

SHORT PAPER 2:
THEORIES REGARDING REPUBLICAN
VOTE SHARE IN NORTH CAROLINA
AND VIRGINIA

October 19, 2019

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EPPS 6301 Political Economic Theories

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1 Introduction

Virginia and North Carolina share a border, have similar populations relative to their land size and a similar demographic makeup (see Table 1). Prior to 2000, both states had a history of voting for Republican presidential candidates but have been less reliably conservative in more recent elections. In 2016, North Carolina voted for Republican Donald Trump with a 3.66 point margin whereas Virginian voters elected Hillary Clinton of the incumbent Democratic Party by a margin of 5.32 percentage points. When they share many similar characteristics, why did Virginia elect a liberal candidate while neighboring North Carolina elected a conservative?

Table 1: Similarities between Virginia and North Carolina

	Population per sq. mile	White Alone	Hispanic Alone	Black Alone
VA	202.6	61.5%	9.6%	19.9%
NC	196.1	62.8%	9.6%	22.2%

Source: U.S. Census (2010)

2 Theory 1: Education

One theory as to why Virginia voted for the incumbent Democratic Party in 2016 and North Carolina did not is because, in comparing states, those having a higher percentage of people having received college degrees will be more likely to vote for a democratic candidate than those having a lower percentage of college graduates. In the past, educational attainment was strongly correlated with wealth, and with a conservative vote share; this is not the case in recent years (Zitner Chinney, 2016). In the 2016 election, people who had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree favored the candidate of the incumbent party by nine points, a 17% gap from those who had not obtained a college degree (Tyson Maniam, 2016). For white voters, the gap was even wider (Harris, 2018). college-educated voters driving democratic votes likely increased the democratic vote share in Virginia. As of the 2010 census,

Virginia had a significantly higher percentage of college graduates than did North Carolina (see Table 2).

Table 2: Minimum Level of Educational Attainment

	Bachelor's Degree	High School/GED	No High School/GED
VA	37.6%	89.0%	11.0%
NC	29.9%	86.9%	13.1%

Source: U.S. Census (2010)

3 Theory 2: Economy

In comparing states, those having a better economy will be more likely to vote for a democratic incumbent party than those having a poorer economy. In this instance, the state of the economy will be examined in terms of median household income (HHI), unemployment rate, and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita; economic indicators from November 2016 are presented below in Table 3.

Table 3: Economic Indicators at Time of Election

	Median HHI	Unemployment Rate	GDP per capita
VA	\$69,535	4.1%	\$59,754.01
NC	\$56,259	5.1%	\$51,856.90

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis,
Bureau of Labor Statistics

The theory that a good economy tends to result in reelection of the incumbent party is not new. R.C. Fair theorized that, in the absence of such factors as party fatigue or other non-economic factors, voters tend to vote for the incumbent (or incumbent party) when the economy is good (Fair, 2002). A study of fifteen European elections corroborated this theory, finding that "economic effects are stronger than any except for issues or distance from parties in left/ right terms" (Van der Brug, Van der Eijk, Franklin, 2000). Hibbs' theory expands on Fair's to factor in partisanship. He states that not only is an incumbent party more likely

to win an election when the economy is good, but also that Democrats especially favor low unemployment (Hibbs, 1977).

While they share the same national economy, the economy was better in Virginia than in North Carolina at the time of the 2016 election; income and GDP per capita were significantly higher and unemployment was a full percentage point lower. Even on a county scale, all of the three wealthiest counties in Virginia and all but one of the three wealthiest counties in North Carolina voted for the incumbent party. Because economic theory and precedent tell us a better economy is more likely to result in an incumbent party reelection, this could explain why Virginia reelected a Democrat whereas North Carolina elected a Republican.

4 Theory 3: Close Races

In the 2008 presidential election, both Virginia and North Carolina elected a Democrat as president for the first time in decades. However, in the following election, North Carolinians elected the conservative challenger with a narrow 2-point margin while Virginians re-elected with the incumbent party by an almost 4-point margin. The close race in North Carolina along with two consecutive party flips firmly established the state as a "swing state;" CNN even called North Carolina "perhaps the state on which the 2016 presidential race turns" (Bradner, 2016). In comparing states, those which are considered "swing states" are more likely to have higher voter turnout than those whose vote history is more established. In a state where voters are predisposed to vote for a conservative because of education and economic factors, this means a Republican victory is likely.

In his "paradox of voting" theory on rational abstention, Downs argues that people should not vote when the benefits of voting are not greater than the costs. The primary cost of voting in democratic elections is time – time off from work to vote, to register to vote, or to do research. The primary benefits of voting come from the degree to which an individual values democracy, desires a win for their party, how much they discount the value of their

vote based on how many others they think will be voting, and how close they think the election will be. Generally, Downs says that the costs will far outweigh the benefits and, consequently, rational people will not choose to vote. However, Downs points out that votes are most valuable when they are likely to be the deciding vote (Downs, 1957). In other words, Downs argues that votes in a "swing state" are more valuable because they are more likely to determine a winner than states which consistently elect the same party by a wide margin. These high-value votes will result in greater turnout for the election.

This theory held to be true in North Carolina. In 2008, the election year the state came to be known as a "swing state," voter turnout increased by over 5% (North Carolina State Board of Elections). We established in prior theories that education and the economy made North Carolinans more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. A high-stakes vote likely incentivized more voters who did not otherwise place high value on their vote to go to the polls. Because of their education and economic factors, these voters were more likely to vote for the Republican candidate.

5 Summary and Conclusion

In summary, educational attainment had a big influence on the 2016 presidential election. College-educated voters, and especially college-educated white voters, were far more likely than less educated constituents to elect a Democratic candidate. Because voters in North Carolina were less educated than their counterparts in Virginia, North Carolina elected a conservative president. An additional factor that could have influenced voters is the state of the economy. While every state shares the same national economy, wide differences between the median HHI, GDP per capita, and unemployment rate between the two states likely influenced whether or not they voted for the incumbent Democratic Party. Finally, elevated value of the votes in North Carolina resulting from a predicted close race could have pushed voters who were likely to be conservative based on their education and economic conditions

to the polls in higher numbers, resulting in a Republican victory in the state.

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