

## Carter Wrenn's "Talking About Politics" blogs on the 2018 Election in CD 2

1.

### Blue Moon

The first time I ever laid eyes on a 'blue-moon' election was thirty-six years ago, after Ronald Reagan was elected. What's a blue moon election? It's the first election after a new President takes office, when there's not a Senator or Governor on the ballot running statewide.

Back in 1982, Jesse Helms's political organization had won three straight elections. So, we did the same things that had worked before. And we lost every race. What had changed?

The next blue moon election was 12 years later, after Bill Clinton was elected. This time the blue moon smiled on the Republicans – who defeated so many Democrats they won a majority in the State House and won four Democratic Congressional seats. Republican candidates who'd been running and losing for years suddenly won. What had changed?

The blue moon didn't return until 2010, after President Obama was elected. And, again, it favored Republicans who – after a century of trying and failing – suddenly won majorities in both the State Senate and State House. How did that happen?

There were the same three trends in each election. In 1982 they worked for Democrats; in 1994 and 2010 they elected Republicans.

Let's look at 2010: President Obama was unpopular which meant angry Republicans voted in droves, disappointed Democrats stayed home, and unhappy Independents voted for Republicans to send Democrats a message. There're a dozen explanations for why those three trends occurred but, whichever explanation is right, those were the trends that determined the outcome of the election.

Now, eight years later, the blue moon is back and it looks like history (and the same three trends) is repeating itself – only in reverse. This time, the blue moon is shining on the Democrats.

Take Congressman George Holding's race. By voter registration George's district is 35% Republican, 35% Democratic and 30% Independent. But that's misleading because one group of Democrats, rural conservatives, almost always vote for a Conservative Republican – which gives a Republican a four or five-point advantage. Let's call it 37% Republican to 33% Democratic.

Now let's do some math: That four-point advantage means if 45% of the Independents vote for George Holding he wins. In the last three elections, in 2012, 2014, and 2016, when Independents disapproved of the job Obama was doing, George received over 60% of the Independents' votes and won each election with almost 57% of the total vote.

But that happened in a political world where Obama was in the White House. And now, that political world no longer exists. And a new world has taken its place.

Last fall, when we took the first poll in George's 2018 campaign we got a picture of that new world. When we asked the standard 'Generic Ballot' question – *In the election for Congress were today, would you vote for the Republican or the Democratic candidate* – the 'Generic' Democrat candidate who should have trailed by four or five points was tied with the Republican candidate.

We took another poll in March and another in July, and in July, for the first time, George trailed his Democratic opponent by three points with 15% of the voters undecided. What had changed? Liberal and African-American Democrats, angry at Trump, were voting more heavily than Republicans. And Independents, who were unhappy with Trump, were voting for Democrats – to send Republicans a message. Those three trends echo the trends in the other blue moon elections.

Today a lot of Republicans in North Carolina, after winning four elections when Obama was President, are looking at the 2018 election the same way they looked at the 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016 elections. They believe this election is no different from those four elections. But the political world isn't made of stone. It changes.

What can a Republican candidate do when the blue moon is shining on Democrats?

To be continued...

2.

### Blue Moon Elections: Who Votes

Two years ago, just before the election, when early voting started, a surprising trend appeared out of thin air. Fewer African-American Democrats were voting than had voted in the 2012 Presidential election. And the impact was profound.

Before the 2016 election polls showed Richard Burr running even with, or a couple points ahead of, Democrat Deborah Ross; and Pat McCrory was trailing Roy Cooper by four to five points. On election day, when fewer African-American Democrats voted, Burr's lead rose to 6 points and Pat McCrory came within a whisker of defeating Roy Cooper.

This year in a poll when you ask, *This election, will you definitely vote, are you very likely to vote, or only somewhat likely to vote?* more African-American Democrats and liberal Democrats are going to 'definitely vote' than either Republicans or Independents.

What caused that change?

It's hard to tell. But that's not unusual in a blue moon election after a new President settles into the White House.

Why Liberal Democrats are more likely to vote is easy to understand: Every time Trump tweets they get overheated.

Why are African-American Democrats voting heavier? That's probably, or partly, Trump too. But there may be more to the story. I didn't think much of the Charlottesville protests when they happened a year ago but looking back I can see how Trump may have crossed a Rubicon with African-American Democrats when he failed to condemn what CNN called 'White Nationalist' protestors.

And what about Republicans? Republicans overwhelmingly approve of President Trump but, below the surface, there is ambivalence: One group of Republicans – the strongest Trump supporters – approve of both Trump's personality and his policies, while another group approves of his policies but not his personality.

Complicating that picture, in a poll when you ask, *Do you approve or disapprove of the job the Republicans in Congress are doing*, many Republicans answer 'Disapprove.' It turns out Republicans dislike the swamp more than Democrats and, for more than a few Republicans, the swamp includes the Republican leadership in Congress.

Why does that matter?

It means one group of strongly pro-Trump Republicans may be looking at this election, thinking, *I'm 100% for Trump but I don't really like the Republican leaders in Congress*. Will they vote this election when Trump's not on the ballot?

And the other group of Republicans, the Ambivalents, may be thinking, *I have mixed feelings about Trump and I don't like the job the Republicans in Congress are doing*. They may be even less likely to vote.

And that may explain why a liberal Democrat is more likely to vote than a conservative Republican this election.

That's four turnout trends – Liberal Democrats (up), African-American Democrats (up), pro-Trump Republicans who don't like the Republicans in Congress (maybe down), and Ambivalents (maybe down) – that favor Democrats.

What does that mean?

Let's take another look at George Holding's race. Last election, George won by 57% to 43%. A four-point increase in Democrat turnout and a four-point drop in Republican turnout turns this election into a six-point race – 53% to 47%. But George only has a six-point lead because those numbers include the Independents who voted for him overwhelmingly last election. But, now, half the Independents disapprove of the job Trump is doing. What if they vote for George's opponent? His race turns into a toss-up.

So, for Republicans, is there a solution? With so many different problems there's not a simple solution. But there's one answer that works across the board.

To be continued...

3.

### A Bombshell

Yesterday, I was going to write about the election but, then, Federal Judge James Wynn dropped a bombshell – by ruling the current Congressional Districts are unconstitutional. The districts, he said, are a ‘partisan gerrymander.’ And have to be redrawn.

Campaigns, in a way, are simple – they have one over-arching goal: To talk with voters about issues. And they do it on TV, radio, the Internet, or half a dozen other ways. George Holding’s been talking with voters for months and so have the Democrats trying to elect Linda Coleman (one Democratic Super PAC just spent \$500,000 for Coleman).

What impact does Judge Wynn’s order have on a campaign? It’s like driving down a highway, going 70 miles an hour, and suddenly out of a clear blue sky a voice shouts *Stop!* Suddenly, you don’t know which district you’re running in or the people who’ll be voting in the election. You might (if Wynn’s order is appealed and stayed) end up in the same district or you may find yourself running in a new district with new voters. And you may not know which district until a month or six weeks before the election.

Today how, when, or even whether North Carolina’s Congressional districts will be redrawn isn’t clear. In his order Wynn went into a Hamlet-like soliloquy saying, *We could do this or we could do that or we could do the other.*

In addition, the timing of Judge Wynn’s order is problematical. He’s had this case for months but didn’t issue a ruling until after Justice Anthony Kennedy resigned from the Supreme Court. Was that a coincidence? With Justice Kennedy gone there’re now four Republican and four Democratic Supreme Court Justices and, if Republicans appeal Wynn’s ruling, a deadlocked 4-4 vote on the Supreme Court could work in Wynn’s favor – and uphold his decision. Was Judge Wynn, who was appointed by President Obama, playing partisan judicial politics?

Stay tuned. The next federal court hearing is Friday.

4.

### Three Kinds of Elections

Well, today, I'm back to writing about George Holding's election – which now may or may not be in November and, may or may not be in a new district. I guess we may know sometime next week.

All that said, assuming wiser (legal) heads prevail and George Holding will be running in the current 2<sup>nd</sup> District, his race is a microcosm of elections across the state.

Years ago, Arthur Finklestein, polling for Jesse Helms in his race against Jim Hunt, told me, *There're three types of elections. First, there's the election where voters like both candidates – and they vote for the one they like most. Then there's the race where voters like one candidate and dislike the other – that one's easy. And, finally, there's the rare race where voters dislike both candidates – and, then, they vote for the candidate they dislike least.*

We've watched a lot of those 'which candidate do I dislike least' elections lately and we have another one on our hands this year. The undecided voters, and the swing voters, dislike both the Washington Republicans and the Washington Democrats and the question is: Who do they dislike least?

In his last poll, in July, George Holding trailed by 3 points (Holding 40%, Coleman 43%, Matemu, the Libertarian, 2%, Undecided 15%). And the undecided voters see Washington politics as a mess and they blame both parties for the mess. In 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016, when Obama was President, those same voters 'disliked Republicans least' and they voted for Republicans.

But now that Obama's gone and Trump's in the White House and Republicans have majorities in Congress the same voters 'dislike Democrats least' – so they're voting for Democrats (or undecided and leaning towards Democrats).

So what can George Holding do? He needs to give swing voters a good reason to dislike Linda Coleman more than they dislike both Washington Republicans and Washington Democrats.

5.

#### Picture of Coleman, Picture of Holding

Linda Coleman isn't well known – her Favorable is 18% and her Unfavorable is 16%. Some Democrats know and like her but most voters don't know who she is or where she stands on the issues they care about.

In June and July, when George Holding ran ads comparing his stand for workfare and for term limits to Linda Coleman's. And as voters learned of her opposition to workfare and term limits, Coleman's 'negatives' rose. But, still, most voters know very little about her.

George Holding's better known but, still, he's not well known with Independents. When you ask in a poll – *Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of George Holding?* – Republicans know and like George Holding but Independents reply, *I've heard his name but I don't know enough about him to have an opinion.* Holding has no real negatives – hardly anyone dislikes him but a few Democrats – but to many voters he's a cipher.

What does all that mean? Since they don't have clear opinion of either George Holding or Linda Coleman, many voters, especially Independents, are voting based on how they feel about Trump and the Republicans in Congress. And that's good news for Coleman. And that's unlikely to change unless Holding gives them a reason to vote for him instead of Linda Coleman – which brings us to the two Super PACs running ads, one attacking George Holding and the other supporting him.

To be continued...

6.

### Two Super PACs: A Negative Ad and a Positive Ad

In a fallen world the 'negative' (the bad thing) has great power, especially in an election where voters are choosing between two candidates they dislike. For example, six years ago, President Obama didn't win by running ads praising Obama's accomplishments – he defeated Romney by telling voters Romney was 'an out-of-touch billionaire.' And remember 'Crooked Hillary?' That's how Trump defeated Clinton.

In July, a Democratic Super PAC spent \$500,000 airing a 'negative ad' about George Holding, basically saying '*Vote against George Holding because he voted to hurt people with pre-existing conditions healthcare.*'

They were charging down the 'negative attack' road but there was one problem: Their ad wasn't true.

And when George Holding [explained](#) that the Republican plan to replace Obamacare – which he'd voted for – did require insurance companies to cover people with pre-existing conditions, the Democratic Super Pac's ad backfired on Linda Coleman. Which should be a lesson to both candidates and Super PACs.



7.

### The Undecided Voters

Let's look at the Undecided Voters who'll decide George Holding's election against Linda Coleman. Fifteen percent of the voters are undecided. They're Republicans 40%, Democrats 22%, and Independents 38%. When asked whether they would vote for a Republican candidate or a Democratic candidate for Congress (the Generic Ballot question), 48% vote Republican, 28% vote Democrat and 24% are Undecided.

20% of the undecided voters describe themselves as Liberals, 25% as Moderates, and 55% as Conservatives; 48% are men, 52% are women; 49% live in Wake county, 51% live in the other five counties in the district, which are made up of small towns and rural communities. And, since most African-American Democrats have already made up their minds to vote for Linda Coleman, very few of the undecided voters are African-Americans.

If George Holding wins 63% of the undecided vote (9.5 points out of 15 points) to Linda Coleman's 37% (5.5 points out of 15) he would win the election: Holding 49.5, Coleman 48.5, with 2% voting for Jeff Matemu the Libertarian candidate.

Of course, that's what statisticians describe as 'too close to call.' So, Holding needs to win more than 63% of the undecided voters, and he needs to persuade 'soft' Coleman voters to vote for him. Those two groups of voters don't love Democrats – they don't favor Coleman because they know and like her. In fact, they hardly know Coleman. But they don't know Holding well either.

In fact, many of those same voters have voted for Republican candidates in the past – including for George Holding – but this year, since they 'dislike Democrats least,' instead of voting for Holding, who's a Republican, they're undecided.

How can George Holding win their votes?

He must give undecided voters a reason not to vote for Linda Coleman. And that's where issues matter. But first, let's talk about two other groups of voters.

To be continued...

8.

### Two Unique Groups of Voters

Let's compare two unique groups of voters.

First, people who have high school degrees. African American Democrats in this group already overwhelmingly disapprove of Trump (Approve 10%, Disapprove 85%) and also overwhelmingly vote for Linda Coleman, George Holding's Democratic opponent. Among the remaining voters with high school degrees, men approve of Trump 79% to 20% and vote for George Holding by 57 points. However, women with high school degrees approve of Trump less (Approve 66%, Disapprove 30%) and only vote for George Holding by 28 points.

Now, let's look at men and women who have post-graduate degrees. Here, again, African-American Democrats already overwhelmingly disapprove of Trump and have already made up their minds to vote for Linda Coleman. Among the other voters in this group, men approve of Trump 65% to 33% and vote for George Holding by 30 points. But, at the same time, women disapprove of Trump (Approve 30% Disapprove 70%) and vote for Linda Coleman.

It's no surprise that men vote for a Republican candidate by a higher percentage than women – we've seen that in past elections. Here's the surprise: This election, women in both groups are less likely to vote for a Republican candidate than they have been in the past.

The bottom line? Giving women a reason to vote for George Holding (or not to vote for Linda Coleman) is another key to his reelection.

Now, let's talk about issues.

To be continued...

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## Two Issues

In George Holding's poll, we asked voters about several issues he and Linda Coleman disagree on.

For example, George Holding opposes Sanctuary Cities and here's a [video](#) of Linda Coleman, at a Democratic forum, saying she supports Sanctuary Cities (at 27:20 into the video).

It turns out voters oppose Sanctuary Cities 70% to 22%. Undecided voters oppose them 70% to 21%. Independent voters oppose them 74% to 16%. Women oppose them 67% to 24%. Moderates oppose them 52% to 36%. And a third of the Liberals oppose them.

As an issue, Sanctuary Cities is not just about immigration – it's about crime. Sanctuary Cities protect criminals and that's a reason women, especially, oppose them. The message is simple: *Sanctuary Cities protect criminals. George Holding opposes Sanctuary Cities. And Linda Coleman supports them. That's the choice.* That message would give undecided voters a reason to say, *I'm not crazy about the Republicans in Washington. But I don't agree with Linda Coleman on Sanctuary Cities. I'm voting for George Holding.*

George Holding has also taken a stand against abolishing ICE. But when Linda Coleman was asked about the same issue she sidestepped. And carefully parsed words. She said she didn't want to abolish ICE completely. But she wants it revamped. Revamped how? She declined to say. Here's a [video](#) of Coleman's statement (she talks about ICE at 7:10) and here's a transcript:

*Question: "What is your stance on abolishing ICE?"*

*Answer: "You know I don't think ICE should be abolished completely, but I certainly think that it needs to be revamped. I think that every program -- you gotta look at it -- and again these programs have to take into account into changes that are occurring in our country. Nothing stays the same and when things change we have to be flexible enough to change with the programs and address those issues. But we have to do it in a humane way. What we do, we have to do very humanely, and we are not acting as a country in a humane way at this time."*

*Question: "So do you support the abolishment or you just want to revamp the program and how would you revamp the program?"*

*Answer: "I would want to revamp the program."*

*Question: "How would you do that?"*

*Answer: "I don't know how yet because I have not studied that issue in depth to give you the kind of answer that I would want, but I would be happy to look at the issues and get back with you and let you know."*

Voters disapprove of abolishing ICE 71% to 17%. And here again, on abolishing ICE, the issue isn't just about immigration – it's about crime. Abolishing ICE means fewer criminals will be deported.

To be continued...

10.

### Two More Issues

More people say yes than no when asked whether they'd vote for George Holding because he supported the Republican tax cuts – but not as many more as you might expect.

On the other hand, when asked whether they would support Linda Coleman if they knew she wants to repeal the tax cut and raise taxes – voters say no, overwhelmingly. By a margin of 6 to 1. (Here's a [video](#) – at 13:44 Coleman supports repealing the tax cut.)

Voters are slightly favorable to the Republican tax cuts. But overwhelmingly oppose tax increases.

Let's look at one more issue. The economy has turned around. Job creation is at its highest it's been in decades. And that matters to voters. If you ask: *Would you support Linda Coleman if you knew she would vote with the Democrats in Congress to repeal the tax cuts, raise taxes and increase regulations on businesses, large and small, and the economic recovery will stop* – their answer, again, is no. 60% of the voters would be less likely to vote for Linda Coleman while only 11% would be more likely. In fact, 27% of the people who are now voting for Linda Coleman would be less likely to vote for her.

To be continued...

11.

## Political Ads

This happened a long time ago but history repeats itself – and it's repeating itself again today.

Twenty-eight years ago, in 1990, Jesse Helms' campaign ran a negative TV ad about Harvey Gantt – and the ad didn't work. We'd taken a poll which showed voters agreed with Jesse and disagreed with Harvey Gantt on the issue but when we told voters (in the ad) where Gantt stood it didn't matter to them at all – so I asked the campaign's pollsters and strategists, *Why not?*

There was a lot of head-scratching and frowning then one pollster said, *Look Carter, you all have been running negative ads in North Carolina for a decade and you've spent who knows how many millions of dollars on those ads and they all look alike with the same music and a dramatic announcer and graphics with bright red captions so, now, the minute a voter sees one of those ads he thinks, 'That's just another political ad,' and tunes it out.*

He suggested making a comparison ad – without the melodrama and graphics and editorial comment – on the same issue that simply said, *Here's where Jesse Helms stands, here's where Harvey Gantt stands, and that's the choice.*

That's what we did. And this time the ad worked. The message got through.

The other day I looked at a lot of Super PAC ads and they looked and sounded a lot like that first ad we ran back in 1990 – that didn't work. And, of course, during the last two elections here in North Carolina people have seen hundreds of those types of negative ads, so when they see one more they tune it out. What does work? Ads with people in them talking. And simple comparison ads.

To be continued...

12.

### The Election, a Summary

This year, after four elections with Obama in the White House, the political world has changed. We're in a Blue Moon election where Democrats are voting heavier than usual and where Republican voter turnout is likely to be lower than usual.

Independents blame both Republicans and Democrats for the political mess in Washington and, back when Obama was President, since they blamed Republicans least they voted for Republicans. But, now, with Republicans in power, Independents blame Democrats least – and vote for Democrats.

These three national trends – Democratic turnout up, Republican turnout down, and Independents favoring Democrats – are lifting Democratic candidates this election. George Holding's race is an example: Holding is better known than his opponent, Linda Coleman, but neither is well-known – which means the national trends are determining which candidate many people are voting for – which explains why Holding, who has won in the past by 13 or 14 points, is in a close race this election.

The solution for Holding – the way he can overcome the Blue Moon trends – is issues. Since Independents and undecided voters aren't enamored with either Republicans or Democrats, by debating the issues he and Coleman disagree on, Holding can give voters reasons not to vote for Linda Coleman. Which issues? Coleman's support for Sanctuary Cities, her support for repealing the tax cuts and raising taxes, the threat that a Democratic Congress would raise taxes and increase government regulations, ending the economic recovery, and Coleman's evasiveness when she was asked about her stand on ICE are examples.

One final caveat: These are the trends in this election now. And they'll probably be the trends on election day. But, in politics, the unexpected happens. And, sometimes, when it does it turns the political world upside down again.