

# Turnout could be key in North Carolina's tight Senate race.

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*Until August, it seemed certain that incumbent Republican Senator Richard Burr would hang on to his US Senate seat this November in the Tar Heel state. As part of our [series](#) on this year's key Senate races, [Newly Paul](#) writes that former Congresswoman Deborah Ross has begun to close the gap with Burr, and that the race is now ranked as a 'toss-up'. She comments that while Burr does have much bigger reserve of cash with which to fight to keep his seat, some of the state's unpopular policies, such as the infamous 'Bathroom Bill', may be pushing voters away from him. In addition, higher minority turnout – potentially spurred on by dislike for Donald Trump and the state's discriminatory voter ID laws – could also tilt the scales towards Ross.*



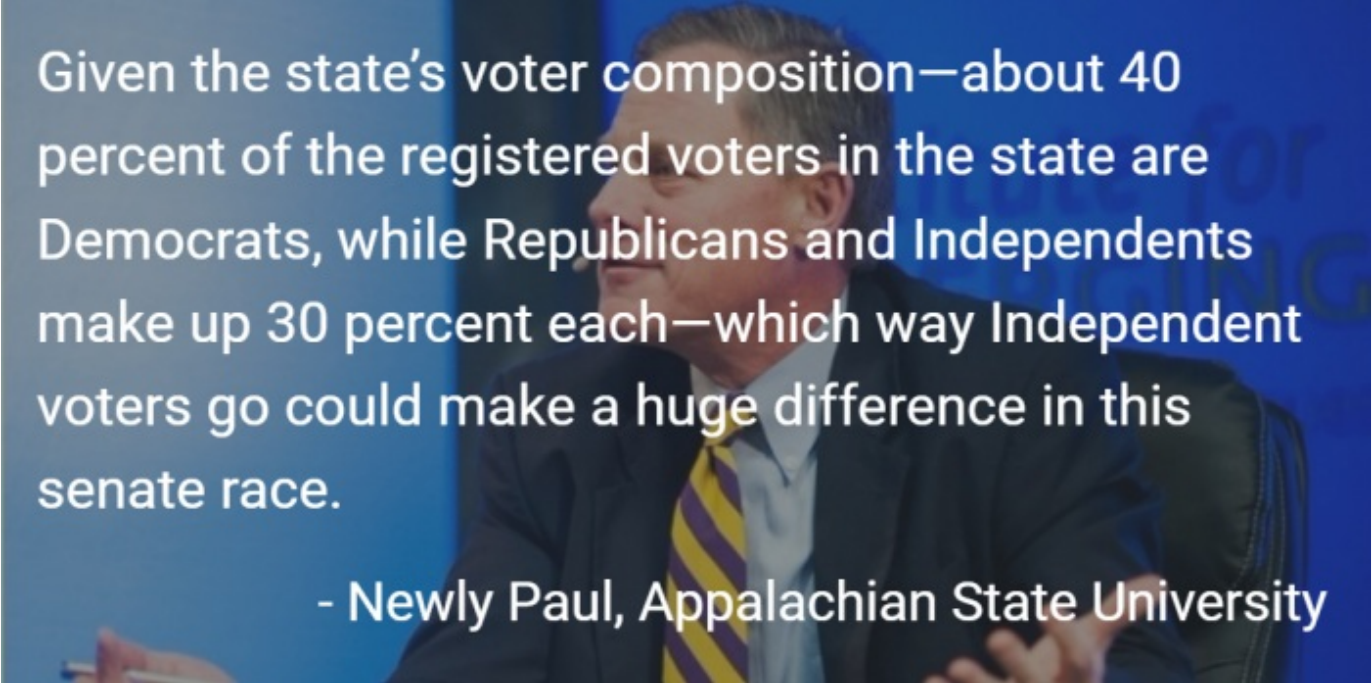
North Carolina's Senate race began as a non-competitive one, all but guaranteeing a clear victory for the Republican incumbent, Senator Richard Burr. Experts believed that Burr, a long-time politician who has represented the state for a decade in the US House of Representatives and for another decade in the US Senate, would maintain his double-digit lead in the early polls, and cruise to victory in November.

But by mid-August, his opponent, former Congresswoman Deborah Ross had [begun closing in](#). This came as a pleasant surprise for the national Democratic Party that had tried unsuccessfully to recruit other political heavyweights such as former Sen. Kay Hagan and Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx to run against incumbent senator Burr. Ross, a virtually unknown lawyer from Raleigh who was former head of the North Carolina chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, and has 10 years experience serving in the state general assembly, has proved that she is capable for the challenge. Now, according to [The Cook Political Report](#), the race is ranked as a toss-up, with either party having a good chance of winning.

This outcome is surprising for a state that is purple, but has leaned Republican in recent years (see [this link](#) for a good summary of how the state's partisan leanings have shifted over the years). In every presidential election from [1980 to 2004](#), the state voted Republican. Though in 2008 Barack Obama won by a thin margin, at the next election, the state voted for Republican Mitt Romney. This shift wasn't surprising, given that since 2010, when the control of the state legislature changed from Democratic to Republican; the policies coming out of Raleigh have taken on a distinct Conservative flavor.

Take the HB2 bill for instance. Widely known as the "Bathroom Bill," this bill, which [became law in March 2016](#), allows people to only use those restroom facilities that correspond to the sex on their birth certificates. The [lesser-discussed provisions](#) of this law prohibit cities and counties in the state from setting a local minimum wage, and do not require companies to pay for sick leave. Since its enactment, the state has seen several high profile private companies [abandon plans](#) for hosting events in the state, and move their business elsewhere.

Similarly, Republican Governor Pat McCrory requested the Supreme Court to delay the 4<sup>th</sup> US Circuit Court of Appeals' ruling with respect to the controversial North Carolina voter ID law, which requires voters to show state mandated forms of ID in order to be eligible to vote. The Supreme Court recently [refused to reinstate this requirement](#), siding with the Circuit Court ruling that the provisions of the law had targeted "African Americans with almost surgical precision."



Given the state's voter composition—about 40 percent of the registered voters in the state are Democrats, while Republicans and Independents make up 30 percent each—which way Independent voters go could make a huge difference in this senate race.

- Newly Paul, Appalachian State University

Senator Richard Burr

Some analysts believe that these unpopular policies, coupled with the chaos of the 2016 Presidential Elections have turned North Carolina's reliably Republican Senate seat into a [toss-up](#). Others believe that in an election year where voters are more worried about the economy and jobs, social justice issues might not impact the election. To what extent Clinton and Trump will impact the senate race is unclear; [latest polls](#) show both candidates neck and neck, with Clinton slightly ahead. But both parties are directing funds and attention to the state in the last few weeks of campaigning before the election.

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which started campaigning in the state much earlier than the Republicans, is [spending](#) \$2.5 million in North Carolina to fight against Burr. A vast portion of these funds will go toward television and digital ads. The Democratic Party's campaign in the state is better organized than that of the Republicans, and Ross has a commendable ability to fundraise, but she is up against Burr's whopping war chest of \$8.1 million from the Republican Senate Leadership Fund to be spent on television ads scheduled to run now through Election Day. In addition, Burr is an incumbent senator with no history of scandal, and he enjoys chairmanship of the prominent Senate Intelligence Committee, all of which make him a formidable opponent.

In addition to her lack of name recognition, one of the most important issues plaguing Ross's campaign is her ACLU record. Though North Carolina is not a deeply Conservative state, her ACLU association could be a stumbling block in connecting with voters. We can already see the beginnings of this tussle in the ad war between the two candidates. The GOP, which is running a national security centered campaign, is running ads attacking Ross for voting to prevent sex offenders from registering with local authorities, and for supporting [a bill](#) that did not require a person with knowledge of child abuse incidents to report them. In contrast, Ross's ads criticize Burr for not taking a strong stance against the HB2 bill, and paint him as a [corrupt Washington insider](#) who is against the middle class.

In addition to campaign efforts, in a purple state like North Carolina, one of the most important factors that could affect the results of the Senate election is voter turnout. This is one area where the presidential election could have a solid impact. Though the state's 68.3 percent turnout rate in the 2012 presidential election was above the national 53.6 percent turnout rate, voters could behave differently this year depending on how they feel about the candidates in the presidential elections.

Also, given the state's voter composition—about 40 percent of the [registered voters](#) in the state are Democrats,

while Republicans and Independents make up 30 percent each—which way Independent voters go could [make a huge difference](#) in this senate race. Incidentally, [Republican turnout was the highest](#) among all three groups in the 2012 elections, while in 2008; Democrat turnout was the highest by a small margin.

In a tight race like this one, racial composition of the voters who turn out to cast their vote could also affect the results. About 70 percent of the state is white, though according to an [Elon report](#), more African Americans than white voters turned out to vote in the 2012 elections. Given the national uproar about the discriminatory nature of the state's voter ID laws, Donald Trump's racist national campaign, and the national Democratic Party's [attempts to woo](#) minority voters in the state, that trend could persist in the 2016 elections, leading Burr to lose his Senate seat.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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