

# Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

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## 2026 Senate Ratings

### Toss-up (3)

MI Open (Peters, D)

Ossoff (D-Ga.)

NC Open (Tillis, R)

### Tilt Democratic (1)

NH Open (Shaheen, D)

### Tilt Republican (1)

Collins (R-Maine)

### Lean Democratic (0)

### Lean Republican (1)

Husted (R-Ohio)

### Likely Democratic (1)

MN Open (Smith, DFL)

### Likely Republican (2)

IA Open (Ernst, R)

Comyn (R-Texas)

### Solid Democratic (9)

IL Open (Durbin, D)

Booker (D-N.J.)

Coons (D-Del.)

Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)

Lujan (D-N.M.)

Markey (D-Mass.)

Merkley (D-Ore.)

Reed (D-R.I.)

Warner (D-Va.)

### Solid Republican (17)

AL Open (Tuberville, R)

KY Open (McConnell, R)

Capito (R-W.V.)

Cassidy (R-Lou.)

Cotton (R-Ark.)

Daines (R-Mont.)

Graham (R-S.C.)

Hagerty (R-Tenn.)

Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)

Lummis (R-Wyo.)

Marshall (R-Kan.)

Moody (R-Fl.)

Mullin (R-Okla.)

Ricketts (R-Neb.)

Risch (R-Idaho)

Rounds (R-S.D.)

Sullivan (R-Ak.)

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans

## CALENDAR

<b>Dec. 19</b>	North Carolina Filing Deadline
<b>Jan. 8</b>	Utah Filing Deadline
<b>Jan. 9</b>	Kentucky Filing Deadline
<b>Jan. 31</b>	Texas' 18th District Special Election Runoff

## North Carolina Senate: Tar Heel Target

By Jacob Rubashkin

It's been 18 years since a Democrat won a Senate race in North Carolina. Even so, the Tar Heel State is the best chance Democrats have at flipping a seat next year — a clear sign of the difficult map facing Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and his caucus.

But there's at least one reason for Democratic optimism heading into next year, and his name is Roy Cooper.

The former governor and longtime mainstay of North Carolina politics was one of the most heavily recruited candidates of this election cycle, and his entrance gives Democrats a proven fundraiser and vote-getter who held onto his statewide offices even as Republicans won at the top of the ticket.

Now he'll face his biggest challenge yet, against a candidate hand-picked by President Donald Trump: a fellow son of rural North Carolina, former Republican National Committee chairman Michael Whatley. Control of the Senate hangs in the balance.

### The Lay of the Land

Democrats have struggled to win federal races in North Carolina even as they find regular success in downballot contests. Barack Obama was the last Democrat to carry the Tar Heel State in a presidential election, in 2008, by just 0.3 percentage points. Since then, the Republican nominee has won by between 1 and 3 points — most recently, Trump outpaced Vice President Kamala Harris by 3 points, 51-48 percent.

It's a similarly bleak picture for Senate Democrats, who have failed to win a race in North Carolina since 2008 despite several close calls. In 2022, Republican Ted Budd bested Democrat Cheri Beasley by 3 points. In 2020, the last time this Senate seat was up for grabs, Tillis won his second term by 2 points after opponent Cal Cunningham became mired in a late-breaking sex scandal.

But Democrats have regularly won many of North Carolina's 10 state-level offices and currently control half of them. Most notably, Democrats have won eight of the nine most recent gubernatorial elections, and have won every election for state attorney general and secretary of state since 1900.

In 2024, Democrat Josh Stein won a dominant, 55-40 percent victory over embattled Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson.

Over the past 16 years, Democratic votes have become increasingly concentrated in the state's urban and suburban areas, while Republicans have made significant gains in the more rural areas. Though she lost the state overall, Harris did better than Obama in 11 of the 12 most populous counties in the state, seeing 11-point improvements in Wake (Raleigh) and Buncombe (Asheville) counties and an 8-point improvement over

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# Report Shorts

**Maine’s 2nd District.** Democratic State Sen. Joe Baldacci is moving toward a run for Congress. He commissioned a poll showing him trailing former Gov. Paul LePage, the likely GOP nominee, by just 1 point, and posted on Instagram days later that “This will be a fun campaign.” Baldacci is the younger brother of former Gov. John Baldacci, who also represented the 2nd District. Likely Republican.

**Minnesota Senate.** Former NFL sideline reporter Michelle Tafoya met with NRSC officials last week ahead of a potential Senate run, according to Alex Roarty of NOTUS. She’s been mentioned as a potential candidate since the beginning of the year but talk had died down before the recent news. Rep. Angie Craig and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan are locked in a competitive primary on the Democratic side. Democrats have a modest 6-point Baseline advantage, but Republicans haven’t won a Senate race in a quarter of a century. Likely Democratic.

**Michigan’s 4th District.** GOP Rep. Bill Huizenga confirmed he would run for re-election to his Western Michigan seat. Huizenga had been on retirement watch after being passed over for the Financial Services Committee gavel and boxed out of a Senate bid by the Trump White House. He’ll face either state Sen. Sean McCann or 2024 nominee Jessica Swartz in a race that should be competitive. Lean Republican.

**Indiana Redistricting.** The Indiana state Senate voted down a Trump-backed redistricting plan in dramatic fashion last week, dealing a blow to the president’s ambitious nationwide redistricting agenda and preserving two Democratic seats held by Reps. Frank Mrvan and Andre Carson. Despite Trump and his allies applying immense pressure, more GOP state senators voted against redistricting than for it.

**Washington’s 4th District.** GOP Rep. Dan Newhouse is not seeking re-election to the Central Washington seat. He turned back multiple challenges from other Republicans after his vote to impeach Donald Trump during the president’s first term. Businessman/former NASCAR driver Jerrod Sessler, who finished ahead of Newhouse in the 2024 primary and lost to the congressman by 6 points in the general election, was running again before Newhouse’s announcement. But other candidates will certainly take a fresh look. Trump finished ahead of Kamala Harris by 21 points in 2024 so the seat will likely remain in GOP hands. Solid Republican.



## 2026 House Ratings

### Toss-Up (2D, 8R)

AZ 1 (Open; Schweikert, R) IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R) OH 1 (Landsman, D) TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)  
AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R) MI 7 (Barrett, R) PA 7 (Mackenzie, R) VA 2 (Kiggans, R)  
CO 8 (Evans, R) NY 17 (Lawler, R)

### Tilt Democratic (6D, 2R)

CA 13 (Gray, D)  
CA 45 (Tran, D)  
CA 48 (Issa, R)  
NE 2 (Open; Bacon, R)  
NM 2 (Vasquez, D)  
NY 4 (Gillen, D)  
TX 28 (Cuellar, D)  
WA 3 (Perez, D)

### Tilt Republican (2D, 6R)

CA 22 (Valadao, R)  
MI 10 (Open; James, R)  
NC 1 (Davis, D)  
NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)  
OH 9 (Kaptur, D)  
PA 8 (Bresnahan, R)  
PA 10 (Perry, R)  
WI 3 (Van Orden, R)

### Lean Democratic (11D)

CA 21 (Costa, D) NY 3 (Suoizzi, D)  
FL 23 (Moskowitz, D) VA 7 (Vindman, D)  
IN 1 (Mrvan, D)  
MI 8 (McDonald Rivet, D)  
NH 1 (Open; Pappas, D)  
NJ 9 (Pou, D)  
NV 1 (Titus, D)  
NV 3 (Lee, D)  
NY 19 (Riley, D)

### Lean Republican (4R)

IA 3 (Nunn, R)  
MI 4 (Huizenga, R)  
PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)  
VA 1 (Wittman, R)

### Likely Democratic (8D)

CA 6 (Open; Bera, D) OH 13 (Sykes, D)  
CA 25 (Ruiz, D) PA 17 (Deluzio, D)  
CA 47 (Min, D)  
NH 2 (Goodlander, D)  
MN 2 (Open; Craig, DFL)  
NV 4 (Horsford, D)

### Likely Republican (2D, 9R)

AK AL (Begich, R) ME 2 (Open; Golden, D)  
AZ 2 (Crane, R) TN 5 (Ogles, R)  
CO 5 (Crank, R) TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)  
FL 7 (Mills, R) TX 35 (Open; Casar, D)  
FL 13 (Luna, R) WI 1 (Steil, R)  
IA 2 (Open; Hinson, R)

	GOP	DEM
Solid	190	185
Likely/Lean/Tilt	23	27
Total	213	212
Toss-up	10	
Needed for majority	218	

Takeovers in *Italics*, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans

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# New Jersey 11 Special: A Mess in Morris & Essex

By Jacob Rubashkin

Democrat Mikie Sherrill's victory in the New Jersey gubernatorial election last month triggered a special election for her 11th District, a wealthy, left-trending seat in North Jersey.

Once held by moderate Republicans Rodney Frelinghuysen and Dean Gallo, the 11th is now Democratic territory. With a dozen candidates vying for the Democratic nomination, and a plurality sufficient to win the primary, there's more uncertainty about who the next member of Congress will be from the area than anytime in the last 40 years.

The cast of characters is long and varied, filled with ghosts of New Jersey politics past, present and future. But the runway is short: just six weeks remain until Election Day, and voters will have the opportunity to cast their ballots by mail before taking off work for Christmas next week.

The eventual winner of this race will take office no earlier than mid-April, until which Democrats will be down a seat in the very narrowly divided House of Representatives.

## The Lay of the Land

The 11th District is a suburban North Jersey seat west of Newark that includes pieces of Essex, Morris, and Passaic counties. Roughly half of the district lives in the eastern part of Morris County, while another 40 percent is in Essex and the remaining 10 percent in Passaic. However, Essex — which includes wealthy liberal enclaves such as Montclair, Maplewood and South Orange — punches above its weight in Democratic primaries. In the most recent 11th District primary, which wasn't competitive, Essex cast 51 percent of the vote, compared to 39 percent for Morris and 10 percent for Passaic.

The district is majority white at 60 percent, and has significant Hispanic (17 percent) and Indian-American (6 percent) populations. Hispanic residents are overrepresented in the Essex part of the district, as well as the majority-Hispanic city of Dover in Morris County, while Indian residents are concentrated in the center of the district. Roughly 5 percent of the population is Black and 5 percent non-Indian Asian.

Nearly 60 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher, making the 11th one of the most



Tom Malinowski

educated districts in the country (the national average is less than 40 percent). With a median household income of \$134,000, the 11th is also one of the 20 wealthiest districts in the country.

Politically, the district has a clear preference for Democrats, with a Baseline score of D+13.5, indicating that a typical Democrat should win by nearly 14 points. Most recently, Sherrill carried the district by 15 points in the 2025 gubernatorial election, 57-42 percent, over Republican Jack Ciattarelli. She previously won re-election in 2024 by the same margin.

In the 2024 presidential election, Vice President Kamala Harris had a relatively weak showing, winning by just 9 points over Donald Trump. That was a steep decline from Joe Biden's 20-point win in the 2020

election, a collapse seen across New Jersey that cycle.

Like many wealthy, educated suburban districts, the 11th has become more Democratic in the age of Trump. Barack Obama would have won it by just 4 and 5 points in 2008 and 2012, respectively, despite winning statewide by significantly larger margins than Harris.

## The Democratic Candidates

Twelve Democrats have filed to run in the February 5 primary: former Rep. Tom Malinowski, Essex County Commissioner Brendan Gill, Lt. Gov. Tahesha Way, former New Jersey Working Families Party executive director Analilia Mejia, Passaic County Commissioner/2018 House candidate John Bartlett, venture capitalist and former paratrooper



Brendan Gill

Zach Beecher, Morris Township deputy mayor Jeff Grayzel, Chatham Borough councilor Justin Strickland, former Maplewood mayor Dean Dafis, former Obama administration official Cammie Croft, impressionist and attorney J-L Cauvin,

and Anna Williams, a corporate social responsibility and engagement manager for a digital music company.

Malinowski, 60, served two terms in Congress from the neighboring 7th District, which sits to the west of the 11th (just 5 percent of the current 11th's voters overlap with the old 7th). The Poland-born Democrat grew up in Princeton, NJ and is a 1987 graduate of University of California, Berkeley. After completing a Rhodes Scholarship in 1991, Malinowski worked in the Clinton Administration in the State Department and on the National Security Council. In 2001, he became the head of Human Rights Watch's Washington, DC office, where he worked for 13 years.

In 2014, Malinowski was confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, a post he held until Trump took office in 2017. Later that year he launched a bid for Congress against GOP incumbent Leonard Lance in the 7th District, which had voted narrowly for Hillary Clinton the year prior. Malinowski won, 51-46 percent, in a strong night for New Jersey Democrats.

Two years later, he narrowly defeated state Sen. Tom Kean, Jr. by 1 point even as Biden carried the 7th by 10 points. Following the Census, the 7th was made somewhat less favorable to Democrats, and in 2022 Malinowski lost a rematch to Kean by 3 points, in a race saw Republicans accuse him of improper stock trades during the Covid-19 pandemic.

His campaign team includes media consultant Brad Lawrence of Message & Media, pollster Anna Greenberg of GQR, and Pivot for direct mail.

Gill, 51, has been a fixture of Montclair and New Jersey politics for more than two decades, both as an operative and an elected official. The Belleville, NJ-born Gill graduated from Seton Hall in 1996 and went to work for then-Rep. Bill Pascrell.

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While working for Pascarell, Gill attended Seton Hall Law School but did not graduate after his actions in a 2000 bar fight led to his pleading guilty to simple assault against a classmate.

Gill went on to manage Pascarell's 2000 re-election campaign, and served in numerous different capacities in state Democratic politics for the next decade, including as district director for Pascarell and Rep. Steve Rothman, field director for Bob Menendez's 2006 Senate campaign, and state director and 2008 campaign manager for Sen. Frank Lautenberg.

In 2011, Gill ran for a seat on the Essex County board of freeholders, winning 62-38 percent. Three years later he won one of four at-large seats on the board, which he still holds. Gill also managed then-Newark Mayor Cory Booker's campaign for Senate in 2013 to succeed Lautenberg, and founded a political consulting and public affairs firm in 2014.

Gill also managed Phil Murphy's successful 2017 primary and general election gubernatorial campaigns.

His campaign team includes manager Danielle O'Bryne.

The Bronx-born Way has served as lieutenant governor since 2023. A 1993 graduate of Brown University and 1996

graduate of University of Virginia Law School, Way has also served as New Jersey Secretary of State since 2018.

After graduating law school, Way worked briefly as a producer for Court TV before practicing as an attorney and administrative law judge in Totowa, NJ, and working as an adjunct literature professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University. In 2006, Way was appointed to the Passaic County board of freeholders, and was soon considered a rising star in the party, with her name floated as a potential running mate to Gov. Jon Corzine in the 2009 election. However, she lost her seat on the county board in an upset as Republicans narrowly swept Passaic that year.

Way, whose husband Charles Way was a fullback for the New York Giants, returned to her legal work and later served as a special counsel to the Passaic board. In 2017, Way was also considered by Murphy as a potential running mate. Instead, he nominated her to be secretary of state after he won.

Following the death of Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver in 2023, Murphy nominated Way as her replacement.

Way's campaign team includes general consultants Nick Ryan and Jordan Woods, direct mail consultant Alan Moore, and pollster Ron Lester, while MVAR is doing media.

Mejia, 49, is an Elizabeth, NJ native making her first run for office but whose career has taken her to the heights of progressive Democratic circles.

After earning three degrees from Rutgers (undergraduate in 2000 and masters' in politics and labor in 2002 and 2003), Mejia worked for several unions in New Jersey and the Midwest, including the United Food and Commercial Workers, UNITE HERE, and the SEIU. From 2011 to 2014, Mejia held leadership roles at 32BJ, the powerful property service union in New Jersey. From there, she was appointed executive director of the

state's Working Families Party, where she worked from 2014 to 2019.

In 2019, Mejia joined the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign as the national political director, remaining with the Vermont senator through the conclusion of the 2020 presidential campaign. After a brief tenure at the Department of Labor under Biden as deputy director of the Women's Bureau, Mejia became co-director of the Center for Popular Democracy, a nationwide progressive advocacy group.

Her campaign team includes general consultant Camille Rivera of New Deal Strategies.

Bartlett, 53, has served as a Passaic County Commissioner since 2013, and previously sought this seat in the 2018 election. A 1995 graduate of Brown University and 2001 graduate of Harvard Law School, Bartlett has primarily practiced as an attorney at three different firms over the past two decades. His clients have included the Democratic National Committee and multiple Democratic political campaigns, and he has worked for the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.

In 2012, Bartlett was elected to the Passaic board, and has been re-elected four times to three-year terms.

In 2017, Bartlett launched a campaign against then-Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen in the 11th District. However, he dropped out before the primary after failing to gain traction.

Bartlett's campaign team includes media consultant Isaac Baker of Thematic Campaigns, Impact Research for polling, and Deliver Strategies for mail.

Beecher, 35, is a newcomer to politics. A Mt. Olive, NJ native and 2013 graduate of Princeton (where he was president of his class), Beecher is a major in the US Army Reserve and served with the 82nd Airborne. He deployed to Mosul, Iraq during Operation Inherent Resolve against

ISIS. After leaving the Army, he earned masters degrees from Cambridge and Kings College, London, and rejoined the Reserve in 2019.

Since 2019, Beecher has also worked in venture capital at a number of firms in Washington, DC and



**Tahesha Way**

Courtesy Way Campaign



**Analilia Mejia**

Courtesy Mejia Campaign

New Jersey.

His campaign team includes media consultant Mollie Binotto of Sena Kozar, pollster Angie Keufler of Global Strategy Group, and The Strategy Group for direct mail.

Grayzel, 62, has held office on and off in Morris Township (pop. 23,507) for the past two decades. A 1985 dual degree graduate of Cornell University, Grayzel also earned a master's in industrial engineering from Columbia in 1990. He worked for pharmaceutical company Bristol Myers Squibb from 1985 to 1999 and since then has operated his own medical device company.

Grayzel repeatedly sought local office in the Republican-leaning Morris Township, running for town committeeman unsuccessfully in 2003, 2004, and 2005. In 2006, he appeared to lose a hotly contested race by 1 vote after a recount, but a judge ordered a new election. In that 2007 contest, Grayzel won and became the first Democrat to hold a local office in the town since 1973.

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He lost re-election in 2009, but recaptured his seat in 2010. He lost again in 2013, and failed to return in a 2015 comeback attempt. In 2018, however, Grayzel successfully regained a seat on the committee as Democrats took their first majority in history, and he served as the township's first Democratic mayor. He gave up his seat in 2019 to run for state Senate, losing to the GOP incumbent by 15 points, but returned to the town government in 2022, ousting the last GOP incumbent on the board. He won re-election earlier this year.

Dafis, 55, is currently a member of the Maplewood (pop. 26,127) town council. Raised in between Philadelphia and Athens, Greece, Dafis graduated from Temple University in 1992 and University of Richmond Law School in 1996. After working as a public defender in Virginia, Dafis moved to New York City to work for JP Morgan Chase from 2000 to 2008. He subsequently worked for gay rights group Marriage Equality USA (Dafis is gay and has spoken about surviving conversion therapy as a teenager), law firm Cravath, and a headhunting firm.

In 2015, Dafis moved to Maplewood and was elected to the Maplewood council in 2017, winning that race and two subsequent terms unopposed. He also serves as the director of the Office of Eviction Prevention in New Jersey's Division of Housing.

His campaign team includes Change Research for polling. Jason DeAlessi of Fuerza Strategy Group is doing the direct mail.

Strickland, 46, grew up in Texas and is a graduate of Texas A&M University. He enlisted in the Army and deployed twice to Iraq, in Baghdad and Mosul, earning the rank of captain. Following his military service he worked as an economic development official for the Pentagon in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Strickland was elected to the Chatham (pop. 9,212) council in 2023, and was a candidate for Morris County Commission in 2024, but lost that race, 55-45 percent.

Strickland was the first candidate to signal his interest in running for



Dean Dafis

Courtesy Croft Campaign



Cammie Croft

operative for local candidates before moving to Washington, DC to work on national progressive issue campaigns. She joined the Obama campaign in 2008 as a rapid response director and joined the administration in

2009, first in the White House and then at the Department of Energy.

After leaving the administration, Croft worked in digital media for a number of nonprofits, most notably Amnesty International, Fwd.us, and Rewiring America, and as a consultant to other groups. She moved to Montclair in 2021.

Also running are comedian J-L Cauvin, whose Trump impressions have gone viral on social media, and community advocate Anna Lee Williams. A Williams College (2001) and Georgetown law school (2004) graduate, Cauvin, 45, worked as an assistant district attorney in the Bronx before moving to private practice. He moved to Bloomfield, New Jersey in 2019 and has toured nationally as a comedian.

Williams, who works for a digital music company, is a Morristown resident and Rutgers graduate.

Courtesy Dafis Campaign

## The Democratic Primary

The dominant theme of the primary is uncertainty.

Election Day is February 5 — a Thursday, not a typical election Tuesday. The schedule set by Murphy is expedited and gives candidates at most two months to make their case. In fact, candidates have even less time than that: mail ballots will be sent out on December 22. In the 2025 gubernatorial election, nearly a quarter of 11th District voters cast their ballots by mail. Another 10 percent voted early in-person (in-person voting begins January 29).

The election also comes in the wake of a massive gubernatorial race that sapped the district's attention, energy and resources. And the most crucial moments of the campaign will play out during the winter holiday season, when voters are least likely to focus on politics and may be traveling out of the district or state, and canvassers will have to contend with below-freezing temperatures.

All that suggests that turnout in the primary could be very low, potentially in the low-to-mid-teens.

The breadth of the field also makes it difficult to handicap; local sources say at least a half-dozen candidates could conceivably come out ahead, and many of the candidates have overlapping geographic or ideological bases of support.

The district is also entirely within the New York media market, making broadcast television prohibitively expensive for most if not all of the candidates, who have to raise money on a compressed timeline.

And all of the candidates — and analysts — are operating with more

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## Inside Elections Podcast

*Nathan, Jacob and expert guests discuss the latest election news in a nonpartisan, data-driven and accessible way.*

**Episode 61:** Nathan, Jacob and University of Virginia's Larry Sabato talk about the most important aspects of political analysis and learn about Larry's path into the world of punditry.

**Episode 60:** Nathan, Jacob and Kirk Bado of National Journal's Hotline discuss what Republicans, Democrats and even President Donald Trump should be thankful for during this holiday season.

**Episode 59:** Nathan, Jacob and Leah Askarinam of the Associated Press analyze the 2025 election results and politics of the shutdown.

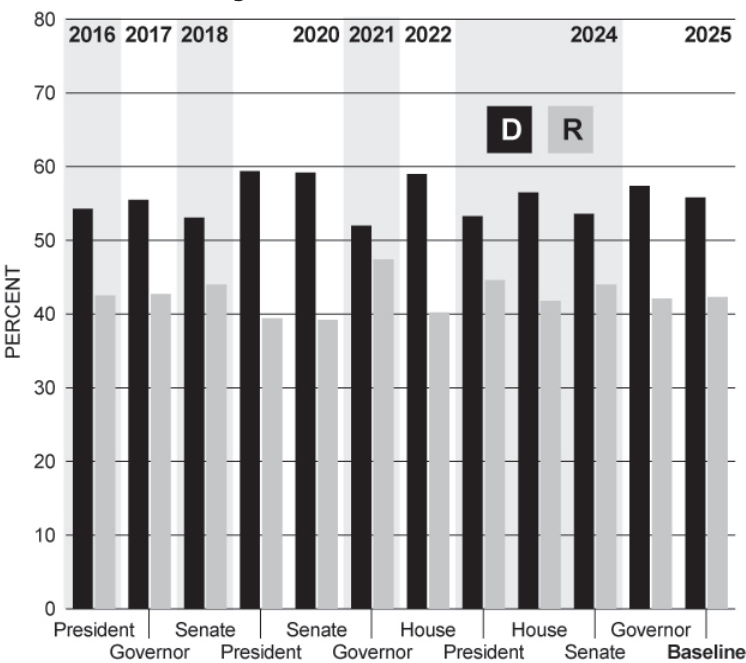
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limited information about their opponents than is typical. Due to a lack of a quorum at the Federal Election Commission, there is no formal fundraising reporting schedule for this race. The earliest that campaigns will have to disclose their fundraising and donors is January 24.

How It Plays Out

Local and national Democrats agree that Malinowski and Gill begin as the two frontrunners, but stress that the two men and their allies are set on a collision course that could damage both and create an opportunity for one of the other candidates to emerge as an alternative. Malinowski began the race with higher name ID than the rest of the field, thanks to his two terms representing a neighboring district and three congressional campaigns that saw him spend \$23 million. He also has a national donor network that helped him become one of the top Democratic fundraisers in 2022, and he’s likely to be the top fundraiser in this race. His campaign said it had raised more than \$750,000 through early December, and he’s the first candidate to air 30-second ads on digital and streaming platforms. He also received the endorsement of the Morris County Democratic Committee and has a powerful backer in Sen. Andy Kim. Gill also has significant institutional strengths, and entered the race with a bevy of Essex County endorsements. His campaign is backed by Murphy and Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, and he won the Essex County nominating convention, albeit in a process many of his opponents felt was heavily biased toward him, and which was nearly delayed by a more progressive faction of delegates who objected to its rushed nature. Gill has assembled a powerful network of allies over his two decades in New Jersey politics, and has endorsements from a number of labor unions including two IBEW locals, the SMART transit union, and the Hotel and Gaming Trades Council. His name ID is the second-highest

Statewide Election Results for New Jersey’s 11th District



among the candidates thanks to his multiple ballot appearances countywide in Essex, which makes up half the primary vote. A poll from the Malinowski campaign conducted by GQR in mid-November showed Malinowski ahead with 28 percent, followed by Gill at 12 percent, and Way and Mejia tied at 5 percent. No other candidate received more than 2 percent of the vote.

There is a possibility this race proceeds as a Malinowski vs. Gill knife



John Bartlett

fight. That could play out as a geographic battle between Malinowski’s Morris and Gill’s Essex bases, as well as a proxy fight between Kim and Murphy, two years after Kim denied First Lady Tammy Murphy a Senate seat.

However, both Gill and Malinowski will likely face well-funded outside groups eager to take the shine off of their candidacies beginning in early January. Malinowski’s allies are girding for resurfaced attacks on his stock trades, which were a dominant theme in his 2022 re-election. Malinowski was investigated by the House Ethics Committee for trades he made of medical stocks during the Covid-19 pandemic, and Republicans spent millions of dollars highlighting the issue in 2022. Rumors abound that cryptocurrency interests could spend against Malinowski as well, after the former congressman has called out the industry for tolerating corruption and scams.

Meanwhile, Gill will face attacks from a group founded by onetime friend Julie Roginsky, a Democratic strategist who had a public falling out with Gill on the 2017 Murphy campaign and accused him of creating a toxic environment and using obscenities toward her. While Roginsky’s group has already begun airing a pro-Malinowski ad backed by at least \$100,000, many watching the race expect the group to hit Gill over the decades-old assault charge at Seton Hall. Initial reports from that incident said Gill used a baseball bat to beat his classmate, which Gill denies.

The question for the other candidates is if they can position themselves as a viable third option for voters turned off from both Malinowski and Gill. Local sources say Mejia and Way are the likeliest to have that opportunity.

Mejia is the most prominent candidate to make an explicitly ideological pitch to voters, leaning into her progressive bona fides as a Working Families Party member and former Sanders staffer. Her path relies less on a specific geographic base than activating progressive and labor voters around the district, and she recently secured endorsements from the WFP, the state SEIU and one of the larger Communications Workers of America locals.

On paper, the 11th doesn’t appear to be the most fertile ground for Sanders-style politics. But it’s not necessary to win a majority — or anything close to one — in such a crowded field, and if Mejia can lock down a more left-wing lane in the primary that could provide enough votes to put her in contention. She finished third in the Morris County convention, after Malinowski and Gill.

Way, meanwhile, is likely the only other candidate who will benefit from independent expenditures on her behalf. The Democratic

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Lieutenant Governor's Association will spend to boost her, though it's not obvious how much. The organization has already begun to send pro-Way mailers. In looking to distinguish her from the field, Way's allies point to her status as the only Black woman in the race and her ability to point to her clashes with Trump as state secretary of state. And the lieutenant governor is well-liked within the state and seen as running a serious campaign. But she'll have to overcome a geographic disadvantage coming out of Passaic County, which only makes up 10 percent of the electorate and which she shares with Bartlett.



Zach Beecher

Courtesy Beecher Campaign

Still other candidates are hoping to lean into their unique strengths to surprise observers.

Bartlett's main advantage is the \$200,000 he had remaining in his 2018 campaign account, which he can now put toward his 2026 bid. But he'll also struggle to stand out in the field, especially coming out of Passaic County.

Beecher touted raising \$225,000 in his first two days in the race and is looking to leverage his outsider status and military background to appeal to Democrats tired of politics as usual, modeling his approach after Sherrill's own successful outsider bid in 2018. But he'll have to overcome his lack of name ID or geographic base in the district.

Grayzel is the only candidate to reach into his own pocket to help fund his campaign, with a \$100,000 loan, but has struggled to gain

traction. Grayzel has focused his campaign on winning over the district's Jewish voters, and launched his bid saying he was a "proud Zionist," but despite his long service in Morris County, he came in second-to-last place at the Morris convention.

Strickland also fell flat at the Morris Convention despite holding office in the county.

Dafis has highlighted his history-making potential: he would be the first openly gay member of the state's delegation. And his campaign is perhaps the most narrowly geographically focused of the bunch. Dafis' home of Maplewood and neighboring South Orange are his primary targets, and his allies believe that in a fractured field a few thousand votes concentrated in that area could be enough to come out on top.

Croft has earned plaudits from national Democrats familiar with her work in the Obama administration, and her early start fundraising means she had nearly \$200,000 at the end of the September to kickstart her campaign. But with limited political ties in the district and no name ID, it's not easy to see how she breaks out of the pack.

## The Bottom Line

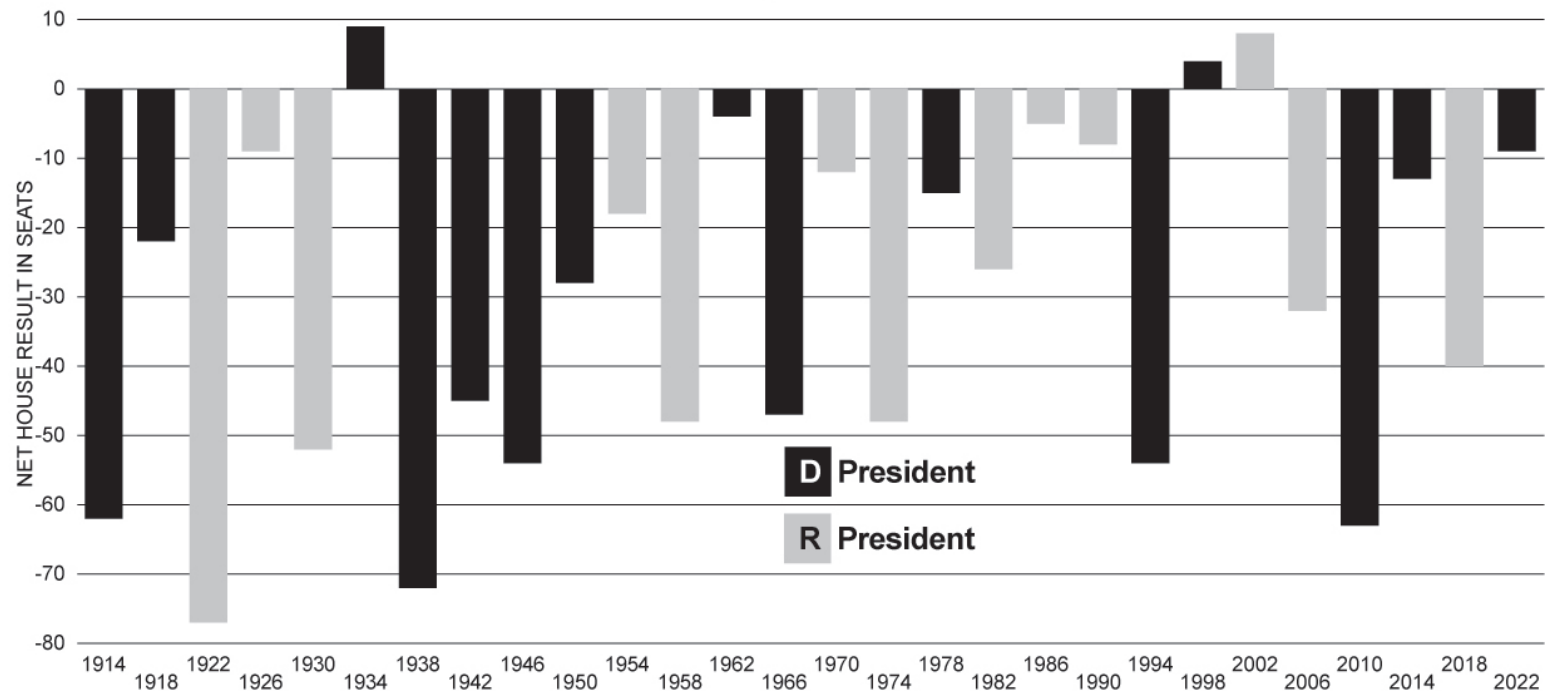
The winner of the Democratic primary will go on to face Republican nominee Joe Hathaway, the mayor of Randolph, in the April 16 special general election. The Democrat will be highly favored in that race, given the partisan lean of the district.

But the story may not end there. Depending on which candidate emerges from the primary, one or more of the losing candidates could choose to challenge them in the regular election primary just a few months later. That race takes place on June 2, with a filing deadline of March 23; so the winner of the primary can't ignore either of their flanks as they look to the special election.

Ultimately, this is a district Democrats should win, as they look to replenish their ranks and flip the additional three seats necessary to take back control of Congress next year.

IE

## Midterm House Results for the President's Party



Continued from page 1  
Obama in Mecklenburg (Charlotte). However, Harris’ margin was worse than Obama’s in 83 of the state’s 100 counties.

The Presumptive Democratic Nominee

Former Gov. Roy Cooper quickly consolidated support from local and Democrats after entering the race, a reflection of his stature within the party and a recognition among Democrats that he is their best chance at flipping the seat. Former Rep. Wiley Nickel briefly ran but dropped out after Cooper entered the race.

Cooper, 68, recently wrapped up eight years as governor and 38 unbroken years in elected office. The Nashville, North Carolina-born Cooper served 16 years as state attorney general, 10 in the state Senate, and 4 in the state House, winning his first election in 1986.

A 1979 graduate of University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and 1982 graduate of UNC’s law school, Cooper worked at his father’s law firm before entering politics, first as an operative on the 1984 Lauch Faircloth gubernatorial campaign and then by challenging a 12-term incumbent state representative in the Democratic primary in 1986. He won, 76-24 percent, in an upset, and was unopposed in the general election.

2026 Governor Ratings

Toss-up (4D)

- KS Open (Kelly, D)
- WI Open (Evers, D)
- MI Open (Whitmer, D)
- Hobbs (D-Ariz.)

Tilt Democratic

Tilt Republican (2R)

- GA Open (Kemp, R)
- Lombardo (R-Nev.)

Lean Democratic (2D)

Lean Republican

Likely Democratic (5D)

Likely Republican (1R)

- ME Open (Mills, D)
- NM Open (Lujan-Grisham, D)
- Hochul (D-N.Y.)
- Shapiro (D-Penn.)
- Walz (D-Minn.)

- IA Open (Reynolds, R)

Solid Democratic (9D)

Solid Republican (15R)

- CA Open (Newsom, D)
- CO Open (Polis, D)
- Green (D-Hawaii)
- Healey (D-Mass.)
- Kotek (D-Ore.)
- Lamont (D-Ct.)
- McKee (D-R.I.)
- Moore (D-Md.)
- Pritzker (D-Ill.)

- AK Open (Dunleavy, R)
- AL Open (Ivey, R)
- FL Open (DeSantis, R)
- OH Open (DeWine, R)
- OK Open (Stitt, R)
- SC Open (McMaster, R)
- TN Open (Lee, R)
- WY Open (Gordon, R)
- Abbott (R-Texas)
- Ayotte (R-N.H.)
- Huckabee Sanders (R-Ark.)
- Little (R-Idaho)
- Pillen (R-Neb.)
- Rhoden (R-S.D.)
- Scott (R-Vt.)

Takeovers in Italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans

After four years in the state House Cooper was appointed to a vacancy in the state Senate, and was elected majority leader in 1997.  
In 2000, Cooper ran for state Attorney General, defeating Republican Dan Boyce, 51-46 percent. (Boyce sued Cooper over claims he made in that race; the two settled 14 years later after Cooper apologized.) In 2004, Cooper faced off against Republican Joe Knott (father of future Rep. Brad Knott), winning by 11 points.

In 2007, Cooper was thrust into the national spotlight when he took over the investigation into the Duke lacrosse case following the recusal of the Durham County District Attorney. Cooper ultimately made the decision to declare the three lacrosse players “innocent” of the rape charges they had faced in the widely discussed case.

In 2008, Cooper won his largest contested victory, defeating Republican Bob Crumley, 61-38 percent. In 2012, he won re-election unopposed, even as Mitt Romney and Pat McCrory won at the top of the



Roy Cooper

ticket for president and governor.  
In 2016, Cooper faced off against McCrory, who had gained national notoriety for his role in passing North Carolina’s “bathroom bill,” in a high-profile contest and one of the rare bright spots for

Democrats that year. Cooper eked out a 0.22-point win — a margin of 10,277 votes — but McCrory alleged improprieties and filed complaints and legal challenges across the state. After a protracted process confirmed Cooper’s victory, McCrory conceded a month later.

In 2020, Cooper won re-election against Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, 52-47 percent, despite regularly polling ahead by double-digits.  
During the 2024 presidential election, Cooper was briefly a vice presidential prospect for the ticket led by Harris, but took his name out of contention in late July.

Cooper’s campaign team includes media consultants Meredith Kelly, AJ Lenar, and Trey Nix of Declaration Media, pollster Molly Murphy of Impact Research, and direct mail consultant Pete Giangreco.

The (Likely) Republican Nominee

While military author and Navy veteran Don Brown has been running and 2024 Superintendent of Public Instruction nominee Michele Morrow just jumped into the race on Friday, Whatley’s near-total consolidation of support from Trump World makes him the clear favorite. Morrow can’t be dismissed considering she narrowly lost statewide after defeating an incumbent in the primary and could get national attention considering her old social media posts calling for Biden and Obama to be executed on live TV.

Whatley, 57, has never run for office before but has spent years at the highest levels of North Carolina and national GOP politics. Most recently he served as the chairman of the Republican National Committee from March 2024 to August 2025, and as the chairman of the North Carolina GOP from 2019 to 2024.

Born in Blowing Rock, a Western North Carolina mountain town known as a tourist hot spot, Whatley graduated from UNC-Charlotte in 1991. He earned a master’s degree in religion from Wake Forest in 1993,

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and another master's in theology from Notre Dame in 1994. He earned a law degree from Notre Dame in 1997.

Whatley clerked for a federal judge in North Carolina and practiced law (including a stint on George W. Bush's recount team) before moving to Washington, DC to work for Georgia Sen. Paul Coverdell. After a brief spell in the Department of Energy, Whatley returned to Capitol Hill to work as chief of staff to the newly elected North Carolina Sen. Elizabeth Dole.

In 2005, Whatley embarked on a career as an energy lobbyist, at firm HBW Resources and its related nonprofit, the Consumer Energy Alliance, which advocated on behalf of oil and gas companies.

After former North Carolina GOP chairman and former Rep. Robin Hayes was indicted on bribery charges in 2019, the state party selected Whatley as his replacement (Hayes was later pardoned by Trump in January 2021).

In 2023, Whatley was Trump's pick for the number 2 spot at the RNC, but came in third in that race to South Carolina GOP chairman Drew McKissik. A year later, after RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel resigned amid tension with Trump, Whatley ascended to the group's top job, which he held until announcing his run for Senate.

Whatley's general consultant is Chris Grant of Big Dog Strategies.

## The General Election

North Carolina Senate races famously take time to develop, and relative to its importance on the battlefield, this race has flown somewhat under the radar. States such as Maine, Michigan, Texas, and Georgia have attracted more attention so far.

That's not a surprise to strategists watching the race, who say that the lack of serious primaries on either side means both candidates are under less pressure to make waves early on. And the relative quiet doesn't change beliefs across the political spectrum that this race will ultimately be a barnburner settled by a few points in either direction — and will carry a price tag that could exceed half a billion dollars.

Cooper begins ahead by mid-single digits in early polling but even

Democrats are quick to qualify those results, given that the former governor begins the race with sky-high name ID while Whatley is not well-known outside of GOP political circles.

The Democrat also starts with a hefty financial advantage, reporting \$8.5 million in cash on hand at the end of September, compared to just \$1.1 million for Whatley.



Courtesy, Whatley Campaign

Michael Whatley

Republicans acknowledge that Whatley begins the race at a polling and financial disadvantage, but see hopeful signs in the broader North Carolina political landscape, with several sources pointing to the GOP's imminent overtaking

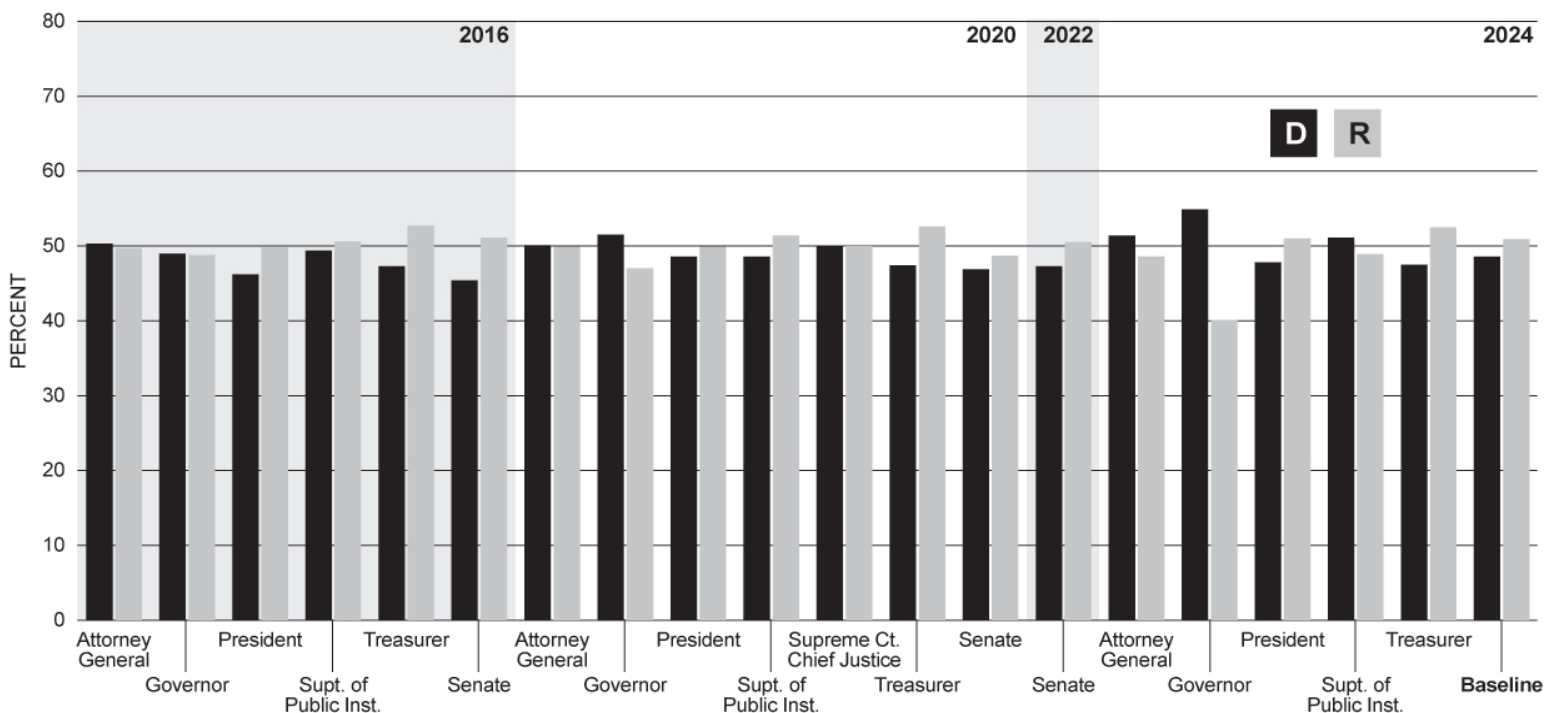
of Democrats in voter registration advantage (much of that comes from a shift of Democrats to unaffiliated, and older Democrats dying, rather than an increase in Republicans). But the Republican will need to rely on his ample Rolodex to generate the funds he'll need to introduce himself to the state's 10 media markets.

Whatley's allies are eager to turn Cooper into a national figure, now that he's running for a federal job for the first time. The national Democratic brand remains abysmal, and Republicans will look to use a similar playbook to other races in Republican-leaning states that featured Democrats with distinct brands, such as last year's Senate contests in Montana and Ohio.

"The problem for Cooper is that he has a national Democratic Party not ideologically aligned with the state as a whole, and he was able to survive as governor as a right-of-center Democrat," said one longtime GOP operative, "but the problem for Whatley is that the message needed

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## Statewide Election Results for North Carolina



Continued from page 9

to taint Cooper as a national Democrat is going to be coming from the institutions that voters in the center already dislike.”

Republicans have already begun to assail Cooper on crime. Whatley and Trump have blamed the highly publicized and graphic murder of a Ukrainian refugee in Charlotte on Cooper, pointing to Cooper’s creation of a taskforce on racial equity in 2020 that called for cashless bail for some misdemeanors. There’s no evidence that the taskforce’s report played a role in the release of the man accused of the murder, but even some Democrats acknowledge Cooper will have to lean into his own law and order bona fides from his time as attorney general to fend off incoming GOP attacks.

Whatley’s allies will also take advantage of the shift in attitudes on trans issues to paint Cooper as out of step with the state. Cooper campaigned heavily against the “bathroom bill” in his 2016 gubernatorial race and vetoed three anti-trans bills in 2023. The Republican Senate Leadership Fund, the main GOP Senate super PAC, has already run ads highlighting those vetoes, adapting the Trump campaign’s “Kamala is for they/them” for Cooper.

Democrats are still assessing how to approach Whatley, who presents as more of a blank slate than Republicans’ other Senate candidates this cycle or in previous North Carolina races but whose lobbying background will be picked over by opposition researchers. “He’s sort of one of these guys who is unremarkable and because of that, there’s a danger,” said one Democrat. “It can be hard for voters to sink their teeth into, ‘why is this guy the bad guy?’”

Whatley is closely tied to Trump, who handpicked him to lead the national party and then to be the standard bearer in the Senate race. But Democrats can’t count on the man who won the state three times in a row to be an albatross for Whatley.

“The president is definitely underwater, but I would not say he’s reviled,” said one Democratic operative. “He’s not boogeyman status at all, he’s a complicated figure, and there’s a certain appreciation for Trump that swing voters give for being tough.”

(One Republican strategist argued it was actually freeing to be so closely associated with the president, since it meant avoiding the uncomfortable contortions that other Republican politicians feel

compelled to engage in, “because what’s the point?”)

Democrats also see Whatley’s role in the response to Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina as a particularly promising vulnerability. Trump put Whatley in charge of overseeing hurricane relief efforts earlier this year. But after cuts made to FEMA by the Department of Government Efficiency, and a new policy implemented by Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem requiring her personal approval for any contract over \$100,000, relief aid has been slow coming to the region.

Western North Carolina was also a rare bright spot for Democrats nationwide. Along with the Atlanta suburbs and northwest Washington State, Western North Carolina was one of the only regions in the country where Harris did better than Biden.

Republicans may counter attacks on the Helene recovery effort by pointing to lingering frustrations with Cooper’s own response to Hurricane Michael, in Eastern North Carolina, back in 2017.

Ultimately, in a state as inelastic as North Carolina, the outcome may come down to the state of the economy — and voters’ perception of the economy — in the back half of 2026.

GOP operatives maintain optimism that the more popular provisions of the One Big Beautiful Bill will improve economic sentiment next year as people see tax benefits, and that the disruption from Trump’s tariff policy will abate as the markets either acclimate to the new normal, or if the administration reverses course and removes the levies. A weaker economy could be difficult for Whatley. “If we’re still talking about affordability issues in six months,” said one Republican, “we’ll have to scramble.”

## The Bottom Line

Don’t be fooled by the lack of movement in the race thus far. This contest is competitive and critical and will attract significant attention and outside spending by the end of next year.

North Carolina is a must-win state for Democrats, whose narrow path to the Senate majority runs squarely through I-85. Along with Maine, North Carolina is the lowest-hanging fruit available to Democrats, who also need to pull off upset wins in two of Ohio, Iowa, Alaska and Texas. **IE**

## Midterm Senate Results for the President’s Party

