative approach and pushed for the expansion of charter schools.

"I think that competition would immeasurably and very quickly strengthen the public schools," he said.

And as the candidates debate ways to improve education with financial concerns weighing heavily on voters' minds, the lottery could be a divisive issue.

In a Jan. 17 televised debate, the five leading candidates drew the battle lines on state-supported gambling. Democrats touted it as a way to raise money without raising taxes while Republicans generally decried the notion as immoral.

Advocates said the lottery would add a massive new money source to improve education. Detractors, on the other hand, argue that the lottery is essentially a regressive tax which abuses the poor.

With this year's fiscal crisis complexities, Beyle said gubernatorial hopefuls could raise the lottery banner to avoid intense debates on fiscal priorities.

"Nobody in a campaign wants to get into that because they've either got to raise taxes or cut programs, so the lottery could be a screen for that," Beyle said.

But outside the debate over concrete issues, each candidate is hoping to distinguish himself within his party. With the primaries almost three months away, Beyle said anything could happen in the gubernatorial arena.

"Right now, hardly anybody's paying attention besides the people who are paid to."

Fleer said much of the fate of the race depended on future campaigning.

"The race is still at a fairly early stage, and my guess is that a lot is going to change before May."

Party Politics to Play Key Role In N.C. House, Senate Battles

By COURTNEY HATHAWAY
Senior Writer

The N.C. General Assembly elections are months away, but questions of which party will emerge on top are already weighing on the minds of politicians and voters.

With the issue of redistricting looming soon after the elections, political officials are divided as to whether Republicans or Democrats will lead the state in a year when party dominance will play a more prominent role than it has in a decade.

And with the general election still in the distant future and a legislature still set to take on the tricky task of allocating state funds from strained coffers, the issue of how to pay for any major initiatives could plague candidates after the dust of

the primaries settle.

N.C. Republican Party political director Dan Gurley said the race would be a struggle on both sides as the Republicans, who have only won the House twice this century — in 1994 and 1996 — strive to regain control.

Gurley said winning the Senate would be good for the Republican Party, but they would focus their efforts mainly on the more achievable House.

"We're going to make an all-out push for the House," he said. "(There will be tough competition) for seats the Democrats hold now that Republicans held previously."

But Wooten Johnson, House caucus director for the N.C. Democratic Caucus, said he was confident Democrats would hold on to the House and Senate.

"People might argue that (the Republicans) can pick up some districts, but I say, no, they can't."

This battle will be especially important because the new legislature will be charged with the task of redrawing the state's voting districts, providing both parties with a pressing need for chamber control.

The issue is particularly crucial because of the narrow split between Republicans and Democrats in the state.

Thad Beyle, UNC political science professor and a veteran of N.C. politics, said Democrats had a comfortable majority in the state Senate because of the way the districts are drawn now, not because they have widespread support.

He said Republicans would favor using traditional census figures to determine the new districts, while Democrats would push for a sampling method that would include more minorities and fringe voters.

"There's going to be an interesting set of decisions that are made," Beyle said. "In North Carolina, it could make a big difference."

Despite the focus on these "insider" issues, Beyle said that when the legislature begins struggling with a budget crunch in May, the dynamics of the races could change significantly. The debate, he said, could shift from what candidates want to

do to how they plan to pay for it. "As the realities of the fiscal situation become clearer, it might be more of an issue."

Gurley also said the budget would be the biggest factor in the elections. "Most states in the country have budget surpluses," he said. "But North Carolina doesn't."

In addition to budget issues, some officials say education should be among the immediate priorities of the candidates. Rob Lamm, press secretary for President Pro Tem Marc Basnight, D-Dare, said N.C. voters considered education to be a top priority and would elect candidates who felt likewise.

But Paul Gronke, a political science professor at Duke University, said he did not expect to see any drastic policy changes after the elections, including in education.

"Both parties will say the right thing (about education to voters)," he said. "I don't see education as a big issue. People are happy, and they're making money."

Despite their varied opinions, officials agreed that the best chances of winning the General Assembly elections belonged to the incumbents who could offer North Carolina a fairly solid economic past.

Gronke also said he expected the veteran politicians to be in good shape to weather the election with ease. "Incumbents will urge voters to stick with the status quo,"

But Gronke said the pending race would pale in comparison to the issues created after the redistricting of North Carolina's voting districts. He said the 2000 election would set the stage for future elections, especially in 2002.

"After the 1990 census, the Democrats were in charge and drew (lines) in a way as to protect those seats," he said. "2000 is not the big election. (But after the 2000 census), it'll be a hard-pitched battle for control."

Congress Hopefuls Seek Presidential Coattails

By GAVIN OFF
Staff Writer

Arming themselves with money, speeches and big ideas, N.C. candidates for the U.S. House are readying themselves for an all-out political war to capture Capitol Hill.

Political analysts said there were several district races that would be more competitive than the rest of the state. Two districts could even have a new set of voters by the time November rolls around.

And although the presidential race could affect the seating in the House, officials said taxes and education would still dominate candidates' campaigns.

Abraham Holtzman, professor emeritus of political science at N.C. State University, said the wave of popularity for presidential candidate George W. Bush might translate into a successful election for Congressional Republicans.

"I believe the last time the Republicans controlled the House and Senate, it coincided with a Republican president," Holtzman said. "This means with an increase in popularity for a Republican presidential candidate, there's an increase in the chance of Republicans picking up seats in the House and Senate."

But candidates can't rely on their more prominent party cohorts to carry them into office.

As hopefuls begin campaigning for a seat in the U.S. House, they are forced to address many of the problems plaguing the state.

Analysts say tackling taxes and public education would be most important.

"Taxes will be a major issue," Holtzman said. "The Republicans are talking about taxes, taxes, taxes; we have to cut, cut, cut."

But Mike Davis, spokesman for 2nd District Rep. Bob Etheridge, D-N.C., said, unlike Republicans, most Democrats advocated smaller tax cuts and reinvesting any tax surpluses. "It's easy to rally against taxes," Davis said. "Mr. Etheridge has consistently voted to make sure our nation's Social Security and Medicare systems are functioning for our future. After that, he is for tax cuts for the middle class."

John Hood, president of the conservative John Locke Foundation, also said taxes would be an issue. "The debate is not about cutting taxes," he said. "It's about how to go about doing it. The Republicans like higher tax cuts and rate reductions, while Democrats favor smaller cuts."

Several officials said there was a fine line

between cutting taxes and regulating governmental spending in areas such as public education. Thomas Bates, press secretary for David Price, D-N.C., said the federal government must reform education and Social Security while lessening the tax burden on the middle class. "We saw last year where the Republicans crossed that line (between cutting taxes too much while stripping governmental spending). They didn't worry about paying down the debt at all."

Aside from policy debates, politicians on both sides of the aisle are grappling for control of Congress. The Republican Party is seeking to bolster its slim majority in Congress, and they see the 2nd District, which includes Sampson County, as primed for a conservative coup. "It's a Democratic seat that is typically conservative," Haynes said. "So we'll talk about education, cutting taxes and cutting the overall role of the government."

But Davis said the Etheridge's knowledge of the 2nd District made him the favorite.

Two other districts, the 1st and the 12th, will also be interesting races because candidates fighting for these seats will have to contend with the possibility of a changing constituency midway through the race.

A federal court case is pending to deter-

mine whether the two districts were drawn illegally on the basis of race, which could significantly change the demographics of the voter base. Both districts have an unusually high minority constituency.

Rep. Mel Watt, a black Democrat who represents the 12th district, said the court's ruling could change both the shape of the district and, in turn, his platform. "Typically you would expect more housing, more education and more low-income job issues that revolve around more urban concerns."

Challenger John Cosgrove said redistricting would benefit his campaign.

"The more compact the district is drawn, the better," he said. "It's better for the people first and me second."

With candidates vying for support of their philosophies on these issues, the campaigns are likely to heat up quickly, analysts say.

But political expert Gary Jacobson said most districts' challengers have an uphill battle if they want to capture a seat in the House.

"Incumbents ought to be in pretty good shape," he said. "People are satisfied with the status quo, so why rock the boat?"

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TRENDS

From Page 1

The pivotal issues aspiring state leaders will need to address include education, agriculture and the environment, urbanization and rural prosperity, experts have said.

"Education has been a hot topic in the United States since the late '70s," said Paul O'Connor, a lecturer in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

O'Connor said the public would expect all candidates to strongly advance education in the state and to continue its traditional commitment to

the issue. "You can't run for governor or lieutenant governor this year without having a strong education agenda," he said.

"It doesn't matter whether you're Republican or Democrat."

Guillory said he agreed, adding that education has been a preeminent issue because the growth in better jobs — offering higher wages for higher skills — demanded better education.

"We've made some progress (in education)," he said.

"The question now is, how do we continue to make progress?"

"The pressure there is that the economy of the future is going to demand increasing education beyond high

school. Candidates need to address this in keeping the state prosperous."

The prosperity of the state has been a focal issue in light of major changes in the state's economy, Guillory said.

During the last century, the economy has significantly shifted from agriculture to industry.

Now, he said, another shift has been taking place, to a technological, service-oriented economy.

"This is not the kind of stuff North Carolina has seen before," Guillory said.

While this shift has benefited some, many N.C. residents have been left out in the cold economically.

Guillory said, "How does the state address communities in danger of being

left behind as our economy changes?"

Looking Ahead

These pivotal political issues might be overshadowed by changes in the state's major political players.

Ten seats exist for elected government officials in the state's executive branch. All have historically been Democrats, Holtzman said.

But Guillory said the election would be a vigorous one because many candidates would be competing for positions, without an incumbent. "It's a very rich and textured election year."

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Party Time

Although largely a Democratic state, North Carolinians' conservative nature has helped the cause of many Grand Old Party members.



Year	President	Governor	Senate Seats		
			Year	Seat #1	Seat #2
1996	Republican	Democrat	1998	Republican	Democrat
1992	Republican	Democrat	1992	Republican	Republican
1988	Republican	Republican	1986	Republican	Democrat
1984	Republican	Republican	1980	Republican	Democrat
1980	Republican	Democrat	1974	Republican	Democrat
1976	Democrat	Democrat	1968	Democrat	Democrat
1972	Republican	Republican	1962	Democrat	Democrat
1968	Republican	Democrat			
1964	Democrat	Democrat			
1960	Democrat	Democrat			

SOURCE: ELECTIONS USA