



## Organizing a New Democratic Majority in North Carolina

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As protests against President Trump's policies have expanded across the country, many progressives are looking for ways to link the energy on display in the streets with an electoral strategy that will help Democrats return to power at local, state, and national levels. In my research, I studied both nonmetropolitan and urban counties across North Carolina and conducted a detailed investigation of organizing efforts in the state's bluest county, Durham. The successes and failures of recent campaigns can inform a model for building an enduring, movement-based Democratic majority in North Carolina and across the nation.

### North Carolina's Blue Swing

In 2000, Republican George Bush carried five of North Carolina's seven largest urban counties, but by 2008 each of those counties had large Democratic majorities and delivered 345,000 more votes for Barack Obama than for John McCain. In 2016, those same seven counties grew even bluer, expanding the Clinton vote margin by nearly half a million votes.

Such stunning new Democratic majorities were not merely the result of movement into North Carolina from the North nor demographic trends; they resulted directly from a massive voter registration effort that turned North Carolina blue for the first time in a half century. More than half a million new voters joined North Carolina's voting rolls in 2008, and nearly 70 percent of them voted Democratic. In Durham County, more than half of the 50,000 new voters added in 2008 and 2016 were organized by local groups, which started to register new voters long before national campaign staff arrived and continued after they left.

### Why Clinton Lost 2016 in North Carolina

Why, then, did Hillary Clinton lose the state of North Carolina in 2016, despite dramatically expanded urban majorities? The answer lies not in a messaging failure nor in an increasing divide between voters in urban and nonmetropolitan areas. The bottom line is simpler: *In 2016, no dedicated Clinton field offices were opened in the vast majority of counties outside of North Carolina's big cities.* Instead, a smattering of Clinton organizers, most of them young people with few local ties, were scattered across nonmetropolitan counties with little logistical support. A look at the size of the turnout in these counties underscores the missed opportunity for Clinton organizers. For example, the number of Republican voters in Tyrell County was not substantially different between 2008 and 2016. What changed were the number of Democratic voters showing up at the polls, which dropped by roughly 20%. In short, there was not a Trump blowout in eastern North Carolina, but rather a depressed turnout of sporadic Democrat voters.

The cost of such under-organizing outside of big cities was steep: In November 2016, Clinton hemorrhaged 200,000 votes across 90 nonmetropolitan counties, completely erasing the 140,000-vote gains she made in

urban centers.

Top-down organizing also hampered the success of Clinton's ground game in urban counties, where turnout dropped even as Democratic majorities grew. Clinton's national campaign managers largely ignored the wisdom and expertise of local actors and organizers, putting their faith instead in the power of "big data" in the form of voter identification technologies to locate and turn out voters. Although such data certainly helped national organizers create contact lists for local volunteers, even the best lists left out "sporadic" voters who had moved recently or who were unregistered. And such data did not help local campaign people find new voters.

Like Obama's national organizers in 2012, Clinton's national organizers ignored people in motion and those living at the wrong address, missing opportunities to expand voter engagement. The national campaign's focus on metrics demoralized volunteers who had been key actors in building the Obama wave of 2008. Put simply, progressives could have developed an even bigger majority in North Carolina's urban counties if national campaign managers had leaned on local organizations about how and where to reach and register sporadic voters.

## What Progressives Should Learn from North Carolina

If Democrats are to win, they need to learn from both the successes and mistakes of recent national campaigns. Only sustained voter-registration drives, collaboration between local and national organizers, and a renewed focus on what works in urban *and* nonmetropolitan counties can reach North Carolina's 800,000 unregistered voters, most of whom are Democratic-leaning. Below are three key takeaways from my analysis of voting returns in North Carolina in the last five presidential elections.

- **Geography and Voter Mobility matter as much as metrics.** The location of campaign headquarters and the location of local field offices matter. Democrats must devote resources to nonmetropolitan counties and find ways to collaborate with local actors in building long term organizing strength. Transportation also matters. Turning out transient and sporadic voters are key parts of any winning strategy for Democrats; finding them in the first place and then mobilizing them are essential tasks for Democrats hoping to reach other unregistered voters.
- **Big data will not create an enduring electoral majority.** Voter identification technologies can be useful, but it must be connected to the insight and organizing infrastructure of local actors to build *sustained* political engagement. Without the knowledge of local organizers, even the most up-to-date voter activation list will not mobilize the aspirations of a community. National campaigns must recognize that returning to a county once every four years does not build a long-term political majority, nor does it help Democrats at the state level get elected to statewide office.
- **Movement culture is essential to building long-term political organization and success.** Movement culture is a form of moral capital that emerges when local people and their organizers craft powerful, justice-based messages that mobilize people and communities simultaneously. Movement culture for progressives means not only articulating a justice-based message, but also finding where sporadic voters live and work – and empowering often unreached communities by offering them the opportunity to participate in the process of building the left's new, imagined future. Building movement culture means listening to the needs of local people and empowering them to become consistent voters and

even fellow organizers. The time frame of movement culture is historical, not one election cycle.