

THE NATIONAL CONGRESSIONAL CLUB, CONSERVATISM, AND THE TAR HEEL
HEART OF NORTH CAROLINA

by

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ABSTRACT

CANA MARIE SCOTT. *The National Congressional Club, Conservatism, and the Tar Heel Heart of North Carolina*. (Under the direction of DR. SONYA RAMSEY).

Dear Congressional Club Friend

What a difference your commitment has made in changing the course of American history! It is truly an honor to work alongside you as a member of The National Congressional Club – and we have accomplished a great deal together over the last decade.

I appreciate your steadfast support and your willingness to “walk the extra mile” for the ideals we cherish. Together, we will continue to help elect candidates who will promote conservative principles through legislation.

I am proud to be on the same team with you. God bless you.

Sincerely,

Jesse Helms¹

The National Congressional Club (NCC) was one of the most influential political action committees (PACs) in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Based in North Carolina, this organization promoted conservatism through effective fundraising and attack advertising, which encouraged voter participation and stimulated national financial support. The thesis examines the role of the NCC in advancing conservatism in North Carolina during its peak, specifically in the highly contested and expensive 1984 and 1990 Senate races, both of which received significant media coverage. I argue that the Congressional Club’s strategic use of direct mail in the 1984 Senate race exploited white anxieties by linking the Democratic opponent to civil rights activism. These tactics were then employed again in the 1990 Senate race, utilizing television attack advertising to exploit fears of a changing racial landscape, specifically by challenging the racial identity of the Black Democratic candidate. Through the use of political ephemera, newspapers, and oral history interviews, this thesis contends that the Congressional Club’s electioneering in 1984 and 1990 was an extension of white supremacy.

¹ Jesse Helms to Congressional Club Friend, 1986, Cp329 N277n, North Carolina Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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Lastly, I extend my deepest thanks to Black and Brown communities across the globe, who are the foundation of my research. Thank you for your resistance against genocide, slavery, exploitation, imperialism, and all forms of injustice. May your perseverance continue to inspire me and others to fight for a kinder and freer world.

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INTRODUCTION: “THE OLD NORTH STATE”

North Carolina’s political temperature heats up significantly during presidential elections. It’s no surprise to find candidates sitting in church pews, shaking hands with tobacco farmers, or digging into the finest barbecue. The state is awarded such treatment due to its position as a “battleground,” “swing,” or “purple” state. Even though the state has not supported a Democratic candidate for president since 2008, scholars concede that North Carolinians do not fully embrace one party over the other.²

It is crucial to highlight that North Carolina’s geography has informed the state’s political consciousness since the antebellum era. In 1949, political scientist V.O. Key reported that the state had “more-tender sectional sensibilities than any other state in the South including tripartite Tennessee.”³ There were two clearly defined regions in North Carolina before the twentieth century: the Atlantic Coastal Plains to the east and the mountainous Blue Ridge to the west.⁴ The Eastern region contains the Black Belt counties, areas in which slavery was more profitable and which have a majority Black population. According to Key, since the late nineteenth century, these rural areas have been resistant to the influence of ruling political machines and large corporations.⁵ Today, these forty-one coastal counties tend to vote Democratic, mainly due to their racially diverse populations.⁶ The western region had fewer farms, due to its rocky terrain, and a smaller enslaved population; it was also home to Republican sectionalism during the early twentieth century.⁷ These twenty-three counties have maintained their Republican identity, and it

² A purple state does not lean towards a single party and can be won by either Democrats or Republicans in statewide and presidential elections. For more information on the definition of a purple state, see Christopher A. Cooper, *Anatomy of a Purple State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2024), 20-23.

³ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Random House, 1949), 219.

⁴ For more information on the specific geographical boundaries, see *Anatomy of a Purple State*, 29-30.

⁵ Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 215-217.

⁶ Cooper, *Anatomy of a Purple State*, 30-31.

⁷ Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 219-220.

is the most racially homogeneous region in the state.⁸ The enormous red clay Piedmont region, situated between the Eastern and Western areas, rose in prominence in conjunction with the New South movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹ These thirty-six counties have become the anchor of North Carolina’s economy, driven by the rapid development of industrial and knowledge-based economies, as well as investments in research and education. The Piedmont is not politically partisan – neither Democrat nor Republican-dominated – and is home to the majority of the state’s population, universities, economic hubs, and professional sports franchises.¹⁰ These divisions are important to recognize because “regional distinctions continue to shape partisanship and voting patterns” in North Carolina, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of the state’s unique political landscape.¹¹



Figure 1: Geographical map of North Carolina by regional divisions¹²

⁸ Cooper, *Anatomy of a Purple State*, 30-31.

⁹ The Civil War (1861-1865) devastated the South’s plantation-based economy. Southern leaders modernized the region through industrialization which promoted capital and opportunity. However, this “New South” vision reinforced a racial hierarchy that excluded Black Americans and reinforced poverty. For more information on the development of the New South, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Tom Eamon, *The Making of a Southern Democracy: North Carolina Politics from Kerr Scott to Pat McCrory* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 4-5.

¹¹ Cooper, *Anatomy of a Purple State*, 31.

¹² Amy Rudersdorf, “NC County Maps: Government & Heritage Library, State Library of North Carolina, 2010.

Key identified North Carolina as a “progressive plutocracy,” a state that pursued economic and social advancements yet was ruled by a wealthy elite class. This characterization, which differs starkly from its Southern neighbors, originates from the antebellum era – the state initially refused to secede from the Union in 1861 due to its smaller enslaved and slaveholder populations.¹³ Democrats gained control of the state after the Civil War, and many of these leaders invested in industry and railroads to finance their interests, restricted the authority of local governments, and blocked the expansion of public education.¹⁴ Additionally, the Democrats attracted white male voters who associated the Republican Party with the Union and the abolition of slavery, and subsequently undermined the guarantee of citizenship and voting rights to Black Americans through the 14th and 15th amendments.¹⁵

Despite the formidable single-party unity, opponents consistently challenged the authority of North Carolina Democrats. The party never received more than fifty-four percent of the popular vote between 1880 and 1896.¹⁶ This opposition was primarily due to pressure from Populists, composed of poor white farmers, Republicans who were former white Unionists in the West, and Eastern Black residents.¹⁷ It is worth noting that Black North Carolinians held more political power than anywhere else in the South. This resilience is evident in the election of

¹³ Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 205-206. The chapter will follow Key’s geographic definition of the South, the former states of the Confederacy: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

¹⁴ Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics: The Personalities, Elections, and Events that Shaped Modern North Carolina*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 10.

¹⁵ Reconstruction (1865-1877) was an effort by the Republican-led federal government to reunify the South and integrate nearly four million freed Black Americans across the South into freedom. It effectively concluded in 1877 after Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew federal troops from the South. This created momentum for southern Democrats to “redeem” the region and establish the single-party Solid South which disenfranchised Black Americans. For more information see, Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

¹⁶ Donald R. Matthews, ed., *North Carolina Votes: General Election Returns by County* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 111.

¹⁷ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 10-11.

hundreds of Black postmasters, commissioners, magistrates, and other local officials across Eastern North Carolina in the late twentieth century, a region with the highest Black population. The Fusionist alliance between Populists and Republicans successfully elected members to the local and federal positions, including Republican George Henry White. The Bladen County native was elected to Congress in 1897 and was the only Black American to serve during his tenure.¹⁸ However, this multiethnic coalition concluded after 1898 as white Democrats developed a white supremacy campaign, accusing Black Americans of insolence and corruption and encouraging white men to redeem the state from “Negro domination.”¹⁹ The white resentment culminated in the 1898 Wilmington Massacre in which white citizens overthrew the Fusionist government, expelled residents from the city, destroyed property, and killed Black people.²⁰ According to historian Timothy Tyson, this “illegitimate and bloody” coup “gave birth to the state’s moderate position of white supremacy, but it was the violent and resilient nature of that ‘progressive mystique’ that preserved white supremacy.”²¹

The leadership of Republican governor Charles Brantly Aycock best illustrates this image. Aycock, and other leading Democrats, helped organize the 1898 massacre, accused Black men of violating white womanhood, and supported the subsequent creation of poll taxes and literacy tests to disenfranchise Black Americans.²² Black voter registration dropped from 120,000 in 1896 to 6,100 in 1902, a stark testament to the impact of these discriminatory

¹⁸ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 12-14.

¹⁹ “Wanderers, Beware!” *The Smithfield Herald*, February 17, 1898, https://newscomnc-newspapers-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/image/67688313/?pqsid=K8OXmOAAg0S_IDLWuE7t4Q%3A31482%3A1959247182.

²⁰ “A Day of Riot and Blood at Wilmington,” *The Farmer and Mechanic*, November 15, 1898, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn99061556/1898-11-15/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image&r=-0.762,-0.071,2.523,1.57,0>.

²¹ Timothy B. Tyson, “Wars for Democracy,” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 254.

²² Eamon, *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, 7-8.

measures.²³ Aycock also advocated for raising teaching salaries and universal public education for white and Black children; however, historian J. Morgan Kousser has noted that this ‘progressive’ attitude was an effort by white Democrats to prevent federal intervention into Jim Crow disenfranchisement.²⁴

Frank Porter Graham adopted a more progressive stance for educational improvement as the president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1930 to 1949.²⁵ Under his leadership, Graham significantly improved access to higher education for lower-class communities, supported labor unions, resisted school censorship, and advocated for gradual desegregation of the school system. Graham’s social activism earned him swift criticism from fellow Democrats who accused him of Communist sympathies.²⁶ The tension between Aycock’s conservative leadership and Graham’s consistent progressivism reflects the state’s “progressive plutocracy” identity that would escalate throughout the century.

From a regional perspective, the Solid South appeared unsteady in the 1930s due to concerns about President Franklin D. Roosevelt expanding executive authority.²⁷ His New Deal legislation, a monumental shift in American politics, contributed to the shifting political landscape by promoting industrial growth, which significantly revitalized urban cities and appealed to immigrant and racial minorities.²⁸ These metropolitan cities, transformed by the New

²³ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 39.

²⁴ Morgan J. Kousser. “Progressivism—For Middle-Class Whites Only: North Carolina Education, 1880–1910,” *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980): 185-186. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208357>.

²⁵ From the 1900s to 1930s, Democrats continued to dominate state politics and exclude Black Americans. However, tensions between progressive and conservative Democrats persisted during this era as both groups pushed for changes across the state, especially in education.

²⁶ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 122-125.

²⁷ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 88.

²⁸ From the 1910s to the 1970s, there was a large-scale movement of Black Americans from the rural South to the North. Known as the Great Migration, Black Americans sought out improved opportunities in employment and education and freedom from Jim Crow segregation. For more information, see Stewart E Tolnay, “The African

Deal, have become, and remain to this day, Democratic strongholds, while isolated rural communities did not receive as much economic recovery.²⁹ The subsequent Democratic presidents' increasing support of civil rights legislation expedited the mass exodus of white Southerners from the Democratic Party.³⁰ According to Gallup poll data, in 1950, white Southerners were twenty-five percentage points more likely to identify as Democrats. This identification dropped to seventeen percentage points by 1980 – the most dramatic change occurred during the 1960s, the civil rights era.³¹

North Carolina was no exception to this white flight, as expressed in 1995 by Wilton Duke, the Pitt County Board of Commissioners Chairman: “The Democratic Party left the white people. When they left, that is what caused the new wave of Republicans.”³² On the other hand, Black voters steadily shifted to the Democratic Party; by 1965, less than ten percent of Black Americans identified as Republicans.³³ As in the late nineteenth century, Black North Carolinians had a greater degree of political agency compared to the other Southern states. However, “when civil rights activism threatened North Carolina’s social structure, the state moved swiftly to the

American ‘Great Migration’ and Beyond,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209–32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036966>.

²⁹ Herbert P. Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm. “Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era. *Politics & Society* 47, no. 3 (2019): 430-440, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329219861215>.

³⁰ Executive Order 99801 desegregated the army (1948); the Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin (1964); and the Voting Rights Act prohibited racial discrimination in voting (1965). For more information on major civil rights legislation of the mid-twentieth century, see, Bruce Ackerman, *We the People, Volume 3: The Civil Rights Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wvnpvq>.

³¹ Ilyana Kuziemko and Ebonya Washington, “Why Did the Democrats Lose the South? Bringing New Data to an Old Debate,” *American Economic Review* 108, no. 10 (2018): 2831-2833, https://kuziemko.scholar.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf3996/files/kuziemko/files/southern_dems_aer.pdf

³² Rob Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 288.

³³ E. Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2016).

right. North Carolina had one of the most active Klans in the country.”³⁴ It occurred in one of the state’s most bitter Senate races in which conservative attorney Willis Smith defeated Graham in 1950 by using violent race-baiting political advertising and encouraging white voters to defend Southern traditions.³⁵

In 1968, Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon took advantage of the white Southerner discontent and warned his party members that “you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the Blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognized this while not appearing to.”³⁶ It proved to be effective in North Carolina, and in 1968, the state elected Nixon as its first Republican nominee since 1928.³⁷ This tactic evolved during the 1970s and famously became known as the “Southern Strategy,” a political strategy that appealed to white Southern voters by exploiting racial tensions and fears. Political consultant Lee Atwater used this political tool to advise Republican successor Ronald Reagan to avoid the use of explicit racist language in favor of “abstract” arguments as race-baiting dog whistles, including “forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff.”³⁸ It is during this era that one of North Carolina’s most controversial political figures emerged as the embodiment of the Southern Strategy and a champion of conservative values.

³⁴ The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is a white supremacist group that has committed acts of violence, intimidation, and terrorism, primarily against Black Americans, since 1865. Christensen, *Tarheel Politics*, 155.

³⁵ Christensen, *Tarheel Politics*, 135-143.

³⁶ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press), 50.

³⁷ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 206.

³⁸ Lee Atwater, “Lee Atwater’s Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy,” interview by Alexander P. Lamis, November 13, 2012, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/>.

Conservatism

Conservatism is an evolving ideology in the United States. For this thesis, conservatism is defined as a political philosophy that favors a limited federal government, emphasizes individual freedoms and self-reliance, opposes Communism, supports a strong national defense, and defends traditional Judeo-Christian social and moral values, such as prayer in schools and opposition to abortion.³⁹ Barry Goldwater outlined these principles in his 1960 book *The Conscience of a Conservative*, which scholars contend is a foundational text for modern American conservatism. Goldwater's ideas appealed to Southerners and fueled his 1964 presidential campaign. Although he was defeated in a landslide by Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson, the campaign marked a significant moment for modern conservatism and helped lay the groundwork for future Republican successes, including Nixon and Reagan.⁴⁰

The Man and His Club

Senator Jesse Alexander Helms was born in 1921 in rural Monroe, North Carolina, in a Southern Baptist segregationist family. In his youth, his fire chief and police officer father brutally assaulted a Black woman before arresting her.⁴¹ Helms did not pursue a political career until he became a radio commentator for WRAL in Raleigh, North Carolina. His coverage of the 1950 senatorial race between Smith and Graham primarily fueled his rise to regional prominence, a significant role that would shape his future political career. Helms also worked as an assistant to the Smith campaign and allegedly produced the race-based advertisements used

³⁹ Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

⁴⁰ J. William Middendorf II, *A Glorious Disaster: Barry Goldwater's Presidential Campaign and the Origins of the Conservative Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

⁴¹ Timothy B. Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998): 540, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2567750>.

against Graham.⁴² Although the true nature of his involvement in the campaign is subject to debate, R.H. Carson, an advertising manager who'd worked with Helms at *The News & Observer*, recalled one instance in which Helms cut out images of Graham beside Black people and sent them out to local papers across the state.⁴³

Helms gradually established himself as a respected media figure throughout rural Eastern North Carolina, using his platform as a political pulpit to attack the expansion of the federal government, New Deal legislation, and later mandatory school busing and civil rights activism. According to Helms, these policies infringed upon states' rights, would undermine American democracy, and contribute to the moral decline of Western society.⁴⁴ Although controversial, many people, especially rural white North Carolinians, identified with his fiery rhetoric and viewed him as a steadfast defender of Southern values. This support resulted in his election to the U.S. Senate in 1972, where he won with a margin of fifty-four percent to forty-nine percent.⁴⁵

Thomas Ellis created the North Carolina Congressional Club a year later to eliminate the \$160,000 debt from Helms's first senatorial campaign. Ellis, an attorney originally from California, volunteered for the Smith campaign in 1950 with Helms and had worked to draft the state's responses against federal school desegregation throughout the decade. Ellis and Helms were poker buddies in the 1960s, until he noticed how white women would approach the senator with awe and admiration for his radio commentaries. Frustrated with the lack of Republican

⁴² William Snider, *Helms and Hunt, The North Carolina Senate Race, 1984* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 73.

⁴³ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 145-146.

⁴⁴ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 20.

⁴⁵ Eamon, *The Making of a Southern Democracy*, 145-149. For more biographical information on Jesse Helms, see William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

victories due to the lingering Democratic identification of the Coastal Plains region, Ellis recognized Helms as the leader to shift the party affiliation of conservative Eastern residents.⁴⁶

UNC Chapel Hill student Carter Wrenn, a Virginia native, was familiar with Helms's television editorials and remembered them as "harsh." Still, he volunteered in his 1972 campaign and joined the Congressional Club after he was offered a job by Charlie Black, one of Helms's staff members, in 1974.⁴⁷ Wrenn was their only employee and was mentored by Ellis until he was appointed to run Reagan's presidential campaign in 1976. Following a successful fundraising campaign for Reagan and his victory in the North Carolina primary, Wrenn became the executive director of the Club.⁴⁸

Although Ellis was the chairman, "he valued everybody's opinion, and he wanted everybody to have input into what was done and how it should be done."⁴⁹ Furthermore, young recruits who worked full-time in their Raleigh office every week energized the Congressional Club. Earl Ashe made television advertisements, Robert Harris collected research, and Arthur Finkelstein conducted polls. It is essential to note that the executive members were the primary managers of the Club; Helms served as the figurehead. Individuals could join the Club through employment, volunteering, or, more popularly, by purchasing a \$100 annual membership. This membership provided access to monthly brochures, seminars, dinners, and other events sponsored by the Congressional Club.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 211-212, 220-221.

⁴⁷ Carter Wrenn, interview by author, August 6, 2025.

⁴⁸ Alfred Clinton Perry, "The Man and His Club," (MA thesis, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1983), C378 UO6 1982/83 v.3, North Carolina Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

⁴⁹ Wrenn interview.

⁵⁰ Perry, "The Man and His Club," 44.

Ellis's vision for the Club as a bridge between conservative Democrats and Republicans wasn't just an idea, but a testament to his strategic planning. This vision proved successful in the 1976 primary for Reagan and in Helms's 1978 Senate campaign, which raised seven million dollars.⁵¹ The transition to the National Congressional Club reflected its increasing popularity nationwide as most of the members were located outside the state.⁵² This change also led to the creation of Jefferson Marketing, an independent corporation that enabled the Club to financially support multiple candidates during an era when PAC power was an emerging phenomenon.⁵³

The Congressional Club's influence was unprecedented. Federal laws in the early twentieth century restricted corporations, national banks, and unions from financing candidates. However, the federal government did not heavily enforce these laws, and interest groups found ways to circumvent them. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) became the first federally recognized PAC in 1944, which collected union donations to support FDR's reelection.⁵⁴ The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) in 1971 and the Supreme Court decision in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), which regulated financial contributions to campaigns, officially codified PAC laws, further expanding PAC political influence and enabling the NCC to finance conservatism.⁵⁵ One year before the 1984 Senate race, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) even challenged the NCC for violating campaign laws by failing to report their expenditures and exceeding contribution limits, but the court ultimately dismissed the suit.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 219; Perry, "The Man and His Club," 45.

⁵² Perry, "The Man and His Club," 44.

⁵³ Wrenn interview.

⁵⁴ Emily J. Charnock, *The Rise of Political Action Committees: Interest Group Electioneering and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10-11.

⁵⁵ *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

⁵⁶ Federal Election Commission, "FEC v. National Congressional Club," *FEC.gov*, <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/fec-v-national-congressional-club/>.

Thus, the Congressional Club's rise to power reveals the strategic evolution of interest groups into year-round entities with the ability to lobby and advocate for conservative causes over time.

The Congressional Club, created to eliminate Helms's debt, transformed into one of the most influential PACs in the nation by the 1980s.⁵⁷ The Club's influence primarily stems from its effective fundraising and advertising techniques, which successfully mobilized voters and shaped public opinion nationwide.⁵⁸ Over the last four decades, historians, political scientists, journalists, and other scholars have analyzed the 1984 and 1990 Senate races and offered various explanations for their outcomes; this scholarship largely centers on Helms and how his conservative philosophy, such as anti-abortion, pro-school prayer, and pro-gun, influenced voters across race, class, and geography. This thesis does not focus on Helms, nor does it claim to identify the most influential factor in his successes.⁵⁹ Instead, it analyzes the Congressional Club as the primary influence behind the 1984 and 1990 elections through its fundraising and negative political advertising. In 1984 and 1990, the NCC relied on anti-Black racism in direct mail and television advertising to ignite racial resentment against the Democratic opposition and mobilize white voters' fear of Black advancement.

⁵⁷ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 223.

⁵⁸ There is scholarly agreement that direct marketing can influence political behavior. The thesis focuses on direct mail and television advertising because these methods were widely utilized by the Club in the 1984 and 1990 campaigns. For more information see, Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (September 2000): 653-663 and, John G. Bullock, Donald P. Green, and Shang E. Ha, "The Effect of Television Advertising in United States Elections," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 2 (May 2022): 702-718.

⁵⁹ For more information on the factors influencing the 1984 and 1990 elections, see Jerry Ingalls and Jamie L. Strickland, "No Blurred Edges; Crowded Middle: Votes for Jesse Helms in 1984 and 1990," *The North Carolina Geographer* 1 (1992): 46-54, <https://ncgeography.org/journal/index.php/NCGeographer/article/view/5/5>.

Historiography

The historiographical analysis for this thesis focuses on three significant themes: the history of Southern conservatism, racial politics in North Carolina, and the rise of political action committees, drawing on scholarly disciplines including history, political science, and communications.

The history of Southern conservatism continues to receive considerable scholarly analysis in American political studies. The earliest scholarship does not explicitly examine ‘Southern conservatism.’ Instead, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholars primarily studied Reconstruction and framed the era as a turbulent period that harmed the region. These interpretations align with the Lost Cause belief of the era, which romanticized the antebellum South, downplayed the presence of slavery as the cause of the Civil War, and portrayed the region as the innocent victim of the cruel North.⁶⁰ It also coincides with the rise of Jim Crow segregation and efforts to dehumanize Black Americans. The following text has been challenged and discredited for its racist and inaccurate portrayal. The thesis does not directly address this text but recognizes it as the intellectual foundation for Southern conservatism studies.

The most notable scholar of the field is William Archibald Dunning. In *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (1907), the author presents a cynical view of Reconstruction and the role Congressional Republicans played in the reintegration of the former Confederate states. He argued that Southerners were victims of the encroaching federal government and cast Black Americans as passive tools of political manipulation who were unfit for self-governance.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For more information on the Lost Cause, see Edward Bonekemper, *The Myth of the Lost Cause: Why the South Fought the Civil War and Why the North Won* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2015).

⁶¹ William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907).

This perspective was integral to his Dunning School, a school of thought that informed academic interpretation of the region for the next few decades. Dunning's narrative legitimizes Southern resistance to Reconstruction and enforces the dehumanization of Black Americans through racial segregation, a key aspect of Southern conservatism throughout the twentieth century.

The scholarship produced during the mid-twentieth century employed a more rigorous analysis, incorporating demographic data, voting patterns, and archival research. These systematic methods displaced the Dunning School interpretation for a more nuanced approach to the region's political culture. Additionally, the civil rights movement influenced scholars to produce works that examined the intersections of race and resistance in Southern conservatism. The following academic works demonstrate how conservative ideology has been shaped by regional and national trends. The thesis recognizes these works as essential for understanding mid-twentieth-century conservative political power as a reaction to increased civil rights for Black Americans.

C. Vann Woodward published *The Burden of Southern History* (1960) before the major political realignment; however, he anticipated the shift in his analysis of southern resistance to change. In this collection of essays, he asserted that the South has a unique position in American history due to its defeat during the Civil War, the legacy of Reconstruction, and the ongoing reality of poverty and racial inequality. Southern identity and culture are rooted in these shared experiences, not just the perpetuation of white supremacy. These 'burdening' experiences provided Southerners with a sense of tragedy, even though the larger narrative of America advances hope and progress. Lastly, Woodward cautioned Southerners not to cling to these defeats, as it would prevent progress. They must carry the 'burden' of their past for a meaningful

engagement with history.⁶² Woodard's essays provide the basis for a more rigorous examination of the South and inform the thesis by highlighting the 'unique burden' of the region, racial inequality.

Numan V. Bartley built upon this foundation in *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (1969). Bartley argued that white Southerners were profoundly resistant to the school desegregation movement after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Bartley's analysis centered on the Southern political elites who framed this ruling as federal overreach and a threat to states' rights. Across the South, including North Carolina, public schools were closed, and local governments raised funds for white children to attend private schools. Bartley's text illustrates how white Southerners unified to oppose civil rights for Black Americans. It also shows how reactionary racial politics interacted with old Southern commitments to states' rights to develop a modern political conservative framework.⁶³

Since the 1980s, scholarship on Southern conservatism has expanded significantly, facilitating an interdisciplinary analysis of the region. Instead of centering white racial backlash, scholars explore religion, class, gender, sexuality, and other influences that have shaped modern conservatism. The transformations in this field coincide with the growing awareness of the South's role in national politics, the increasing polarization between urban and rural communities, and the presence of multiculturalism in academia. The following texts are representative of this sophisticated scholarship, and the thesis contributes to this discussion by

⁶² C. Vann Woodard, *The Burden of Southern History*, (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

⁶³ Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

elaborating on modern conservatism and its persistence through coded language that appealed to Americans across the nation.

Dan T. Carter traced the evolution and influence of Southern conservatism on national politics in *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich* (1996). These essays recognized the segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, as the figurehead of modern conservatism for his ability to weaponize racial resentment and advertise this message to white voters. Carter argued that Wallace's coded political rhetoric became the strategy for national conservatism. It informed the platforms of prominent Republicans, such as Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and Reagan.⁶⁴ Carter's text demonstrates how dog-whistle politics fueled conservative discourse and mainstreamed Southern populism.

Similarly, Matthew Lassiter explored the ascendancy of modern conservatism in *The Silent Majority* (2007). He centered the suburban middle class of rising metropolitan areas, a product of the economic industrialization of the New South rhetoric. In the years following World War II, the Sunbelt South rose in prominence. These "silent majority" voters aligned with modern conservative values – economic individualism, resistance to centralized government, and opposition to liberalism – due to their creation by white residents seeking to live in upper-class and racially homogeneous neighborhoods. These communities were not explicitly racist, but they did adopt 'colorblind' policies that upheld de facto segregation, segregation by custom rather than law. Lassiter's work retreats from explicit racial resentment for a complex analysis of how

⁶⁴ Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963–1994* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

race, class, and location shape the conservative ideology.⁶⁵ The thesis expands Lassiter's discussion by demonstrating how Republicans catered to white conservatives across party lines.

The historiography of North Carolina politics presents a topical rather than chronological framework as scholars have examined themes across various historical periods. For example, there has been a thematic scholarly emphasis on the state's dueling progressive and conservative images. The thesis features these analyses in the context of the state's social, political, and cultural life. It is featured in V.O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949). The landmark text demonstrates that the South is not just a monolithic entity, but a diverse and varied region. He described North Carolina as having a progressive reputation because of educational reform and economic growth, but this progress was hindered by white elites who marginalized Black Americans.⁶⁶ Key's observations provide an essential understanding of Southern political behavior and establish the tradition of chronicling North Carolina's transformation for future scholars.

Rob Christensen continued this tradition in *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics* (2008). He charts the development of the state's politics from the post-Reconstruction era to the twenty-first century. He argued that the paradox is central to the state's political identity, as state politicians have projected an image of modernity while being cautious in the pursuit of social justice. The narrative is focused on local figures and movements to contextualize them within the state's ideological spectrum.⁶⁷ His text effectively synthesizes the complex nature of state politics, highlighting that it is a constant negotiation between conservative and progressive ideologies.

⁶⁵ Matt Lassiter *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*.

⁶⁷ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*.

There has also been a persistent study of racial politics in North Carolina. These studies have explored the evolution of Black political agency from Reconstruction to the twenty-first century. Scholars examine the advancements made by Black Americans in the face of racial segregation, party realignment, and the ongoing struggle for civil rights and equality. The thesis complements the following works in its argument that non-Black individuals often interpret Black political activity as a threat.

Helen G. Edmonds's *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina 1894-1901* (1951) is a foundational text that highlights the role of Black political activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She examined the multiracial Fusionist coalition established between Republicans and Populists against white Democrats and argued that Black Americans actively fought against Jim Crow. However, a racial coup overturned this coalition in 1898 and led to the establishment of disenfranchisement laws.⁶⁸ Edmonds informs the historiography on early Black political behavior and the possibilities of multiracial political participation.

In the modern era, writers such as US Army veteran, talk show host, and professor Val Atkinson expanded discussions of Black political culture in North Carolina, from the Reconstruction era to the early twenty-first century. In his book, *Southern Racial Politics and North Carolina's Black Vote* (2007), he argues that conservative white dominance has consistently denied Black political power. Black Americans were disenfranchised through poll taxes, gerrymandering, literacy tests, and other tactics of fear and intimidation.⁶⁹ Atkinson's text reveals that despite North Carolina's 'moderate' image, white conservatives have consistently

⁶⁸ Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina 1894-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951).

⁶⁹ Val Atkinson, *Southern Racial Politics and North Carolina's Black Vote* (Indiana: Trafford Publishing, 2006).

excluded Black residents from political participation, making it an enduring aspect of modern politics.

The partisan and ideological transformation of the state is evident in its electoral history. The thesis examines key scholarly and journalistic publications that document the 1984 and 1990 elections, highlighting the social, political, and racial dynamics of each election cycle. A year after Helms secured victory, the former editor of the *Greensboro News and Record*, William D. Snider, published *Helms and Hunt* to analyze one of the most divisive and expensive Senate campaigns in American history. It is the first and only full-length text that examines the 1984 race. Snider effectively portrayed Helms and Hunt through their political careers and connection to North Carolinians.⁷⁰ He argued that the 1984 race was a battle between the Old and New South, characterized by the polarizing tactics employed in the campaign. His text captures the influential nature of political action organizing, the impact of racial ideology on voting patterns, and the contested political identity of the state. The thesis supports Snider's argument and positions the 1984 race as a battle between dueling ideologies.

Appalachian State University Lecturer James Patrick Kellam examined the 1984 election in "Helms, Hunt, and Whiteness" (2017) and argued the centrality of race in the campaign, especially in advertising.⁷¹ It is a more focused analysis than Snider's, claiming that Helms's victory is due to his emotional appeal to white voters. Race does not exist in the foreground; it shaped campaign policy and voter strategies. This thesis contributes to electoral politics by

⁷⁰ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*.

⁷¹ James Patrick Kellam. "Helms, Hunt, and Whiteness: The 1984 Senate Campaign in North Carolina" (MA thesis, Appalachian State University, 2017), https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Kellam,%20J_2017%20Thesis.pdf.

demonstrating that appeals to white identity can mobilize voters against perceived threats of displacement.

Harvard Kennedy School of Government Senior Case Writer Pamela Varley's "Jesse Helms vs Harvey Gantt: Race, Culture, and Campaign Strategy in the 1990 Battle" is a case study that explores how race and culture influenced the 1990 campaign. She claimed that the opponents presented competing narratives: Gantt represented modernity and racial progress while Helms embodied nostalgia and white cultural resentment. This dueling narrative of identity defined the 1990 election rather than policy differences. Varley's case study enhances the historiography through its campaign-level analysis, which reveals how racial identities influenced voter choice.⁷² The thesis utilizes the modernity-nostalgia distinction made between the two candidates and investigates the broader cultural dimensions of this dynamic to argue the centrality of race in politics.

Erik Ose's *When Harvey Met Jesse* (2014) is a full-length text that examines the 1990 campaign. Ose argued that Helms specifically manipulated white anxieties to mobilize white voters and suppress Black voters. Ose claimed that the election shows the effectiveness of dog-whistle politics in Southern political dynamics. It adapted to fit the new media landscape, and subsequently, his opponents exposed his racial identity to a broader audience through television. Ose provides essential insight into the racialized messaging of modern political advertising.⁷³ Finally, the scholarly evolution of PACs emerged in prominence during the mid-twentieth century. The thesis supports the evolving research on PACs as essential to

⁷² Pamela Varley, "Jesse Helms v. Harvey Gantt: Race, Culture, and Campaign Strategy in the 1990 Senate Battle," *Harvard Kennedy School of Government* (1992): 1-39.

⁷³ Erik Ose, *When Harvey Met Jesse: Attack Ads of the 1990 Gantt-Helms U.S. Senate Race in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: Latest Outrage Press, 2014).

understanding how well-funded entities shape modern political processes by representing specific candidates and interests.

The earliest studies focused on their formation and growing presence in politics. When V.O. Key wrote *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (1942), PACs did not yet exist in a formal sense. However, there were interest groups, such as labor unions and business lobbies, which shaped policy and public opinion, thereby creating tension.⁷⁴ This text highlights a fundamental concern about pressure groups undermining democratic processes.

Political scientists, such as E.E. Schattschneider, critiqued this growing influence in *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (1960). He argued that Americans do not fully participate in democracy and are semi-sovereign because a select few elites and interest groups primarily control political power. He contended that political parties must be stronger and more centralized to counter these groups and better represent the interests of the American people.⁷⁵ Although PACs still had not been formally organized by this time, Schattschneider shows how wealthy individuals can gate-keep politics from everyday Americans.

David B. Magleby and Candice J. Nelson discuss the legal framework that enabled PACs to fund campaigns after the passage of the *Federal Election Campaign Act* in 1971 in *The Money Chase* (1971). They argued that PAC financial contributions, which have become the primary method of funding competitive campaigns, directly influence policymaking and subvert

⁷⁴ V.O. Key, *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, 5th ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1942).

⁷⁵ E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960).

democracy, prioritizing the wealthy and corporations over average citizens.⁷⁶ Compared to the theoretical arguments made by Key and Schattschneider, this text presents a shift toward data-driven analysis, and it documents how PACs exploit legal frameworks. The same argument is made in *Game Changers* by Henrik M. Schutzing and Steven E. Martin, who investigated how Super PACs and dark money groups operate in the twenty-first century. The authors referred to these committees as “game changers” that determine election outcomes and policy-making. Schutinger and Martin’s text highlights how democratic institutions are distorted by Super PACS and fuel political partisanship.⁷⁷ The thesis argues that the Congressional Club directly influenced the outcome of the 1984 and 1990 elections through its fundraising and advertising strategies.

⁷⁶ David Magleby and Candice J. Nelson, *The Money Chase: Congressional Campaign Finance Reform* (D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1990).

⁷⁷ Henrik M. Schatzinger and Steven E. Martin. *Game Changers: How Dark Money and Super PACs Are Transforming U.S. Campaigns* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

CHAPTER TWO: WHERE DO YA STAND, JIM?

“The campaign issues aren’t the thing that matters. It’s character.” – Carter Wrenn⁷⁸

North Carolina entered the 1980s with a sense of urgency. The New South movement transformed North Carolina from a poor rural state in the post-Civil War era to an industrial powerhouse that made its fortune in tobacco farming, textile and cotton mills, and furniture companies. However, nearing the end of the twentieth century, many of these factories closed due to developments in the banking, science, and technology sectors. These companies invested in cities across the state, such as Charlotte, Raleigh, and Durham – cities in the Piedmont Region – and transformed them into prominent hubs. The diversification of North Carolina’s economy had a profound impact on local communities, particularly in rural areas, where population decline, environmental degradation, poverty, and unemployment were significant issues.⁷⁹ On the other hand, urbanization increased funding for public education, promoted immigration to the state, raised the per-capita income, and encouraged the development of various industries.⁸⁰ It is crucial to emphasize the disparity between the growing prosperity of urban centers and the hardships faced by rural communities in the political landscape.

Black North Carolinians, who made up 1.3 million of the population, navigated a complex reality at the start of the decade.⁸¹ Due to upward economic, political, and social mobility across the region, there was a reverse migration of Black people to the South starting in

⁷⁸ Wrenn interview.

⁷⁹ Jesse L. White Jr., “Economic Development in North Carolina: Moving Toward Innovation,” *Popular Government* 69 no. 3 (2004): 2-5, https://www.sog.unc.edu/sites/default/files/articles/article1_7.pdf.

⁸⁰ T. William Lester and Nichola Lowe, “Rebuilding the Bridge to the Future: An Analysis of What Works for North Carolina’s Economy,” *Think NC First*, July 2015, https://nicholalowe.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/9703/2015/06/Lester_Lowe_Think-BW.pdf.

⁸¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *1980 Census of Population* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1980/volume-1/north-carolina/1980censusofpopu801351uns_bw.pdf.

the 1970s.⁸² There was greater political representation: the number of Black legislators in the North Carolina General Assembly nearly quadrupled between 1981 and 1983, Henry E. Frye became the first Black American to serve on the state Supreme Court in 1983, and elected officials drafted legislation to protect and develop local communities.⁸³ There was a prosperous professional class comprising doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs, who had access to capital. Additionally, Black enrollment into higher education increased to nine percent by 1980, especially at historically Black colleges and universities.⁸⁴ According to one source who attended college in the 1970s in Greensboro, North Carolina, an urban city in the Piedmont Region, “It was such a fun time to go to school and be with my friends. We loved going out in the city.”⁸⁵

Despite these advancements spurred by the civil rights and New South movements, Black North Carolinians continued to face difficulties. In 1979, members of the KKK allied with Nazis and attacked an anti-Klan rally by the Communist Workers Party in a Black neighborhood in Greensboro, killing five and injuring twelve. “That scared me,” recalled the Greensboro resident. “Klan activity like that happened to my friends from Mississippi and Alabama.”⁸⁶ Additionally, Black workers earned less than their white colleagues and suffered a higher rate of unemployment, particularly in urban areas.⁸⁷

⁸² Stewart E Tolnay, “The African American ‘Great Migration’ and Beyond,” 223.

⁸³ Milton C. Jordan, “Black Legislators: From Political Novelty to Political Force,” *North Carolina Insight* 12 (1989): 40–44, https://nccppr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Black_Legislators-From_Political_Novelty_to_Political_Force.pdf.

⁸⁴ Joseph R. Meisenheimer II, “Black college graduates in the labor market, 1979 and 1989,” *Monthly Labor Review* (1990): 13-16, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1990/11/art2full.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Interview with a former Greensboro resident, July 2025. All civilian interviews are confidential, and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

⁸⁶ Interview with a former Greensboro resident.

⁸⁷ Meisenheimer II, “Black college graduates in the labor market,” 15-20.

There were nearly 2.6 million registered voters in North Carolina in 1980; 1.87 million were Democrats, and 608,000 were Republicans.⁸⁸ Nearly fifty-six percent of white residents were registered to vote, compared to thirty-eight percent of Black residents.⁸⁹ However, the Congressional Club appealed to conservative voters regardless of party affiliation, and many of these voters were switching to the Republican Party due to the “Southern Strategy.”⁹⁰ This support was apparent during Ronald Reagan’s first presidential campaign in 1976. The NCC’s leadership during the primaries pushed the organization to the forefront of state Republican politics. Reagan was unsuccessful in 1976 but defeated Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter four years later. Ellis and Wrenn utilized NCC resources to direct the campaign, raising \$4.6 million for Reagan’s campaign in a pivotal move that secured him the state’s primary. This effectively laid the groundwork for his presidency and established him as a leader of the conservative revolution.⁹¹

The NCC’s effective advertising and fundraising made it the most influential PAC in the nation. Although they experienced successes, their challenges would soon arise due to their frontman. Helms always declared himself loyal to conservative principles above all else, which often caused strife with fellow party members, including the president, the Senate, and his North Carolinian supporters. It is evident in his support of a cigarette tax bill in 1982, despite his promise to tobacco farmers to keep costs low. Nearly 150,000 North Carolinians still worked in the tobacco industry and were affected by rising prices.⁹²

⁸⁸ “Registration Statistics, Part I,” *NC State Board of Elections*, <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/registration-statistics-part-1-1980-october-6/4259653>.

⁸⁹ Charles S. Bullock III and Ronald Keith Gaddie, “An Assessment of Voting Rights Progress in North Carolina,” *American Enterprise Institute* (2004): 19, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20060621_VRANorthCarolinaStudy.pdf?x91208.

⁹⁰ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 227.

⁹¹ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 217-219

⁹² Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 94-95.

The senator wasn't just losing favor with the tobacco farmers. A poll conducted by the North Carolina School of Journalism in October 1982 revealed that fifty percent of North Carolinians preferred Democratic Governor Hunt, compared to thirty-one percent for Helms. In the previous year, Hunt led forty-six percent to thirty-eight percent. Helms's blunder in the tobacco industry, combined with various failed Congressional Club appointees in local elections, appeared to be souring North Carolinians on the senator.⁹³ Additionally, many of the migrants to the state were Republican, but not attracted to Helms's fiery rhetoric. For the first time in his political career, Helms was facing defeat.⁹⁴

Helms was severely distraught when Congressional Club members revealed this information. He even thought about not running for reelection until Finkelstein inquired whether he would consider returning to the Senate.⁹⁵ Helms expressed his love for serving in the position, and both Ellis and Wrenn encouraged him to confront what would be his toughest challenge yet.⁹⁶ Thus began the campaign in June 1983, with ads in nearly one hundred fifty newspapers and eighty radio stations targeting the state's rural areas. Across twelve weeks, these attack ads appeared more than 14,000 times and soon began to shape the political opinions of North Carolinians.⁹⁷

⁹³ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 120-124.

⁹⁴ Eamon, *The Making of Southern Democracy*, 202.

⁹⁵ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 270-274

⁹⁶ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 228.

⁹⁷ Ken Eudy, "Ads Signal Helms-Hunt Race Is On," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 9, 1983: 9, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A11260DC9BB798E30%40WHNPX-173673D6E99D4AAF%402445495-17366BB64E0A7237%408.173673D6E99D4AAF%402445495-17351E50EC3AB7E7%400>. All subsequent NewsBank articles have a similar link, so it will not be repeated.

Governor James Baxter Hunt

“This is 1984. This is North Carolina. This is a progressive state. We’re not going to go back now and open those old wounds ... My gracious, how far back do you want to take us?” – James B. Hunt ⁹⁸

Governor James Baxter Hunt exemplifies North Carolina’s progressive pulse.⁹⁹ Born in 1937 to a schoolteacher mother and soil conservationist father in Greensboro, he was inspired by politics at a young age and sought out opportunities in school clubs and public affairs. After graduating from North Carolina State University, he enrolled in law school at UNC Chapel Hill and became the college director of the Democratic National Committee, forming political relationships that would benefit him later in his career.¹⁰⁰

As a fledgling figure in state politics, Hunt quickly showed himself to be an effective and ambitious politician for the Democratic Party. He understood the state’s dueling embrace of conservative and progressive politicians and branded himself as a true centrist candidate who could identify with both ideologies. He advocated for improved agricultural practices, significantly raised the state’s standards of public education, and frequently spoke of the importance of restoring the American spirit.¹⁰¹ “We loved Hunt,” expressed a former election poll worker. “He had a vision for the future.”¹⁰² His popularity led to his election as lieutenant governor in 1972, and four years later, he was sworn in as governor, receiving nearly sixty-five percent of the vote.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ “Hunt/Helms Debate II,” filmed September 9, 1984, C-SPAN, 57:58.
<https://www.c-span.org/program/public-affairs-event/hunt-helms-debate-ii/92920>

⁹⁹ Progressive politics is a political philosophy that addresses inequality through reform. For more information on progressive reform, see Howard W. Allen and Jerome Clubb. “Progressive Reform and the Political System,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1974): 130–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40489302>.

¹⁰⁰ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 23-25.

¹⁰² Interview with a former election poll worker, July 2025.

¹⁰³ For more biographical information on Jim Hunt, see Gary Pierce, *Jim Hunt: A Biography* (Winston Salem: John F. Blair Publisher, 2010).

Hunt's rise to prominence is significant. His landslide victory reveals the Democratic playbook for the late twentieth century: blending socially conservative values with progressive policies. This "ideological nimbleness" enabled him to attract big corporations to the state and increase public school funding while supporting the death penalty, banning alcohol in the governor's mansion, and expanding the prison system.¹⁰⁴ Hunt's pragmatic leadership kept the Democrats afloat during the wave of Republican victories as he appealed to conservative and progressive voters across party lines, much to the chagrin of the Republican Party. According to a volunteer in his 1984 campaign, "He knew how to play the game, and he played it well."¹⁰⁵ Hunt didn't just play the game; he changed it. Two years into his governorship, he successfully lobbied for a constitutional amendment permitting the governor to serve consecutive terms, clearing the way for his reelection in 1980. If there was anyone to replace Helms, Hunt was at the ready.

1984

"You know, Hunt is vulnerable; he flip-flops on the issues ... You don't know where he stands." – Robert Harris¹⁰⁶

Ellis and Wrenn anticipated an intense battle to stifle Hunt's political popularity. The NCC based its campaign on the governor's character rather than ideology. Thus, the tagline of the campaign appeared: "WHERE DO YA STAND, JIM?" in letters, radio, and television advertisements. The phrase was created by NCC member Robert Harris, a man known as "the Stephen Hawking of conservatives."¹⁰⁷ According to Wrenn, this race differed from previous

¹⁰⁴ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 259.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with a former campaign volunteer in 1984 and 1990, July 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Jim Morrill, "The Stephen Hawking of conservatives: NC's Bob Harris wielded political influence," *The Charlotte Observer*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/politics-government/article245734720.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Stephen Hawking (1942-2018) was one of the most famous physicists of modern science, suffered from paralysis, and was wheelchair bound – similarly to Harris. Morrill, "The Stephen Hawking of conservatives."

campaigns because it wasn't an ideological battle. The Club attempted to undermine Hunt using this angle, but there wasn't a significant shift in the polls, as voters did not perceive the governor as a liberal. With help from their pollster Arthur Finkelstein, the advertisements shifted to criticizing Hunt's character, particularly highlighting his inconsistent positions on various issues, including foreign policy and tax cuts.¹⁰⁸

The Congressional Club criticized Hunt's character and employed an old political tool, racism.¹⁰⁹ Racism initially emerged in the debate to make Martin Luther King Jr's birthday a federal holiday. Dr. King Jr., the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, utilized nonviolent protests to combat racial discrimination in the United States. Following the leader's assassination in 1968, a motion to create a federal holiday in his honor was presented four days later by Democratic Representative John Conyers. An official vote did not reach the House floor until 1979, and the initial bill fell through. However, persistent efforts from civil rights activists and labor unions led the House to reconsider in 1983.¹¹⁰ Helms was certainly the strongest opponent against the creation of the holiday. He often expressed his discontent with the civil rights leader during his radio media days: he accused him of inciting violence, being a Communist sympathizer, and labeled him a danger to American society.¹¹¹

Helms found it unreasonable to celebrate King's legacy and he was not alone in that opinion. Some Americans felt there were already too many national holidays, while others claimed that it'd be too expensive to institute.¹¹² Back home, eighty-five percent of white North

¹⁰⁸ Wrenn interview.

¹⁰⁹ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 249.

¹¹⁰ Dan T. Fleming, *Living the Dream: The Contested History of Martin Luther King Jr. Day* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 14, 26, 102.

¹¹¹ Jesse Helms Viewpoint 1674, 1967, 04912, box 2, folder 18, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹¹² Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 130-131.

Carolinians were opposed to the holiday.¹¹³ On the other hand, many Black North Carolinians were overjoyed with racial pride at the possibility of the holiday. Kelly Alexander Sr., chairman for the Charlotte National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), described the moment as “a demonstration of democracy in action,” and Monroe lawyer Randy Miller believed the holiday would be “a rallying point for Black people, for white people, people of all races.”¹¹⁴ Since the bill’s ratification in November 1983, the holiday has become a day of service, volunteering, and community building. However, several states responded by merging the holiday with Confederate commemorations.¹¹⁵

Helms launched a filibuster in the House against the holiday, which resulted in a ten percent increase in his poll numbers.¹¹⁶ The senator reiterated his earlier opinion about Dr. King Jr. and requested that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) release its files on the civil rights leader as proof of his communist identity. The FBI did not have evidence connecting Dr. King Jr., nor any other major civil rights leaders, to communist organizations.¹¹⁷ Consequently, the filibuster failed, and Helms was widely criticized across the political aisle for his actions. The national media expressed this moment as a political suicide for Helms, but the NCC was not concerned. In reality, his stark opposition to the holiday resonated with white residents who

¹¹³ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 249.

¹¹⁴ Pat Borden, “King Holiday Stirs Black Pride.” *The Charlotte Observer*. October 20, 1983: 3. *NewsBank: Access World News –Historical and Current*.

¹¹⁵ Meena Venkataramanan, "Two states still observe King-Lee Day, honoring Robert E. Lee with MLK." *Washington Post*, January 16, 2023, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A733447116/AONE?u=anon~e6eadef1&sid=googleScholar&xid=69ae8d45>.

¹¹⁶ Christensen, *Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 249.

¹¹⁷ Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to Congressman Alton Lennon, 04912, box 2, folder 18, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

already associated civil rights with communism.¹¹⁸ This fight showed the authentic Helms, which the NCC juxtaposed against Hunt's inauthentic character.¹¹⁹

Hunt could not be connected to the slain civil rights leader, but he could be linked to his 'radical' ideologies and the perceived successor of the civil rights era. Another Jesse was running for political office in 1984; Reverend Jesse Jackson is a prominent civil rights activist who worked under Dr. King Jr. in his youth and helped lead the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), one of the leading organizations of the movement. In 1971, Jackson left the SCLC after experiencing conflicts with its president, Ralph Abernathy. He then founded People United to Save Humanity (Operation PUSH) in Chicago.

It is important to highlight the nature of civil rights after the 1960s. Dr. King Jr.'s assassination created a leadership vacuum that no single unifying figure could fill. "King was the head," remembered a retired post office worker who was ten years old when Dr. King Jr. died. "Nobody could replace that. I remember where I was when he died. It felt like civil rights died with him. That was that."¹²⁰ With the national symbol gone, the movement shifted from national mobilization to more localized and community organization. Additionally, the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation in the South changed the focus to discrimination in sectors such as housing, healthcare, and the economy in the urban North. Lastly, the reign of New Deal Democrat presidents, who'd drafted civil rights legislation, came to an end in 1969 with the election of

¹¹⁸ Conservatism dominated national Republican Party politics during the Reagan era. The Republican Party advocated for strong anti-communist foreign policy, limited government, and Judeo-Christian morality to maintain support in the South and across the Sunbelt region. Conservatives readily associated civil rights activism with communism, framing progressive reform as destructive for the nation. For more information, see Yasuhiro Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace: Civil Rights and Anticommunism in the Jim Crow South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

¹¹⁹ Wrenn interview.

¹²⁰ Interview with a retired post office worker, July 2025.

Richard Nixon. Nixon came to power by undermining previously established liberal programs and appealing to the traditional values of Southern whites, pulling them to the Republican Party. Thus, the civil rights era seemingly came to a close for a greater focus on conservatism and protecting ‘declining’ American values.¹²¹

According to Dr. King Jr.’s biographer, Jackson began “emerging as the dominant figure,” “captured public attention,” and “challenging leadership trajectories.”¹²² Through Operation PUSH, he motivated Black Americans to improve their economic circumstances by achieving educational success and embracing personal responsibility. He traveled across the United States, raising funds and giving uplifting speeches on the importance of educational reform, investing in Black-owned businesses, and pressuring politicians to be more responsive to underrepresented communities.¹²³ As Jackson grew in popularity, he set his sights on something higher: the presidency. He resigned as the chairman of Operation PUSH in 1984 and became the second Black American to run a presidential campaign for a major party.¹²⁴

Jackson promised to run for the Democratic nomination if two million Black voters were registered across the South before the 1984 elections. In May 1983, he traveled to North Carolina, hoping to gain 250,000 new voters. After his visit to Charlotte, only 250 were

¹²¹ Jerry A. Watts and Jerry G. Watts, “BLACK POWER OR POWERFUL BLACKS: AN ANALYSIS OF JESSE JACKSON’S 1984 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORAL EFFORT,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 14, no. 1/2 (1987): 236–68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23262560>, 236.

¹²² David Maraniss, “Jackson and King Examining the Legacy After 20 Years,” *The Washington Post*, April 2, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/04/03/jackson-and-king-examining-the-legacy-after-20-year/s/84005843-6a27-44e6-ad2f-87f70ed8e1e0/>.

¹²³ Georgia M. Swanson, “Messiah or Manipulator? A Burkean Cluster Analysis of the Motivations Revealed in the Selected Speeches of the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1982), https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=bgsu1668078369664338&disposition=inline, 13-17.

¹²⁴ Watts and Watts, “BLACK POWER OR POWERFUL BLACKS,” 268.

registered.¹²⁵ This trip was the only documented time Jackson met with Governor Hunt. In response, the KKK held a voter registration drive with over 400 attendees.¹²⁶ “So many Black people went to see Jesse,” remarked the Hunt campaign volunteer, “I was already registered to vote. It made me glad because Black people needed to vote. It’s too serious not to!”¹²⁷ Before the Democratic primaries, only 695,000 Black voters were registered in the South, which marked an increase of nearly nine percent in registration. Jackson still ran his campaign, which came to be known as the Rainbow Coalition, promising opportunities and empowerment for all people.¹²⁸

Direct Mail

Dear Friend,

Your unfailing support of my positions and friendship for me personally has been a constant source of inspiration for the past twelve years.

These years as a United States Senator have been richly rewarding, thanks to all you've done for me and the conservative cause in America.

In grateful recognition of this I've enclosed a special token of my appreciation.¹²⁹

The words written above are common to the direct mail produced by the NCC. Direct mail political advertising consists of letters, pamphlets, newsletters, and various other political material that are sent directly to voters. It was readily utilized by PACs during the late twentieth century to mobilize voter participation and encourage financial support. This method was developed by Richard Viguerie in the 1970s through his consulting firm.¹³⁰ Viguerie joined the

¹²⁵ Ken Eudy, “Jesse Jackson’s Crusade Nets 250 New Voters in Charlotte,” *The Charlotte Observer*, May 18, 1983: 1. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.

¹²⁶ “Klan Voter Drive,” *The Charlotte Observer*, May 24, 1983: 21. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.

¹²⁷ Interview with a former campaign volunteer in 1984 and 1990.

¹²⁸ Robert C. Smith and Joseph P. McCormick II, “The Challenge of a Black Presidential Candidacy (1984),” *New Directions* (1985): 25-27, <https://dh.howard.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1390&context=newdirections#:~:text=Overall%2C%20695%2C00%20Blacks%20were%20added,registration%20declined%20by%20nearly%2010%25.>

¹²⁹ Senator Jesse Helms to a Friend, 04912, box 001, folder 1, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹³⁰ Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: A Comprehensive Guide for Understanding the “New Right” and its Role in American Politics of the 1980s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 45.

conservative youth group Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) in the 1960s and discovered two crucial issues: the organization's high financial debt and the inability to connect conservatism with Americans. Thus, he began direct mailing for the YAF to explain conservative philosophy to individuals, share local conservative activities, and request donations.¹³¹ Viguerie later resigned from YAF and created the Richard A. Viguerie Company (RAVCO) in Falls Church, Virginia.¹³²

The direct mail machine served two main purposes. Large computers stored the personal information of voters who'd supported conservative politicians. Individuals received correspondence by mail, followed by additional letters sent to those who responded. These follow-up letters connected voters to the large movement, highlighted conservative causes and referenced a prominent figure.¹³³ The first major candidate this was employed for was Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater in 1964, and successfully raised nearly \$6 million.¹³⁴ By the 1970s, RAVCO had become the leading direct mail service for politicians nationwide. Even Democrats reached out to Viguerie for assistance, but were often turned away due to ideological differences.¹³⁵ His headquarters in Virginia employed 300 people and housed two computers and 3,000 reels of tape containing names and addresses of over ten percent of the U.S. population.¹³⁶

The NCC was unaware of the power of direct mail until Viguerie demonstrated its efficiency in eliminating the debt from Helms's first senatorial campaign in 1973. Viguerie

¹³¹ Takahito Moriyama, *Empire of Direct Mail: How Conservative Marketing Persuaded Voters and Transformed the Grassroots* (Topeka: University Press of Kansas, 2022), 54-55.

¹³² Moriyama, *Empire of Direct Mail*, 79.

¹³³ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 192-193.

¹³⁴ Crawford, *Thunder on the Right*, 46-47.

¹³⁵ Moriyama, *Empire of Direct Mail*, 96-97.

¹³⁶ Crawford, *Thunder on the Right*, 48.

categorized direct mail into two types: prospect mailing for recruitment and house file mailings directed at donors. The Club hired vendors to do the prospect mailing while they handled the house file mailing. Letters were sent out every three weeks, and the NCC collected data from the return mail as they reported their donations to the FEC.¹³⁷ By the end of the decade, the NCC was utilizing direct mail far better than any other political organization due to their ability to fundraise nationwide. During the first half of 1984, direct mail generated \$1.76 million.¹³⁸ “You couldn’t escape Helms in 1984,” recalled a source that worked at the post office at that time, “They were everywhere. I probably had them memorized!”¹³⁹

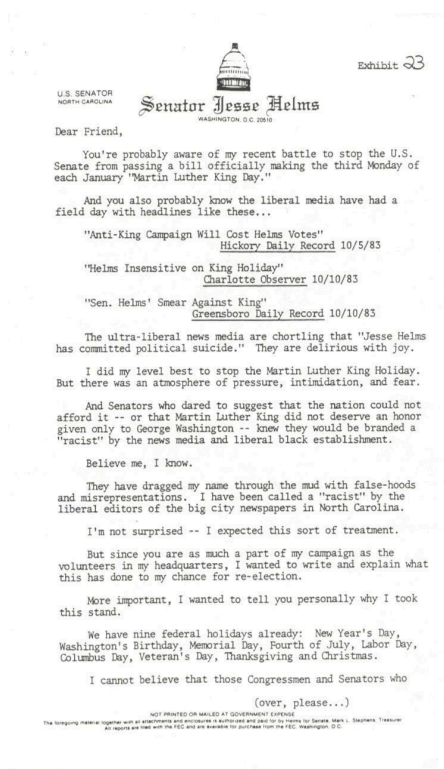


Figure Two: A letter from Jesse Helms to a potential donor¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Wrenn interview.

¹³⁸ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 276, 311-310

¹³⁹ Interview with a retired post office worker.

¹⁴⁰ Jesse Helms to a potential donor, 1984, 04912, box 1, folder 1, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The framework of direct mail relies on persuasion through storytelling. The letters usually begin with a personalized or friendly greeting, such as “Dear Friend,” establishing familiarity between the sender and recipient. The Congressional Club is not always listed as the sender; at times, the names of prominent members such as Helms, Wrenn, Ellis, may be listed instead. In the following paragraphs, conservatives are described as the true defenders of American values against the immoral liberal elites. Helms, and oftentimes Reagan, are depicted as courageous heroes who have consistently fought against the Democrats, yet their accomplishments would be meaningless without their supporters. These accomplishments include cutting back “waste in the food stamp program,” bringing back “children’s sacred right to pray” in schools, and “strengthening” the national defense.”¹⁴¹ Finally, each letter emphasizes the importance of a financial contribution to continue the fight against the liberal establishment, requesting donations ranging from \$5-\$100, with a subtle encouragement for larger contributions.¹⁴² Direct mail was effective, with the Congressional Club regularly receiving up to two thousand letters daily.¹⁴³

Governor Hunt is not always mentioned explicitly – oftentimes it’s the liberal mob, media, Communists, or the Democrats that are poised as threats against conservatism. Regardless of the title, the NCC conveys a sense of an approaching crisis due to ‘radical’ individuals, such as Dr. King Jr. and Reverend Jackson. Dr. King Jr. is usually branded as a socialist sympathizer who’s unworthy of consideration as an American hero. Reverend Jackson is described as a “dangerous liberal roaming the back streets” of small towns in North Carolina, leading a bloc of

¹⁴¹ Senator Helms to a Club member, 04912, box 1, folder 1, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹⁴² Letter from Senator Helms to a Club member.

¹⁴³ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 217.

extremist voters.¹⁴⁴ In both instances, Hunt is fiercely criticized for his support of the MLK holiday and his connection to Jackson's voter registration.

In addition to Dr. King Jr. and Jackson, Hunt is frequently accused of associating with other prominent Black figures of the era. One letter criticizes his association with Horace Julian Bond, the Black senator of Georgia, and his "BlackPAC," which seeks to end Helms's leadership.¹⁴⁵ Bond, a key figure in the civil rights movement, did not have a BlackPAC, was never publicly involved with Governor Hunt, and did not endorse Jackson's presidential campaign. There were Black political organizations in the 1980s, such as the Simkins Memorial in Durham and the Raleigh-Wake Citizens Association, which actively supported Democratic candidates; however, these organizations are never mentioned in the letters.

There is no question that Hunt had the support of Black North Carolinians.¹⁴⁶ He expressed solidarity with Black Americans as early as his college days and even attended a candlelight vigil in his hometown the day Dr. King Jr. was assassinated.¹⁴⁷ He was vocally explicit in his support for the King holiday as one that would benefit all Americans and marketed it in Black newspapers – a move the Congressional Club accused him of hiding from white voters.¹⁴⁸ In response, Black voters supported the governor by increasing voter registration numbers, fundraising luncheons, and fraternal associations' endorsements, such as the president

¹⁴⁴ Jesse Helms to Dr. Bruce E. Whitaker, 04912, box 1, folder 1, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Carter Wrenn to Cathy McCharen, 04912, box 1, folder 1, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

¹⁴⁵ Letter from Carter Wrenn to Cathy McCharen

¹⁴⁶ "Hunt Recognizes Significance of Black Participants," *The Charlotte Post*, May 31, 1984, <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn88063138/1984-05-31/ed-2/seq-5/#words=Jim+Hunt>

¹⁴⁷ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 38-39.

¹⁴⁸ Ken Eudy, "King Holiday Enters Acid-Tongued Helms-Hunt TV Debate," *The Charlotte Observer*, September 10, 1984:1, *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.

of the North Carolina Association of Black lawyers, who criticized direct mail efforts for their “exercise in hate-mongering that is really offensive to Black people.”¹⁴⁹ Despite his solidarity with Black Americans, Hunt maintained his “ideologically nimble” platform, believing it would catapult him forward as it did in 1976 and 1980.

The Congressional Club strategically played the race card in 1984. Hunt had no tangible connection to Dr. King Jr. beyond his support for the federal holiday and merely shared party affiliation with Jackson. But the NCC understood that it needed to mobilize white North Carolinians by linking these individuals together. The content in the letters echoes the race-baiting language of the Southern Strategy, which subtly capitalized on white resentment towards civil rights. These letters perpetuate white supremacy by criminalizing Blackness and encouraging white Americans to maintain the social hierarchy under the imagery of legitimate political critique.

One of North Carolina’s most infamous political battles came to an end on November 7, 1984. Helms defeated Hunt with a slight margin of fifty-one percent to forty-seven percent. The Hunt campaign was outspent and outfunded throughout the election. The nearly two-year-long election race cost a total of twenty-six million, making it the most expensive election in North Carolina history at the time. Helms spent nearly seventeen million and Hunt spent over ten million. The majority of Helms’s funds came from small donations; between 1983 and 1985, twelve million letters were mailed, which raised nearly twenty million. As expected, Helms earned over sixty percent of the white vote and performed particularly well with rural, Eastern North Carolina, male, and Christian voters. Hunt received close to one hundred percent of the

¹⁴⁹ Snider, *Helms and Hunt*, 205, 242, 322.

Black vote.¹⁵⁰ “I was sad when Hunt lost,” expressed a former poll worker. “I really thought he would win it for us.”¹⁵¹

The Congressional Club targeted Hunt for various positions in an effort to undermine his political credibility. However, the intentional association between the governor and Dr. King Jr., as well as Reverend Jackson, highlights the significance of race in 1984 and the presence of conservatism in North Carolina. Both MLK and Jackson served as the symbolic leaders of Black America who advocated for the advancement of Black Americans and supported progressive policies. Hunt never fully identified with Dr. King nor Reverend Jackson, but his alignment with Black Americans proved to be an effective connection to exploit. The NCC understood that conservative voters were resistant to social change and attacked Hunt in their advertisements as the potential instigator for ‘radical’ transformation.

The Congressional Club influenced the political landscape in 1984 by promoting anti-Black racism, which encouraged white dominance to consolidate in the democratic process. The success the Congressional Club engineered for Helms was unprecedented. Wrenn and Ellis emerged as the leading figures in PAC fundraising. Energized by the 1984 success, the NCC continued its year-round fundraising and voter scouting. As the decade progressed, the Club would soon resurrect these tactics and strategies for what would become the final and most divisive battle of its political career.

¹⁵⁰ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 301-302.

¹⁵¹ Interview with a former election poll worker.

CHAPTER THREE: DISMANTLING THE GOOD ARCHITECT

“We thought Jesse would win, but it could’ve gone either way. Gantt was a good candidate.” – Carter Wrenn¹⁵²

North Carolina pursued modernity and reform in the latter half of the 1980s. In 1984, the Research Triangle established its first biotechnology center to advance the life sciences and technological development.¹⁵³ The General Assembly drafted the Basic Education Program in 1985, resulting in a more rigorous school curriculum.¹⁵⁴ The Charlotte-based NationsBank became one of the country’s top financial powers in 1988 after purchasing First Republic Bank of Dallas, Texas.¹⁵⁵ That same year, the National Basketball Association (NBA) expanded to Charlotte with the Hornets, promoting tourism, business activity, and cultural identity.¹⁵⁶ Also in 1988, construction widened the interstate, which controlled the increasing flow of traffic and supported the rapidly growing metropolitan areas.¹⁵⁷ This project was crucial to address the rapid population growth caused by New South growth and reverse migration.¹⁵⁸ There were nearly seven million residents at the end of the decade, many of whom migrated to North Carolina from Hispanic and Asian countries.¹⁵⁹ In contrast, North Carolinians working in traditional industries

¹⁵² Wrenn interview.

¹⁵³ “North Carolina Biotechnology Center,” *RTP*, accessed June 28, 2025, <https://www.rtp.org/company/nc-biotechnology-center/>.

¹⁵⁴ North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, “North Carolina Education: Strengthening the Foundations & Preparing for the Future. Information on Education Progress in North Carolina Five Years after ‘A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,’” April 1988, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED296452.pdf>.

¹⁵⁵ Howard E. Covington Jr. and Marion A. Ellis, *The Story of NationsBank: Changing the Face of American Banking* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 1-10.

¹⁵⁶ Matt Crossman, “The Place Went Nuts! An Oral History of the 1988 Charlotte Hornets,” *Charlotte Magazine*, October 17, 2013, <https://www.charlottemagazine.com/the-place-went-nuts-an-oral-history-of-the-1988-charlotte-hornets/>.

¹⁵⁷ “History Made: I-485 Opens 40 Years after Planning Began,” *WSOC TV*, June 5, 2015, <https://www.wsoc.com/news/local/history-made-i-485-opens-40-years-after-planning-b/52128080/>

¹⁵⁸ Tolnay, “The African American ‘Great Migration’ and Beyond,” 223.

¹⁵⁹ James H. Johnson Jr., Karen D. Johnson-Webb, and Walter C. Farrell Jr, “A Profile of Hispanic Newcomers to North Carolina,” *Popular Government* 65 (1999): 2–12, <https://www.sog.unc.edu/sites/default/files/articles/f99-0212.pdf>.

– textile, tobacco, and furniture – experienced an accelerated decline of manufacturing jobs. This worsened poverty and unemployment rates in rural communities, reinforcing the ever-growing divide between urban and rural communities.¹⁶⁰

The 1.5 million Black residents living in North Carolina at this time were a part of this upward mobility.¹⁶¹ Kevin Howell, the first Black student body president at NC State University, led a student protest against the university’s efforts to replace the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday with Easter Monday in 1987. Howell also encouraged student activism through his March Against Racism – Challenging History (M.A.R.C.H.) protests, which highlighted systemic barriers faced by Black university students.¹⁶² In 1989, thirteen Black legislators served in the House and four in the Senate.¹⁶³ There was an active Black Workers for Justice coalition fighting for union rights and workplace protections against discrimination.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, environmental justice activism emerged to address pollution’s disproportionate impact on low-income Black neighborhoods.¹⁶⁵ “I was living in Charlotte at the time,” expressed one source, “I would go visit other places around the country, and none of them were like North Carolina. It really felt like the state was up and coming.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Jeannine Sato, “The State of North Carolina: Jobs, Poverty and Family,” (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008), 7-8., https://evidence2impact.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/s_ncfis08c01.pdf.

¹⁶¹ United States Census Bureau, *Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: 1990 Census – North Carolina* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1990/cp-1/cp-1-35.pdf>.

¹⁶² “Kevin Dwan Howell,” *Student Leadership Initiative*, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://sal.lib.ncsu.edu/student-leaders/people/kevin-dwan-howell>.

¹⁶³ Jordan, “Black Legislators,” 40.

¹⁶⁴ “Black Workers for Justice,” *Fruit of Labor*, <https://www.fruitoflabor.org/black-workers-for-justice#:~:text=The%20BWFJ%20is%20an%20organization,BWFJ%20as%20a%20statewide%20organization>.

¹⁶⁵ “Environmental Justice,” *NC Conservation Network*, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.ncconservationnetwork.org/our-work/environmental-justice/#:~:text=A%20brief%20overview,disposal%2C%20and%20natural%20gas%20infrastructure>.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with a retired post office worker.

Black communities also faced hardship during this period. The landmark *Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board* decision in 1971 made North Carolina the national model for desegregation. However, federal courts began releasing school districts from desegregation orders in the latter half of the decade, viewing it as a temporary plan. These school systems also ended their mandatory busing programs and redrew school lines, forcing students to attend schools in their neighborhoods and keeping Black and Latino students in underfunded schools.¹⁶⁷ According to a source, “I remember when the schools desegregated. The Black kids still weren’t given the same attention. That’s why I went to the military. Nobody told me that I could go to college.”¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, Black communities experienced economic hardship, earning less than their white colleagues and facing higher rates of unemployment.¹⁶⁹

The Congressional Club continued its operations during this time. A week after the 1984 victory, Ellis and Wrenn organized Fairness In Media (FIM) to fundraise and promote Helms’s agenda. The Club aimed to take control of CBS and urged its donors to purchase stock in CBS to help establish a conservative media presence.¹⁷⁰ The CBS takeover was ultimately thwarted when a New York businessman purchased the stock. However, the NCC’s ongoing criticism of the perceived “liberal” bias in the media generated increasing skepticism among their conservative supporters towards major news outlets.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Stephen Samuel Smith, *Boom for Whom? Education, Desegregation, and Development in Charlotte* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

¹⁶⁸ Interview with a former election poll worker.

¹⁶⁹ Lori G. Kletzer, “Job Displacement, 1979-86: How Blacks Fared Relative to Whites,” *Monthly Labor Review* 114, no. 7 (July 1991): 17-19. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1991/07/art2full.pdf>.

¹⁷⁰ Wrenn interview.

¹⁷¹ “CBS Gives Fairness In Media a List of Its Shareholders,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 1985, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1985/03/27/cbs-gives-fairness-in-media-a-list-of-its-shareholders/69f6ef58-2627-4b96-b8ed-acc7ac67bd4b/>.

Helms remained committed to his conservative ideology and consistently battled his party members in Washington. He notably delayed the appointment of several individuals to the State Department, believing that true conservatives were being purged.¹⁷² The senator also shifted his focus to foreign policy issues. At this time, the hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) was decreasing as Reagan developed a diplomatic relationship with President Mikhail Gorbachev and supported pro-democracy movements across Europe.¹⁷³ Furthermore, there was an emergent “culture wars” in which conservative and liberal values clashed on a national scale. Helms led the crusade and advocated for evangelical Christian morality, supported anti-abortion legislation, ignored the growing AIDS crisis, which disproportionately affected gay men - and blamed it on their immoral sexuality, and defunded cultural institutions for their perceived vulgarity.¹⁷⁴ Lastly, there were greater efforts to overturn affirmative action, a policy of President John F. Kennedy’s Executive Order 10925 (1961) and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Civil Rights Act (1964), which sought to address discrimination in education and employment. Conservatives, including Helms, argued that affirmative action violated individual rights and promoted reverse discrimination.¹⁷⁵ “They unraveled so much for so many people,” recalled a source, “It was unfair, that’s what it was.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² “Helms to oppose candidates,” *The Charlotte Post*, June 14, 1985: 2, *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.

¹⁷³ The Cold War was a geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union primarily between the end of World War II and the early 1990s. For more information, see William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink* (New York: Dutton, 2022).

¹⁷⁴ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 345-360.

¹⁷⁵ Affirmative action, a product of the civil rights era, are policies designed to counter systemic discrimination and promote diversity. Conservatives have historically opposed affirmative action claiming that preference should not be given based on race and gender and that it unfairly hurts white people. For more information, see Jennifer L. Hochschild, “Affirmative Action as Culture War,” in *The Cultural Territories of Race: Black and White Boundaries*, ed. Michèle Lamont (Chicago and New York: University of Chicago Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 343–350, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119431732.ecaf0237>.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with a former Greensboro resident.

Democrats largely struggled in the “culture wars” for two reasons: leading party members distanced themselves from progressive causes to appeal to swing and lower-class white voters, and there were internal divisions.¹⁷⁷ The party’s ineffectiveness is evident in Reagan’s landslide victory in 1984 and the subsequent election of his party’s successor, George H.W. Bush, in 1988. Bush was less aggressive in tone and policy than his predecessor, but he continued the Republican platform of social conservatism.¹⁷⁸

By 1990, there were 3.147 million registered voters in North Carolina, with 2.019 million identifying Democrats and 969,000 as Republicans.¹⁷⁹ Two years earlier, fifty-eight percent of Black residents were registered to vote, compared to nearly sixty-five percent of white residents.¹⁸⁰ Helms was determined to run for re-election by February 1989, and Ellis and Wrenn were ready to lead the campaign. At that time, Finkelstein, who was gay, parted ways with the NCC due to differing political opinions with Helms and his anti-gay rhetoric. John McLaughlin was brought on as the pollster for the 1990 campaign.¹⁸¹ The Club benefited from a solid donor list it had built over the past decade, which provided the necessary funding¹⁸² “Those people sent Helms so much money, he ain’t worry about a dime,” exclaimed a former poll worker, “That’s what politics is. Nothing but money.”¹⁸³ A rematch with Hunt was the obvious choice – early polls showed that forty-seven percent of voters favored Hunt compared to 44 percent for

¹⁷⁷ Matthew Maxwell Akins, "Desperate Democrats in the Reagan Revolution: A Party Determined to Win the White House" (Senior Independent Study Thesis, The College of Wooster, 2022), 1-2, <https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy/9669>

¹⁷⁸ Akins, “Desperate Democrats in the Reagan Revolution,” 59-62.

¹⁷⁹ North Carolina State Board of Elections, “Registration Statistics,” 1.

¹⁸⁰ Blum, "An Assessment of Voting Rights Progress in North Carolina," 19.

¹⁸¹ Wrenn interview.

¹⁸² Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 364.

¹⁸³ Interview with a former election poll worker.

Helms.¹⁸⁴ “I thought he was going to run again,” recalled a volunteer in the 1984 campaign. “He almost beat him the last time.”¹⁸⁵ But Hunt was not assembling his supporters, conducting polls, nor fundraising.¹⁸⁶ The governor was noncommittal on running again, sharing that he was “too busy” in May 1989.¹⁸⁷ The message was clear from some of his closest advisers and longtime supporters: “This isn’t the year,” “It’s very hard to come back after a defeat like that,” and “The time is right for a new face: an urban person, a woman, a Black.”¹⁸⁸

Mayor Harvey Bernard Gantt

“In my case, I wanted to be a good architect, and that’s enough resolve to carry you over those little covert and snide remarks that could trip you up along the way.” – Harvey Gantt¹⁸⁹

The Democrats needed a new challenger; thirty-five prospective candidates were invited to a senatorial campaign workshop on May 12, 1989.¹⁹⁰ Among them was Harvey Bernard Gantt. In 1943, Gantt was born on Young’s Island in Charleston, South Carolina. His family lived in public housing until the end of World War II and then moved downtown, where his father built their first house. This is where Gantt first developed an interest in architecture. He became involved in politics at an early age by reading about non-violent activism, joining the NAACP, and even leading a sit-in at a lunch counter during his senior year of high school. He attended Iowa State University on scholarship until he transferred to Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. After a brief legal battle, Gantt was the first Black student admitted to the

¹⁸⁴ Jim Morrill, “Hunt Can’t Match His 83’ Lead Over Helms - Ex-Governor Still Slightly Ahead,” *The Charlotte Observer*, July 3, 1989: 1A, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with a former campaign volunteer in 1984 and 1990.

¹⁸⁶ Tim Funk, “Hunt Advisers Say Times Wrong to Challenge Helms,” *The Charlotte Observer*, February 12, 1989: 1B, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

¹⁸⁷ Tim Funk, “Hunt vs. Helms - The Sequel? Ex-Governor Hasn't Decided Yet,” *The Charlotte Observer*, May 15, 1989: 7, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*

¹⁸⁸ Tim Funk, “Hunt Advisers Say Times Wrong to Challenge Helms.”

¹⁸⁹ Vivian Ross, “10 Years After Breaking Clemson Color Bar, He’s Content As Architect,” *The Charlotte Observer* 87, January 28, 1973:152, *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.

¹⁹⁰ Jim Morrill, “Committee Has A Clue on Helms Challenger in ’90 – Or Does It?” *The Charlotte Observer*, May 12, 1989: 5C, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

university.¹⁹¹ The first Black female student, Lucinda Brawley, was accepted to Clemson a few months later and married Gantt in October 1964.¹⁹²

Gantt moved to Charlotte after graduating from MIT and established Gantt Huberman Architects. His company was influential in the city's urban planning and designed various landmarks around the city, including the ImaginOn children's library and the Transportation Center in Uptown.¹⁹³ His political career began in 1974 when he was elected to the Charlotte City Council, filling the seat of the only Black appointee, Fred D. Alexander.¹⁹⁴ As a council member, Gantt represented Charlotte's Black citizens through discussions on city budgeting, neighborhood development, and other community projects.¹⁹⁵ He initially believed his role to be temporary, but Gantt served on the council for nearly a decade before he was elected mayor in 1983.¹⁹⁶

"We all loved Harvey," expressed a source who lived in Charlotte at the time. "He was a young, fresh face who did so many good things for the city. It made me, all of us, proud to see him up there."¹⁹⁷ He ran for re-election in 1987 but lost to Sue Myrick, who became the city's first Republican mayor. Her platform criticized Gantt for his handling of traffic congestion and for allegedly using his political position and racial identity to obtain a license for a local

¹⁹¹ NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, "Harvey B. Gantt," *NAACP LDF*, <https://www.naacpldf.org/about-us/scholarship-recipients/harvey-b-gantt/>.

¹⁹² Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, "About Harvey B. Gantt," *The Gantt Center*, last modified May 22, 2025, <https://www.ganttcenter.org/about-the-center/about-harvey-gantt/>.

¹⁹³ Charlotte's central city district is known as 'uptown.' Martha Fowler, "... About Harvey B. Gantt, First Black At Clemson," *The Charlotte Observer*, December 5, 1972: 38, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

¹⁹⁴ "Filling that Empty Council Seat," *The Charlotte Observer*, November 18, 1974: 20, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

¹⁹⁵ "Mayor Harvey Gantt To Address Condominium Council," *The Charlotte Post*, January 19, 1984, <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn88063138/1984-01-19/ed-1/seq-1/#pageinformation>.

¹⁹⁶ Susan Jetton, "Gantt Now Sees City Council Term 'As Temporary Role,'" *The Charlotte Observer*, December 18, 1974: 1, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with a former Greensboro resident.

television station – accusations that likely resonated with conservative voters.¹⁹⁸ When asked about the role of race in his defeat, Gantt acknowledged that it “has been a factor in all of his quests for public office,” but he asserted that white racism was not responsible for his defeat in 1987.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, racism would be a factor in his 1990 campaign for the Senate.

Gantt’s rise to prominence is a landmark event. The victories of the civil rights movement reshaped the social, political, and cultural landscape of the South, permitting Gantt to attend university and become an architect. His pursuit of higher education and a professional career reflects the growing Black middle class with access to capital and influence. As an architect, Gantt’s company promoted urban renewal, intersecting with the modernizing vision of the New South movement. His leadership earned him multi-ethnic support, highlighting reverse migration to Southern cities and the growing importance of racially diverse coalitions. These individuals elected him as the city’s first Black mayor amidst Reagan-era conservatism. Therefore, Gantt’s victory is the culmination of the struggles and opportunities in the South during the late twentieth century. As one source remarked, “That was a proud moment voting for him. Harvey made us feel powerful.”²⁰⁰

1990

“If you had a liberal African American, a liberal Black candidate, a lot of your conservative white Democrats were gonna vote for the conservative candidate.” – Carter Wrenn²⁰¹

The NCC understood that Gantt’s racial identity made him unfavorable to conservative white voters, but they didn’t consider him a weak candidate; he was well-known in the Piedmont

¹⁹⁸ Christensen, *The Paradox of Tarheel Politics*, 262.

¹⁹⁹ “Race Is Not The Only Factor,” *The Charlotte Post*, November 12, 1987, <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn88063138/1987-11-12/ed-1/seq-6/#words=Harvey+Gantt+Harvey+Gantt%27s>

²⁰⁰ Interview with a retired post office worker.

²⁰¹ Wrenn interview.

region, which had a large media market and population of Black voters.²⁰² There was a growing number of Black Americans attending college and entering professional fields, including politics, business, and architecture, which expanded the middle class. Additionally, these Black Americans were attracted to the expanding economic opportunities across the South.²⁰³ In a poll commissioned by the Gantt campaign, it was found that forty percent of North Carolina voters opposed the senator.²⁰⁴ Once again, Ellis and Wrenn needed to discredit the Democratic candidate. However, unlike 1984, the NCC attacked Gantt on issues, such as abortion, rather than character, because Gantt “was a little more liberal than Jim Hunt was.”²⁰⁵

The NCC didn’t have to play the race card in 1990. Gantt was seeking to become the state’s first Black senator in the South since Reconstruction and the fourth Black senator in American history. His association with the Charlotte metropolitan area – a city viewed with skepticism by many North Carolinians – did not provide him with the necessary support beyond the Piedmont Region. Gantt’s platform was more progressive than that of leading Democrats in the party, and he expressed support for abortion access and denounced the death penalty. Ultimately, Gantt was competing against an eighteen-year Senate veteran who had strong financial and advertising support and had never faced political defeat. In short, Gantt was facing an uphill battle.²⁰⁶

However, around the region and country, the political tide was shifting for Black Americans, which emboldened Gantt’s campaign and caused legitimate concerns for Ellis and

²⁰² Wrenn interview.

²⁰³ Larry L. Hunt, Matthew O. Hunt, and William W. Falk, “Who Is Headed South? U.S. Migration Trends in Black and White, 1970-2000,” *Social Forces* 87, no. 1 (2008): 95–119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430851>.

²⁰⁴ Varley, “Jesse Helms v. Harvey Gantt,” 10

²⁰⁵ Wrenn interview

²⁰⁶ Varley, “Jesse Helms v. Harvey Gantt,” 1.

Wrenn. In January 1990, Douglas Lawrence Wilder was sworn in as the governor of Virginia, becoming the first elected Black governor in the United States. That same month, David Dinkins became the first Black mayor of New York City. According to pollster Harrison Hickman, this win encouraged Black candidates across the country: “If Doug Wilder and Mr. Dinkins ... make history, I don't think there's any question that Harvey Gantt will more likely see a U.S. senator staring back from the mirror.”²⁰⁷ Surely, the time was ripe for an African American to make their return to the Senate floor.

Helms spoke favorably about Gantt during his radio media days and highlighted his efforts in desegregating Clemson University.²⁰⁸ Despite these words, Helms's anti-Black racism was well-documented: he was outspoken about his opposition to federal integration and most notably led the failed filibuster against the King holiday. Gantt never even interacted with Helms during the campaign, claiming that his team avoided debates to lessen the importance of his candidacy.²⁰⁹ Black voters were eager to elect Gantt to the Senate alongside urban residents and other minorities. “We were ready in 1990,” exclaimed a campaign volunteer. “We handed out flyers, wore buttons, attended rallies, and everything! No doubt about it, Helms had to go!”²¹⁰

Television Advertising

“You needed that job, and you were the best qualified, but they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota. Is that really fair? Harvey Gantt says it is. Gantt supports Ted Kennedy's racial quota law that makes the color of your skin more important than your qualifications. You vote on this issue next Tuesday. For racial quotas, Harvey Gantt. Against racial quotas, Jesse Helms.”²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Tim Funk, “Wilder Intrigues Black Politicians - If Virginia Makes Him Governor, Others May Try Statewide Races,” *The Charlotte Observer*, October 30, 1989: 1A, *NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current*.

²⁰⁸ Christensen, *Tar Heel Politics*, 265.

²⁰⁹ Harvey Gantt, interview with the author, August 2025, Charlotte, N.C.

²¹⁰ Interview with a former campaign volunteer in 1984 and 1990.

²¹¹ “Hands” advertisement (1990), *YouTube*, uploaded February 28, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Lw8_f6_2XQ.

These words narrate the most famous and controversial advertisement of the 1990 campaign and are considered one of the ‘dirtiest’ advertisements in American political history. The NCC still utilized direct mail and radio to connect with conservative voters in 1990, but the increasing availability of modern technology in the late twentieth century revealed a coveted spot for political advertising. Television political advertisements are video messages created by political parties and special interest groups with the intention of promoting their candidate, attacking opponents, and influencing public opinion. Televised advertisements have become an unavoidable aspect of modern elections in the United States.

Radio was the primary means of media communication in the early twentieth century, and television advertising evolved from it. It became a popular format for political candidates after World War II due to the rapid expansion of personal television ownership.²¹² The first campaign featuring television political advertising was the 1952 campaign between Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower and Democrat Adlai Stevenson. In these short advertisements, both parties reminded voters of their party members’ recent accomplishments against Adolf Hitler and the German Nazi Party.²¹³ Eisenhower filmed three dozen advertisements in which he appeared to answer questions from ordinary citizens – he later won in a landslide.²¹⁴ This campaign established a precedent for elections in the United States that each subsequent presidential candidate has followed.

Television advertising became more prevalent in the 1964 presidential campaign between Republican Barry Goldwater and incumbent Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson. Unlike the

²¹² Darrell M. West, *Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-2004* (DC: CQ Press, 2005), 1-3.

²¹³ West, *Air Wars*, 3.

²¹⁴ Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates, *The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), ix.

Eisenhower advertisements, Johnson injected a steady stream of fear and paranoia into his campaigns. In his famous “Daisy” ad, Johnson invoked fears of atomic warfare and accused Goldwater of being unfit for leadership in the nuclear age. Johnson eventually defeated Goldwater in a landslide victory. This campaign highlighted a notable shift in television advertising, moving beyond crafting a politician’s image and informing the public. It demonstrated how fear and emotion can be weaponized to demonize political opponents and negatively influence public opinion.²¹⁵

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, television political advertisements became more professionalized as campaigns utilized media professionals to produce memorable commercials. Attack advertisements became increasingly popular during this period. Conservative PACs in the 1970s and 1980s eagerly sought out television spots to communicate right-wing values. Once again, this was spearheaded by conservative figure Richard Viguerie and his RAVCO organization. He envisioned conservatives “using thirty-minute television messages, devoting twenty-five minutes to discussion of a political issue and then a fund-raising appeal in the last five minutes,” followed by a toll-free number that viewers could call to donate.²¹⁶

The Congressional Club used television advertising in all of Helms’s campaigns, increasing its investment with each election cycle. Ellis and Wrenn, along with media specialist Earl Ashe, researcher Robert Harris, and pollster John McLaughlin, collaborated to create television advertisement scripts tailored to how different demographics would respond to their commercials. The NCC also hired Robert Holding as its media strategist due to his skill in

²¹⁵ West, *Air Wars*, 3.

²¹⁶ Crawford, *Thunder on the Right*, 49.

purchasing commercial airtime from television stations at a discounted rate.²¹⁷ After the advertisements were released, polls were conducted to assess their effectiveness.²¹⁸ The focus on television advertising reflects the NCC's goal to maintain its national support. This was essential to counter the growing coalition of ethnic minorities, feminists, and LGBT activists that the Gantt campaign accumulated, a group that the NCC believed did not reflect North Carolina values.²¹⁹

Although the NCC prioritized the issues in 1990, their advertisements also attacked Gantt's integrity, similar to their approach against Governor Hunt, including negative portrayals of his physical image. These advertisements accused Gantt of being "too" or "dangerously liberal" for North Carolina, often followed by unfavorable photographs of him. In one advertisement, Gantt is depicted with raised eyebrows, smirking mischievously.²²⁰ Some advertisements questioned Gantt's political career and wealth. One commercial claimed that he used his mayoral influence and "his minority status to get himself a free TV station license from the government only to sell out to a white owned corporation for three and a half million dollars." The narrator referred to this as a betrayal of the Black community.²²¹ The NCC produced various advertisements to speculate on this act, claiming that Gantt's "minority status" enabled his acquisition of the station, which was ultimately the reason for his defeat in the

²¹⁷ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 365.

²¹⁸ Wrenn interview.

²¹⁹ Gantt interview.

²²⁰ During the antebellum era, slaveholders accused enslaved Blacks of being dishonest and prone to criminal behavior. This stereotype developed after emancipation as Southern whites utilized it to maintain racial control. It has persisted into the twentieth-century, reinforcing fear and distrust of Black people. For more information, see M.R. Banaji, S. T. Fiske, and D.S. Massey, "Systemic racism: individuals and interactions, institutions and society," *Cognitive Research* 6, no. 82 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00349-3>.

²²¹ Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 97.

mayoral race.²²² This is the same argument that Myrick platformed in her 1987 mayoral victory over Gantt. Gantt acquired a license for a local television station in Charlotte in 1985 under the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), an independent government agency that regulates media communications across the United States. Gantt obtained this license after his original investor group, which was over eighty percent white, merged with a minority-owned group. The FCC promoted minority ownership to encourage diverse broadcasting; however, a spokesperson for the FCC confirmed that Gantt's license was not dependent upon minority ownership. Gantt sold his partnership in the station four months later and earned \$450,000 in profit, with an additional ten percent interest over the next decade.²²³ The FCC cleared him of any wrongdoing in the acquisition and sale of the company in 1987.²²⁴

There are various advertisements claiming that Gantt benefited from minority handouts and sold out Black Americans. One advertisement criticized Gantt for having a swimming pool and tennis court in his home, claiming that this represented a shattered "covenant with the Black citizens of Charlotte."²²⁵ There is a frequent use of photography in the NCC's advertising, specifically bringing attention to Gantt's image and connecting him to other notable Black figures. Jesse Jackson's endorsement of Gantt was highlighted, suggesting that the two men collaborated closely. Gantt never campaigned with Jackson in 1990, who was viewed by conservatives as a "radical crazy liberal" who would have "African Americans taking over society."²²⁶ It should be noted that the Congressional Club members were never mentioned in

²²² Wrenn interview.

²²³ Erik Ose, *When Harvey Met Jesse*, 932-938.

²²⁴ Seth Effron, "Helms Attacks Gantt on TV Station Deal FCC Probed Sale, Found Gantt Blameless," *Greensboro News & Record*, October 30, 1997, https://greensboro.com/helms-attacks-gantt-on-tv-station-deal-fcc-probed-sale-found-gantt-blameless/article_ca0e05d1-8261-5730-acf3-16d4e4c614d1.html

²²⁵ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 377.

²²⁶ Gantt interview

these advertisements. Helms was portrayed as the commanding figure of the campaign and the constant reminder to North Carolinians that he was the reliable candidate in the race. The Gantt campaign never responded to these advertisements, emphasizing that they were “appealing to the hopes and aspirations of North Carolinians and not fear” as the Helms campaign did.²²⁷

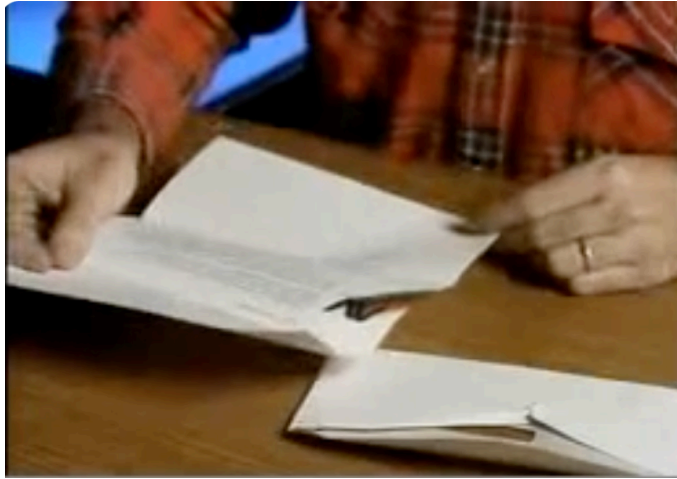


Figure Three: Screenshot from the infamous “Hands” advertisement²²⁸

The NCC’s most infamous advertisement appeared in the final weeks of the campaign. In a hotel in Alexandria, Virginia, Alex Castellanos recorded the hands of his cameraman. Ellis took the videotapes and brought them back to Raleigh. Within a few hours, campaign manager Mark Stephens edited the film and sent it to local television networks.²²⁹ In the advertisement known as “Hands,” a pair of white hands is shown opening a letter and then crumpling it up. The narrator accuses Gantt of supporting racial quotas – policies requiring that a certain percentage of jobs be filled out by individuals from specific racial or ethnic groups, which would harm qualified white candidates. The narration is followed by an image of Gantt beside Democratic

²²⁷ Gantt interview.

²²⁸ “Hands” advertisement”

²²⁹ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 378-380.

Senator Ted Kennedy, who proposed the Civil Rights Act of 1990.²³⁰ President Bush vetoed the act, arguing that it would result in racial quotas. While Gantt endorsed the bill, he did not support racial quotas.²³¹ The “Hands” advertisement aired for a few days before being pulled, as the NCC did not believe it was as effective as their other attack advertisements.²³² To Gantt, the advertisement was Helms being “as racist as we always thought he was.”²³³

On November 7, 1990, Helms defeated Gantt with a decisive margin of fifty-three percent to forty-seven percent. In total, this campaign cost less than twenty-five million; Helms invested seventeen million, while Gantt spent over seven million. The investment in television proved to be effective for the Helms campaign, but the Congressional Club accumulated \$1 million in debt. As in 1984, Helms performed extremely well with white voters, achieving a strong last-minute turnout that resulted in sixty-one percent of the white vote. In contrast, Gantt’s support predominately came from Black voters, women, young people, and other minority communities.²³⁴ Gantt reflected on the loss, stating, “I was very obviously disappointed. So discouraged about losing, but encouraged that an African-American ran a closer race with Jesse.”²³⁵

The Congressional Club’s television advertising reveals the enduring legacy of white supremacy in American politics. The constant references to Gantt as a threat invoked harmful stereotypes of Black male criminality and untrustworthiness. This narrative was further reinforced by claims that his acquisition of WJZY was a result of his political privilege and

²³⁰ ““Hands’ advertisement”

²³¹ Ose, *When Harvey Met Jesse*, 986.

²³² Wrenn interview.

²³³ Gantt interview.

²³⁴ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 382-383.

²³⁵ Gantt interview.

minority status, coupled with an emphasis on his relationship with Jackson. The accusation that Gantt betrayed Black America for personal economic gain highlights two critical issues: it indicates a class divide among Black Americans and implies that they are intended to remain lower-class. The “Hands” advertisement ultimately connected Gantt with racial quotas, insinuating that his ascendancy would displace white residents. Thus, the 1990 NCC television advertisements effectively mobilized white voters and reasserted the traditional social hierarchy of the South.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

“Racism was one reason why Helms has won every election he has ever run.” - Ernest Ferguson ²³⁶

After the 1990 election, Helms cut ties with the Congressional Club, as well as with Wrenn and Ellis. “We all came together over the Cold War and Reagan,” Wrenn recalled. “After the Cold War ended, a lot of those bonds weakened, and Jesse was difficult to work with ... He was more worried about his legacy.”²³⁷ The decision to part ways with the Congressional Club likely gave its senior members a sense of relief. The NCC had been responsible for promoting Helms for the past twenty years. Ellis and Wrenn often had to persuade Helms to participate in fundraising, and they grew frustrated with his desire to edit their advertisements. Helms was particularly critical of his appearance and insisted on presenting an honest character in his advertisements.

The relationship became increasingly fragile over the years as the two men grew disinterested in his political infighting, while Helms became distrustful of their ambitions for power and money. Helms was especially appalled by the one million dollars in debt that the Congressional Club accumulated after the 1990 campaign. Their partnership officially came to an end in 1994 when the FEC filed a lawsuit against the Helms for Senate organization for illegally working with the Christian Coalition during the 1990 election. This lawsuit eroded any remaining working relationship between the men.²³⁸ Without Helms as their frontman, the NCC eventually closed its Raleigh office, and its members sought out other political opportunities. By

²³⁶ Ernest Ferguson, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms* (New York: WW Norton & Co Inc., 1986), 236.

²³⁷ Wrenn interview.

²³⁸ Link, *Righteous Warrior*, 385-389.

1994, the empire was defunct.²³⁹ Helms never apologized nor publicly expressed regret for the negative and racially charged attacks he made.

According to Wrenn, “the most important thing I ever did in politics was the Reagan campaign in 1976.”²⁴⁰ Reagan’s remarkable upset in the state primary revitalized his campaign, catapulted him to the forefront of conservative ideology, and paved the way for his success in 1980. Thus, the partnership between Ellis and Wrenn served as the architect of Republican politics and conservative policymaking for two decades. The emergence and success of the Congressional Club within the political landscape can be best understood in the broader context of the South across the century. White supremacy remained a foundational element of Southern conservatism at the conclusion of the Civil War. Southern elites sought to ‘restore’ the South through Jim Crow legislation and racial violence, asserting a social and political hierarchy that excluded Black Americans. When Black citizens resisted this racial hierarchy, white communities rallied around racial solidarity to undermine their advancement.

Although the civil rights movement significantly disrupted elements of Southern conservatism, its ideological framework adapted for the modern era. Coded language replaced overt racism, which resonated with Southern white voters who were shifting to the Republican Party. This ‘dog-whistle’ politics also appealed to wider audiences, informing the national political discourse with anti-Black racism. Helms embraced and promoted race-baiting tactics throughout his political career; however, he also energized voters by appealing to conservative values, such as resistance to federal intervention and anti-communism. These values were significant factors contributing to his Senate victories, alongside race.

²³⁹ Wrenn interview.

²⁴⁰ Wrenn interview.

The 1984 and 1990 campaigns offer compelling insights into modern conservatism, highlighting the paradox of the “New South” narrative. Urban centers have emerged as hubs for ethnic minorities, economic innovation, and progressive politics. However, they are often juxtaposed with suburbs and rural areas that tend to embrace cultural conservatism. The Congressional Club successfully mobilized conservative support through direct mail advertisements, fostering a close and familial relationship between the NCC and its supporters. These individuals were specifically targeted, and their information was catalogued to ensure their ongoing commitment to the organization. Although direct mail proved to be a significant revenue generator, it became increasingly expensive to sustain. Nevertheless, it provided Ellis and Wrenn with the necessary financial resources to challenge Jim Hunt and undermine his credibility. The governor was portrayed as an untrustworthy politician whose connections to civil rights activists and radical ideologies made him unsuitable for the Senate. These accusations reinforce the notion that Black advancement would cause chaos and disorder. Ultimately, white voters were encouraged to assert their racial identity to protect the cultural traditions of the South.

The same initiative was pursued during the 1990 campaign. The notable increase of television advertising represented a departure from the grassroots mobilization strategies of earlier campaigns. Nevertheless, the NCC chose to emphasize visual storytelling to construct a national coalition aimed at defeating Harvey Gantt. The Congressional Club challenged the racial identity of Charlotte’s first Black mayor by using television advertisements that depicted him as a threatening figure who was pursuing special advantages for Black Americans. Interestingly, Gantt was also accused of betraying his race due to his economic activities. These accusations suggest a narrative of Black criminality and undermine the efforts of Black

Americans striving for economic mobility. Once again, voters were urged to mobilize in order to defend their whiteness within the democratic process.

Epilogue

The 1984 and 1990 Senate campaigns were fiercely contested and costly political battles that left lasting impacts on the state's identity. These battles were more than just races for a Senate seat; they were struggles for the very essence of North Carolina and its potential future. Jesse Helms' campaigns, which exploited racial anxieties, reaffirmed the power of Southern conservatism. On the other hand, the candidacies of Jim Hunt and Harvey Gantt represented the growing momentum for progressivism and racial justice. Following his defeat, Hunt left public office for several years before making a triumphant return as governor in 1992. Gantt ran against Helms for the Senate in 1996 but was unsuccessful; however, he remained active in politics.

“Neither of the elections surprised me,” expressed a former Greensboro resident. “Of course, I was disappointed, and I had every right to be! But I won’t say that I didn’t anticipate it. I’ve lived here all my life. Some things change, some things don’t budge one bit.”²⁴¹

“The state was moving forward with the banks, the businesses, and the basketball team. I mean, why shouldn’t we have a senator that symbolized that?” asks a retired post office worker. “The people chose wrong both times.”²⁴²

North Carolina continues to embody contradictions. It draws national attention for its purple political identity, resulting in close elections at both local and state levels. Urban areas serve as hubs of modernity and progressive politics, whereas rural communities uphold conservative values. Republican elected officials uphold conservative agendas, while Democrats advocate for a progressive policy.

²⁴¹ Interview with a former Greensboro resident.

²⁴² Interview with a retired post office worker.

“I would say that North Carolina is a conservative state,” said a former campaign volunteer in 1984 and 1990. “I mean, we don’t have a Helms today, but there could be one in power. That’s the kind of place we live in and will probably always live in.”²⁴³

The final chapter on the 1984 and 1990 races has yet to be written. Its legacy is urgent, as North Carolina remains in a state of negotiation between progressive and conservative ideologies. This tension between reform and resistance shapes the state’s future, yet it does not solely define it. Ultimately, the responsibility to influence the political landscape of both the South and the nation belongs to North Carolinians.

²⁴³ Interview with a former campaign volunteer in 1984 and 1990.

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