

# [***What you should know about North Carolina's race for governor***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C34-BTR1-JC5B-G3FJ-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

North Carolina has been an underappreciated political battleground recently and not gotten the same attention as nearby Georgia or Florida or the traditional campaign hotbeds of the Rust Belt.

That is changing in 2024, partly because of a potentially historic governor’s race that pits North Carolina's centrist tendencies against the rise of populist conservatism in the era of [*Donald Trump*](https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump).

The Republican nominee is [*Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson*](https://apnews.com/article/robinson-government-spending-balanced-nutrition-388251303ac98c6edbf52e5b3c43d554), a 55-year-old who would be the state’s first Black governor. Democrats have chosen Attorney General Josh Stein, a 57-year-old who is trying to keep the office in his party’s control after two terms under outgoing Gov. Roy Cooper.

Here are some key dynamics and questions in the contest.

**REPUBLICANS WANT NORTH CAROLINIANS TO SHIFT RIGHT**

Since 1992, Democrats have won seven out of the eight governor’s races in North Carolina, a run that Democrats attribute to nominating center-left candidates who prioritize public education together with economic development. The lone Republican governor in that span was Pat McCrory, the former Charlotte mayor who pitched himself to voters as a business-friendly conservative rooted in the pragmatic, problem-solving ***politics*** of City Hall.

Robinson, with his conservative firebrand approach, does not fit either profile. He once called abortion “child sacrifice.” In various church pulpits, he has asserted men as the rightful leaders in church and society. He once mused that leaders of the original birth control movement in the U.S. were “witches, all of 'em.” He has discussed LGBTQ people with words like “filth” and “maggots” and said transgender women should never use women’s restrooms: “Find a corner outside somewhere to go.”

Donald Trump, the former president and current GOP presidential nominee, calls Robinson [*“Martin Luther King on steroids.”*](https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-donald-trump-endorsement-governor-cf9092cc8c10d0f2106aacedc63fd8af)

Separately, North Carolina Republicans [*nominated Michele Morrow*](https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-election-superintendent-runoffs-legislature-d7339a3264fd1af5be23f6c216c759e8), a mother who has home-schooled her children, for state superintendent of public instruction. Morrow has accused public schools of indoctrinating children with liberal views on race and gender, and she advocated a new Parental Bill of Rights law. Morrow also was present for the [*Jan. 6, 2021, rally*](https://apnews.com/hub/capitol-siege) of Trump supporters and their advance on the Capitol — though she has said she never entered the building.

**A REPEAT OF THE BATHROOM BILL FALLOUT?**

After Robinson and Morrow were nominated, the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce took the unusual step of commenting publicly on the primary results, issuing a statement in March that called the result “a startling warning of the looming threats to North Carolina’s business climate.”

There is precedent for Republicans’ conservative social and cultural approach affecting North Carolina elections. McCory, the last GOP governor, went along with more conservative legislators in signing HB2, known as the Bathroom Bill, which rolled back protections for LGBTQ+ people and required people in North Carolina to use public bathrooms that aligned with the gender assigned on their birth certificates.

Reaction in the business community was swift. The NBA pulled its professional men’s basketball’s All-Star game from Charlotte. Major corporations criticized the law. McCrory went on to [*lose his 2016 reelection bid*](https://apnews.com/general-news-71dcaa193a444dc7926b8ceca83ca817) to Democrat Roy Cooper, in no small part, because of HB2.

Some conventional Republicans believe the GOP is playing with fire again with Robinson at the top of the statewide ticket.

“The Democrats have the best messenger they could possibly have against Mark Robinson — and that is Mark Robinson,” said GOP strategist Paul Schumaker. “Because all of that is on video, audio, social media and church websites. These ads are going to write themselves.”

**NORTH CAROLINA HAS A TICKET-SPLITTING HISTORY. CAN THAT HOLD?**

Despite Democrats’ control of the governor’s office, North Carolina has a long history of split results between the governor and the presidency. Cooper, the outgoing Democratic governor, twice won when Trump carried North Carolina’s electoral votes. In 2020, Cooper won reelection by almost 250,000 votes, and he exceeded Trump’s vote totals, drawing 2.83 million to Trump’s 2.76 million. Cooper ran ahead of Democrat Joe Biden by almost 200,000 votes.

The question becomes whether ticket-splitting continues four more years into a hyper-partisan era, especially with Republicans running with such an unapologetically bombastic and conservative slate.

“People want to say North Carolina is a purple state, but I personally believe we’re a red state,” said state GOP Vice Chairwoman Susan Mills in an interview. She called Robinson “a very bold and outspoken man, especially about his Christian faith,” and argued that would attract new voters, as Trump has done.

State Democratic Party Chairwoman Anderson Clayton countered that Robinson’s nomination and the state GOP’s direction overall emboldens her party’s base and helps attract the kind of swing voters who twice elected Cooper.

“We still care about what our state reputation is, and you’re not going to go embarrassing us,” she said.

**ROBINSON AND STEIN: STARKLY DIFFERENT PATHS**

Beyond policy and party differences, Stein and Robinson have distinctly different biographies.

Before 2018, Robinson’s political activity consisted of voting and unvarnished Facebook posts. Then he gave an intense speech at a Greensboro City Council meeting, chiding his hometown politicians for considering tighter gun restrictions.

“I am the majority!” he declared. It went viral online and propelled him into the lieutenant governor’s race two years later.

Robinson tells [*a bootstrap story of growing up poor*](https://apnews.com/article/robinson-government-spending-balanced-nutrition-388251303ac98c6edbf52e5b3c43d554), losing manufacturing jobs and enduring bankruptcy. His version obscures details of his financial history, which includes an ongoing inquiry into a nonprofit that his wife started in 2015. But it gives him an everyman pitch that endears him, especially to conservative anti-establishment voters.

Stein, meanwhile, is a lawyer who holds multiple Ivy League degrees and served in the state Senate before winning two terms as attorney general. Democrats like Clayton argue that his time in that office helps him appeal to centrist voters and avoid being tagged as too liberal. But, at the least, Stein’s biography allows Robinson and Republicans to cast him as a typical Raleigh politician.

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Associated Press reporter Thomas Beaumont contributed.

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