



How Elite and Grassroots Conservative Networks Have Transformed Republican Policymaking in North Carolina

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In 2010, North Carolina Republicans gained control of both chambers of the state legislature for the first time in over a century. After that, their margins grew and a Republican governor was elected in 2012. Over the same stretch, North Carolina Republicans have become more conservative, pursuing a contentious agenda of legislation frequently unpopular with a strong majority of North Carolinians – even troubling, at times, to moderate Republicans.

House Bill 2, the infamous North Carolina bathroom bill is an important example. Although GOP Governor McCrory initially ran as a moderate on social issues and twice as many voters in Republican-leaning suburbs opposed the bill as supported it, McCrory ultimately signed and defended the socially-conservative bill passed by the legislature in 2016. In other policy realms as well – including environmental protection, education, and voter participation – similarly unpopular far-right measures were enacted in recent years by North Carolina's fully Republican-controlled government.

Some of the North Carolina Republican lawmakers elected in 2010 represented the values of Tea Party activists, but most of the party's legislative and executive leaders had been in office for years. Like McCrory, they had moderate backgrounds and a history of collaborating with Democrats to pass compromise legislation. Why did these Republicans move so far to the right after taking office? To explain what happened, my research examines connections between state government and conservative organizations outside of the party. I find that North Carolina conservatives have built and tightened relationships between elite policy advocacy organizations and networks of activists operating in districts across the state.

The Rising Clout of Non-Party Political Organizations

North Carolina conservatives have benefitted from growing clout and tightening relationships between grassroots and elite advocacy and organizing groups. An initial upsurge of conservative grassroots energy paved the way for major Republican gains in the 2010 election. Some of this energy flowed through longstanding Christian right networks, but a new wave of participation also appeared as voluntarily created local Tea Party groups took shape across the state, creating sites for activist citizens opposed to the presidency of Barack Obama to meet regularly and plan community events and lobbying projects.

Thereafter, major Republican gains in North Carolina occurred in tandem with the rise to prominence in state politics of a trio of elite-run policy think tanks and advocacy organizations: the John Locke Foundation; the North Carolina Civitas Institute; and a part of a nationwide organization run by the Koch network called Americans for Prosperity-North Carolina. With funding from the private John William Pope Foundation, these three organizations grew from the mid-2000s. Their conjoined capacities let them also reach out to voters and to Tea Party activists and Christian evangelicals across the state.

Why State Conservative Networks Are So Effective

Intertwined conservative networks have been able to transform North Carolina Republican Party politics and policymaking for two main reasons.

- Linkages across organizations help conservatives coordinate their messaging inside and outside of government, allowing Republican partisans of all stripes to sing from the same hymnbook. By 2010, for example, Americans for Prosperity-North Carolina and activist Tea Party groups across the state had a particularly close relationship. Americans for Prosperity hosted a series of summits for Tea Party

activists to learn how to engage voters and contact their legislators. In turn, Tea Party groups became very likely to link to Americans for Prosperity on their websites. Across the 49 other U.S. states in 2011, only about one-fifth of Tea Party groups linked to Americans for Prosperity, but fully half of the websites of North Carolina Tea Party groups included such links.

- In turn, coordination and broad geographic reach have enabled the intertwined conservative organizational networks to persuade majorities of elected Republicans to advance their policy preferences. The Locke Foundation and Civitas have the expertise and resources to push for specific conservative reforms, while Americans for Prosperity and other grassroots networks stoke voter turnout and hold legislators accountable.

Policy campaigns show how conservative coordination works. In 2013, Americans for Prosperity-North Carolina, Civitas, and Tea Party groups joined forces to pressure North Carolina lawmakers to adopt the Locke Foundation's tax cut recommendations – in the face of considerable public doubts about reducing corporate taxes while increasing sales taxes that hit lower- and middle-income residents. In the 2016 House Bill 2 saga, evangelical activists placed calls to representatives and held rallies at the Capitol. At the same time, the Locke Foundation and Civitas Institute authored opinion pieces and commissioned polls to suggest, falsely, that the bill would be popular in the state. In fact, only the “strong Republicans” favored this legislation, while majorities of every other group disagreed. Passing the bill angered moderate, business-friendly Republicans and inflamed the 2016 gubernatorial election.

Can North Carolina Liberals Build Similar Clout?

Lately, North Carolina Republicans have experienced some electoral setbacks, but it remains to be seen whether any comparable set of left organizational networks can gain influence in the state, even if Democrats continue to win elections. The Moral Monday movement that arose in 2013 to protest restrictions on voting rights and other policies was mostly active in the Raleigh-Durham area. Since November 2016, preliminary research suggests that an upsurge of grassroots anti-Trump resistance energy might outpace the Tea Party of 2009 to 2011. Across the country, thousands of left-leaning local groups are listed on a map run by the “Indivisible” movement that seeks to inspire and coordinate local efforts; and in North Carolina, there are now 87 highly active groups, many more than the roughly three dozen Tea Parties active in the state in 2011. But many of the state's other left organizations are active only in the biggest cities. It remains to be seen whether, like their conservative counterparts, elite and grassroots liberal civic organizations will be able to collaborate to build clout in North Carolina government.

Read more in Caroline Tervo, “Conservatives in Concert: The Impact of Partisan Organizational Networks on Policy and Politics in North Carolina,” (working paper, 2018).