

## *Back to Blue? Shifting Tides of Red and Blue and The Dole-Hagan Senate Race in North Carolina*

Jody C. Baumgartner, Peter L. Francia, Brad Lockerbie,  
and Jonathan S. Morris

At the start of the 2008 election cycle, not many observers or analysts would have predicted that Senator Elizabeth Dole would lose her seat. Indeed, in their January 2008 analysis of U.S. Senate races, the non-partisan Cook Political Report rated Dole's seat "solid Republican." However, the dynamics in North Carolina began to change and Dole was on the long list of Republicans who had the potential to lose; by May the race had shifted to the "likely Republican" category, by the end of summer Dole's seat was classified as "lean Republican," and in the middle of the fall campaign it was judged as a "toss up." This article explores the contest between Elizabeth Dole and Kay Hagan by tracing the factors that allowed this apparently "safe" Republican seat to be captured by Democrats in 2008. While we discuss a number of factors that help to explain Hagan's victory, we suggest that a changing partisan electoral environment resulting from the immigration of non-Southerners to the state not only favored this outcome, but may auger well for the Democratic Party in the future. In other words, a state that had shifted red during the past several decades may be reverting back to blue.

Next, we outline the shifting electoral and demographic landscape in North Carolina and contrast the candidates. Then, we discuss the environmental factors arrayed against Dole in 2008, including the mood of the state, an economic crisis, the popularity of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama in North Carolina, and a competitive Democratic primary that drew out a large number of newly registered Democrats. Finally, we examine the campaign in some detail, including the important issues,

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JODY C BAUMGARTNER is an assistant professor of political science at East Carolina University. PETER L. FRANCIA is an associate professor of political science East Carolina University. BRAD LOCKERBIE is a professor political science and chair of the Department of Political Science at East Carolina University. JONATHAN S. MORRIS is an assistant professor of political science at East Carolina University.

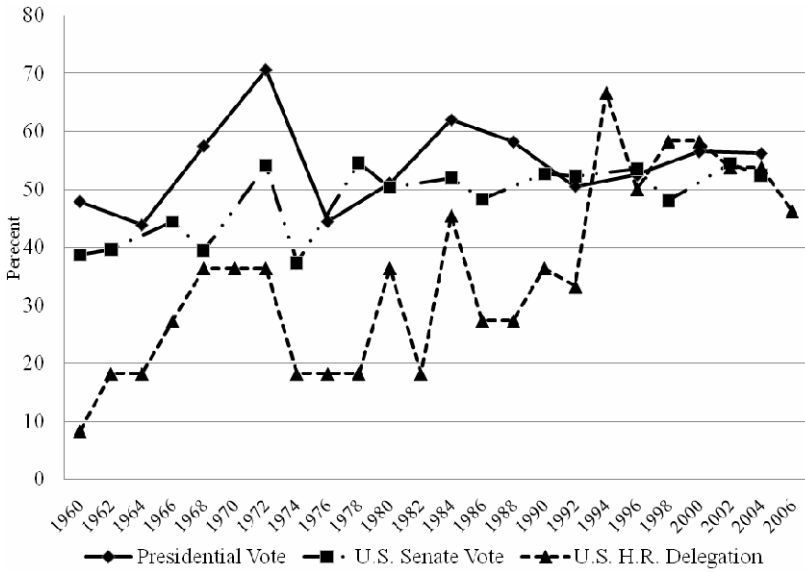
strategies and tactics of the candidates, and the effect the national campaigns of the parties and presidential candidates had on the race.

### **The Setting**

Conventional wisdom suggests that North Carolina, like most southern states in the past 40 years, is a state that consistently votes for Republican candidates. Accounts reflect this in the popular press as well as scholarly research.<sup>1</sup> The tide in North Carolina presidential politics began shifting toward the GOP as early as 1952, when Dwight Eisenhower captured a respectable 46 percent of the vote. In 1956, he increased his vote share in the state to 49.3 percent, and in 1960, Nixon garnered 47.9 percent of the vote.<sup>2</sup> Since 1968, the only Democratic presidential candidate to win in North Carolina was Georgia native Jimmy Carter in 1976. Based upon this recent history, the idea that North Carolina was ‘in play’ for Barack Obama in 2008 attracted a good deal of media attention. Below the surface of presidential politics, however, the Tar Heel state is not as reliably Republican. Unlike some other southern states, North Carolina has a fairly competitive two-party system (Prysbly 2008).

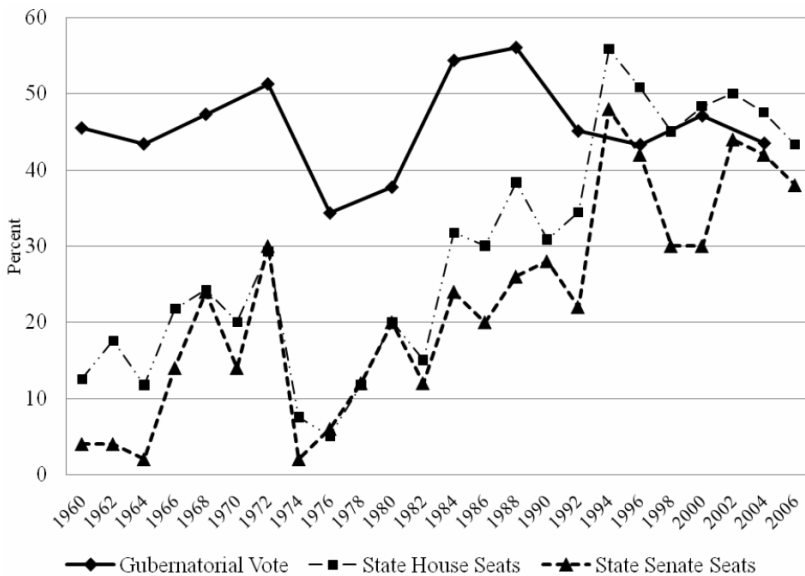
Like much of the South, North Carolina was a solid Democratic state before about 1950. Starting at the presidential level it started to change. As noted above, Republican candidates for president (with the exception of Barry Goldwater) were competitive in North Carolina in the 1950s and 1960s. Since 1976, Republican presidential candidates consistently garnered greater than 50 percent of the vote, and from 1984 through 2004, a greater percentage of the popular vote in North Carolina than their national average. Although there were a few election cycles in which their support declined, Republicans have steadily grown in the number of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1960. However, their support peaked in 1994 and declined somewhat since then. Elections to the 120 member state House and the 50 member state Senate followed a similar pattern. Democrats have remained firmly in control of the state Senate, and as the Republicans’ numbers in the House waned throughout the last decade, they lost a controlling majority in 2006. Republican success at the gubernatorial level was limited as well. They won only three of the 12 elections for governor since 1960 (James Holshouser, Jr., in 1972, and James Martin in 1984 and 1988). At no point during this period, however, did the Republican vote share fall below 43 percent (Prysbly 2008). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that North Carolina cannot be simply characterized as a “red” state. Two-party competition is alive and well in the Tar Heel state. Partisan trends in elections to the U.S. Senate in North Carolina are harder to identify.

**Figure 1. Republican Strength in NC Federal Elections (1960-2006)**



Source: Prysby 2008; Leip 2009.

**Figure 2. Republican Strength in NC State Elections (1960-2006)**



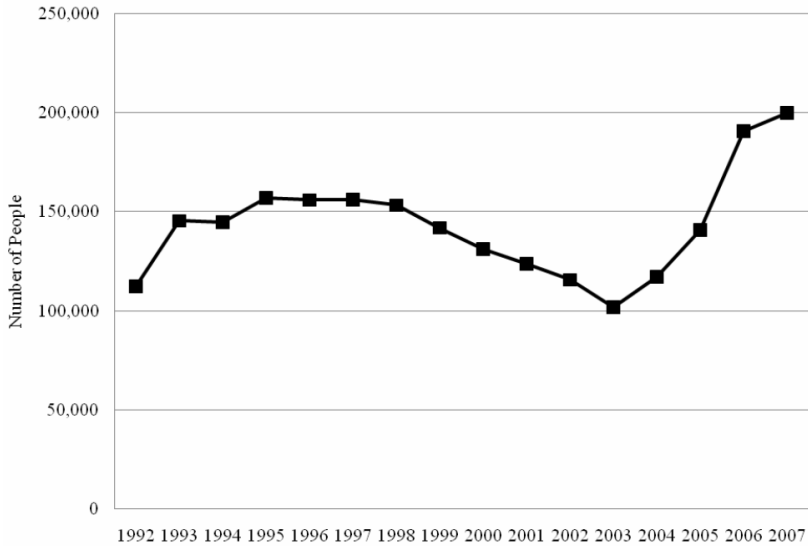
Source: Prysby 2008.

Elizabeth Dole's Senate seat was the subject of much attention in the past few decades. Starting with Jesse Helms' first bid for the Senate in 1972, in which he won with 54 percent of the vote, the seat was always very competitive. Helms never won more than 55 percent of the vote at any point in his career. If there is any merit to the concept of presidential coattails, Helms certainly was indebted to Richard Nixon and then Ronald Reagan. In 1990 and 1996, Helms was opposed by Harvey Gantt, garnering close to 53 percent of the vote in each of these contests. The 1990 race was particularly rancorous due to a television ad run very close to Election Day by the Helms campaign that was criticized for the indirect use of racist themes. Meanwhile, the other Senate seat in North Carolina was even more competitive and margins of victory even narrower. Moreover, there was a good bit of partisan turnover in this seat. In fact, since 1974, the seat has changed parties in every election cycle.

There were other factors at work to suggest Dole's defense of the seat may have been problematic. First, President Bush's approval ratings dropped steadily in North Carolina throughout his second term. As much as a year before the 2008 election, only 10 percent of North Carolinians strongly approved of President Bush while 40 percent strongly disapproved.<sup>3</sup> Second, the economy seemed to be in a freefall in the fall of 2008, which bodes ill for the party in power. Finally, the national economic crisis hit North Carolina particularly hard. The manufacturing base located in Eastern and Northern North Carolina had bled jobs for decades, and this job loss was further accelerated by the economic crisis that hit during the fall of 2008. In the year preceding the election, unemployment in North Carolina rose from 4.7 percent to 7.7 percent. The crisis within the financial industry also affected the state. Charlotte is the financial hub of the Southeast: both Wachovia and Bank of America have their headquarters there. And, while blame associated with the cause of the financial crisis was thrown in all directions, President Bush and the Republican Party absorbed the majority of it.

Although there were several factors that hampered the Republican Party's efforts to successfully defend their control of Dole's Senate seat, the defeat may also be indicative of larger trends within the state. North Carolina may be in the midst of a demographic realignment. The population of the state has consistently increased in recent years. Figure 3 shows this growth, illustrating that it exceeded national averages, never falling below 100,000 in the past 15 years. The dramatic increase since the turn of the century is especially noteworthy. Of course, by itself population growth does not signify a partisan shift. But recent survey data do suggest a distinct trend among those migrating to North Carolina. Relying on data from 2005, Vercellotti (2008) found that native born North Carolinians were more conservative than those NC residents who were born outside the state. He

**Figure 3. North Carolina Population Growth Per Year (1992-2008)**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)).

also concluded that this trend was more pronounced in North Carolina than in the rest of the south.

More recent data further demonstrate a strengthening progressive base in the state. An Elon University Poll taken in March of 2009 found that 23 percent of those who have lived in the state ten years or less classify themselves as “liberal” or “very liberal.” This is in clear contrast to those who have lived in the state 30 years or more: only seven percent of this group identify themselves as liberal or very liberal. Furthermore, those moving into North Carolina who do not classify themselves as liberal are more likely to register to vote as Democratic or unaffiliated rather than Republican. In fact, the percentage of unaffiliated voters in the state increased by 18 percent between 2000 and 2008 (Prysbey 2009).

Migration to North Carolina appears to be most pronounced in major metropolitan areas of the state, which have traditionally leaned further to the left than the rest of the state. Thus, the size of the Democratic electorate has increased. As Vercellotti noted, “The sizable migration of non-southerners into the state beginning in the 1980s has at least partially offset the growing conservatism of native North Carolinians. Less conservative newcomers have relocated to the metropolitan areas in the Piedmont section of the state, along with counties popular with retirees” (2008, 42). More recent data

indicate this trend may have accelerated in recent years. For example, Mecklenburg County, which contains the city of Charlotte, has grown by 25 percent since the turn of the century, and Wake County, which contains the Raleigh-Durham area, grew by 33 percent over the same time period (Prysbly 2009).

### **The Candidates**

A native of North Carolina, Elizabeth Dole spent much of her career in Washington holding executive branch positions under five presidents. Some of these were fairly high profile, including Deputy Assistant in the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs under President Nixon (1969-1973), membership on the Federal Trade Commission under Presidents Nixon and Ford (1973-1979), Secretary of Transportation under President Reagan (1983-1987), and Secretary of Labor under President George H.W. Bush (1989-1990). Later, she left government to become president of the American Red Cross (1991-2000). In 1999, she began an unsuccessful bid for the Republican presidential nomination. In spite of a fairly strong showing in the Iowa straw poll in August, she withdrew from the race in October, citing a lack of funding.

Upon Senator Jesse Helms' retirement in 2001, and at the urging of national and state party leaders, Dole re-established residence in North Carolina in order to make a run for his seat. With the endorsement of Helms, Dole won the nomination with 80 percent of the vote and faced off against former President Bill Clinton's chief of staff, Erskine Bowles, in the fall. Her campaign was fairly aggressive in a race that saw close to \$30 million spent. While Dole had to contend with charges that she was not a true North Carolinian (a.k.a. a "carpetbagger"), her national reputation as influential within the national political scene appeared to benefit her campaign. Furthermore, her marriage to 1996 GOP presidential nominee, Bob Dole, also helped her name recognition against the lesser-known Bowles. Dole won the race with 54 percent of the vote (Bowles received 45%).

Dole established a solidly conservative voting record as a member of the U.S. Senate, siding with the position of the American Conservative Union more than 90 percent of the time. Dole supported making President Bush's 2001 tax cuts permanent, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and a "do-it-all" approach to energy (including offshore drilling), while opposing same-sex marriage and abortion rights. Dole also helped secure federal money to fund several North Carolina projects that included programs to assist local law enforcement in identifying and processing illegal immigrants with criminal records, anti-gang initiatives, and road construction.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Dole's work as an incumbent Senator, she faced some potential problems heading into her re-election campaign. Her conservative voting record, for instance, put her on the same side as many of the positions supported by President Bush. While this was a benefit in the years immediately following her 2002 election when President Bush was exceedingly popular in North Carolina, it became a major drawback in 2008 when Bush's approval ratings reached historical lows. In addition, Dole presided over the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) in 2006 when Republicans lost six Senate seats and control of the U.S. Senate. Not only did the Republicans' disappointing performance earn Dole criticism for the defeats, but her high-profile role as a national leader and fundraiser in the Republican Party also contributed to a growing perception among North Carolina residents that she was out of touch with their concerns.<sup>5</sup> As one voter explained to a reporter during the campaign, "Dole hasn't lived among us that much. She doesn't know what's going on in North Carolina."<sup>6</sup>

Kay Hagan ultimately took advantage of these electoral circumstances as the Democratic Party's nominee in the 2008 general election. In the year leading up to the election, however, Hagan was not viewed as a likely challenger to Dole. As potential Democratic challengers, including Governor Mike Easley and former Governor Jim Hunt decided not to run, Hagan emerged as the favorite. Hagan secured the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in May of 2008 when she defeated her main opponent, Jim Neal, by a 32 percentage-point margin (60% to 18%).

Hagan is also a native of the Tar Heel State, although her family moved to Lakeland, Florida when she was young. Like Dole, Hagan became active in politics at a young age. As a youth she worked on the campaigns of her uncle, former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator Lawton Chiles Jr., and interned at the Capitol as well. After marrying her husband Chip, she moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, where she practiced law and was later vice president for NationsBank (now Bank of America). Hagan remained active in community and state Democratic politics throughout this period, eventually serving as local chair for Democratic Governor Jim Hunt's 1992 and 1996 re-election bids.

In 1998, Governor Jim Hunt persuaded Hagan to run for the state senate in the 32nd district, which includes most of the city of Greensboro. With the help of her uncle Lawton, who walked the district with her, she won the seat and was re-elected to four more terms. During her time in Raleigh, she served as chair of the Appropriations Committee and the Pensions, Retirement & Aging Committee. While known as a "pro-business Democrat," she was far from conservative, supporting pay increases for teachers, a moratorium on executions, and opposing a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.<sup>7</sup>

## The Campaign

Despite the early polls showing Elizabeth Dole in the lead, there was some indication of trouble to come. Although Dole led early by as much as twenty percentage points, she was only garnering 55 percent in the polls. Moreover, no subsequent polls showed her with such a large lead.

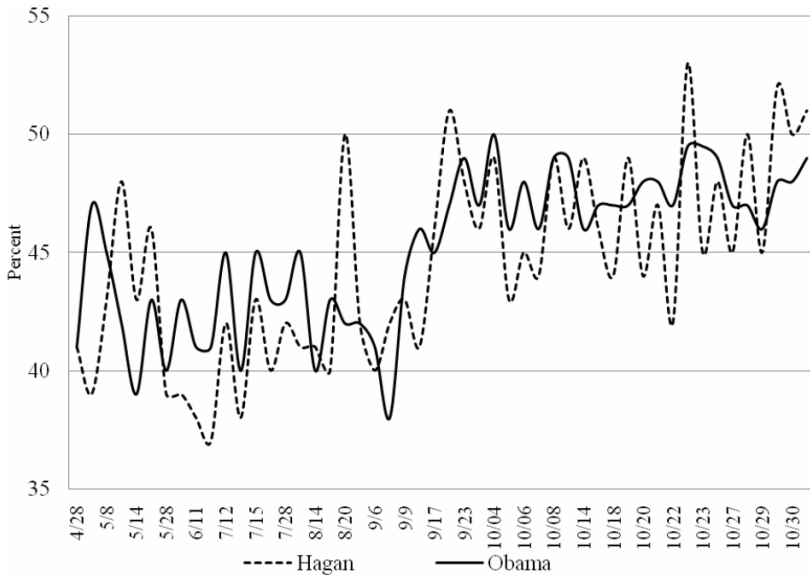
Following her win over Neal, Hagan wasted little time in attacking Dole, accusing her of spending too much time in Washington and not enough time in North Carolina. At one campaign stop, Hagan joked that Dole had been absent from North Carolina for so long that, “I don’t think she’d qualify for in-state tuition.”<sup>8</sup> Hagan positioned herself as a moderate Democrat on major issues such as taxes. For example, Hagan supported tax cuts for the middle-class, but criticized Dole for supporting “tax cuts for the wealthy.”<sup>9</sup> She carefully developed a “responsible withdrawal” position on the Iraq War to avoid upsetting either pro-military or anti-war voters. With the price of gasoline topping \$4 a gallon as the election approached, Hagan also connected her support for renewable “green” energy technologies with jobs, telling an audience: “Energy cost is the first thing that people mention to me every day. . . . We need to become the state that says ‘Alternative energy sources (are) important to us.’ We need to be helping people with manufacturing solar panels and windmill parts, creating those jobs in North Carolina. Once we do that, those jobs aren’t going to be outsourced.”<sup>10</sup>

Hagan was also the beneficiary of a far more significant factor—the unprecedented size and energy of Barack Obama’s campaign organization in North Carolina. Obama won the North Carolina primary against Hillary Clinton in May of 2008 by building a sizable grassroots operation throughout the state. For example, Obama had field organizers in all 100 North Carolina counties, as well as more than 400 paid staff members in North Carolina compared to just 35 for the McCain organization (Francia et al. 2009). Grassroots efforts by the Obama organization and other allied groups helped significantly expand voter registration of African Americans and young voters (18-29) and they were effective in getting these voters to the polls, especially to participate in early voting (Francia et al. 2009). As Figure 4 demonstrates, the association between Barak Obama’s public approval and Kay Hagan’s tightened significantly following the primary season. In the last month of the general election campaign, this association became even closer ( $r=.45$  in October,  $p<.05$  [ $N=22$ ]).

In addition to Obama’s popularity and organization in North Carolina, Hagan also benefitted from the competitiveness of the Democratic presidential primary in North Carolina six months earlier. While some Democrats were concerned that the close contest between Obama and Hillary Clinton would drive a wedge through the party and discourage some Clinton



**Figure 4. Approval for Barak Obama and Kay Hagan (April-October 2008)**



Source: RealClearPolitics.com.

supporters from turning out in the general election, in hindsight it is clear that North Carolina Democrats were energized by the state’s unexpectedly important role in the primary. Newly registered Democrats outnumbered newly registered Republicans by a margin of six-to-one (MacGillis and Crites 2008). This clearly served as an advantage to all Democrats on the ticket in the general election.

Despite the major factors working against Dole, polls showed the election to be close throughout the summer and closing months of the campaign. As Election Day drew near, television advertisements became the dominant weapon for allies of the Dole and Hagan campaigns, with estimates indicating that some \$34 million was spent for and against each candidate.<sup>11</sup> One of Dole’s primary backers was the outside group, Freedom’s Watch, which bought ads in October that were highly critical of Hagan. In one ad (“Run-away”) the group accused Hagan of supporting increases in state taxes and fees. The announcer in the ad stated: “Kay Hagan voted for over 50 higher taxes and fees on income, birth, medical care, cars, food, even death.”<sup>12</sup>

Allies of Hagan were active as well. In August, Moveon.org, spent nearly \$500,000 on commercials that attacked Dole for “being in the pocket

of Big Oil.”<sup>13</sup> A month later in September, the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), added Dole to its “Dirty Dozen” list for her poor legislative record on environmental issues. Labor groups, such as Citizens for Strength and Security (CSS), also targeted Dole. The LCV and CSS combined spent more than \$1 million on ads against Dole.<sup>14</sup> Organized labor’s active involvement in the election led to charges from the Dole camp that Hagan was “in the tank for big labor” and that Hagan’s efforts to “sneak into office as a Trojan horse for her big labor backers” were a “slap in the face to voters.”<sup>15</sup> Much of Dole’s opposition to organized labor centered around the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would make it easier for workers to unionize. Hagan claimed to be looking “favorably” at the bill.<sup>16</sup>

Still, the most memorable and controversial advertisements did not come from the interest group community, but rather from the candidates and the party committees. Initially, though, the earliest ads were relatively benign. In June, Dole put out a series of ads touting her legislative work and constituent service for the people of North Carolina. The ads discussed Dole’s “clout” and effectiveness in handling the tobacco buyouts and in mitigating the effects of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Act.<sup>17</sup> Another set of ads extolled Dole’s role in assisting local law enforcement with illegal immigration.<sup>18</sup> These early ads attempted to show that Dole was not only an effective senator, but also to distance her from charges of being a Washington insider.

Later that summer, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) countered Dole’s message with one of the more memorable commercials of the election. The ad relied on a double entendre, seeming at first to be about Dole’s age (she was 72 at the time of the election), but was in actuality about disappointment in her lack of effectiveness as a senator and her close association with President Bush. The ad begins with two elderly men sitting in rocking chairs on the front porch of a country store where they engaged in the following exchange:

[Senior 1]: “I’m telling you, Liddy Dole is 93.”

[Senior 2]: “Ninety-three?”

[Senior 1]: “Yup, she ranks 93rd in effectiveness.”

[Senior 2]: “After 40 years in Washington?”

[Senior 1]: “After 40 years in Washington, Dole is 93rd in effectiveness, right near the bottom.”

[Senior 2]: “I’ve read she’s 92.”

[Senior 1]: “Didn’t I just tell you she’s 93?”

[Senior 2]: “No, 92 percent of the time she votes with Bush.”

[Senior 1]: “What happened to the Liddy Dole I knew?”

As both men rock in their chairs, “Senior 2” ends the ad with the line: “She’s just not a go-getter like you and me.”

The ad drew attention in the *Washington Post* when polls began to show Hagan leading Dole after the commercials had blanketed the state.<sup>19</sup> The DSCC continued with its “rocking chair” theme. In another ad, the two seniors criticize Dole for outsourcing jobs to China. The commercial ends with same tag line, “What’s happened to the Liddy Dole I knew?” The DSCC also followed a line of attack raised earlier by Moveon.org that criticized Dole for her associations with oil companies. The ad tells viewers, “She [Dole] voted for billions in tax breaks for Big Oil, against funding for alternative energy like wind and solar . . . [and] even tried to eliminate mileage standards. On gas prices, she’s part of the problem.”<sup>20</sup>

The Dole campaign returned fire with a series of its own ads attacking Hagan. In one notable commercial, a yelping dog exclaims, “Fibber Kay Hagan.” The “fib,” according to the ad, involved Hagan falsely minimizing her husband’s financial interests in oil stocks.<sup>21</sup> These ads were supplemented with additional ones from the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC). A popular line of attack against Hagan was on the issue of taxes. In one ad, a narrator tells viewers: “Taking a closer look at Kay Hagan? She’s been in the state legislature for a decade. Hagan helped double the state debt, gave us the highest tax burden in the Southeast, higher income taxes, sales taxes, too. Now Kay Hagan wants to go to Washington?”<sup>22</sup> Another NRSC ad implored viewers to consider the prospects of liberal politicians controlling Washington. The announcer in the commercial asks: “Who’s the Senate race really about? Hagan or Dole? Neither one. It’s about liberals in Washington. They want complete control of government... the left wants 60 votes in the Senate.”<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, critics of the ad pointed out that the NRSC—by suggesting that the Democrats would have complete control of government with 60 votes in the Senate—was tacitly conceding the presidential election to Barack Obama. John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, followed with his own ads, pleading for support from North Carolina voters to block the possibility of 60 Democratic votes in the Senate—a similar example of what some saw as a concession of a Dole defeat. DSCC spokesman, Matthew Miller, compared the situation to a “circular firing squad.”<sup>24</sup>

Still, without question, the most controversial advertisement came in the election’s final week when the Dole campaign ran its now infamous “Godless” spot. In the ad, the Dole campaign questioned Hagan’s ties to the group, Godless Americans Political Action Committee. Most controversially, the ad ends with what critics saw as an effort by the Dole campaign to falsely paint Hagan as an atheist. The commercial closes with an image of Hagan and a voice that sounded similar to Hagan’s—but was not—that says, “There is no God.” The full text went as follows:

[Announcer]: “A leader of the Godless Americans PAC recently held a secret fundraiser in Kay Hagan’s honor.”

The ad transitions to a clip of Godless Americans’ PAC Executive Director, Ellen Johnson.

[Johnson]: “There is no God to rely on.”

A second clip of Johnson appears.

[Johnson]: “There was no Jesus.”

The ad moves to a clip of Bill O’Reilly of Fox News who questions Godless Americans’ PAC director, David Silverman.

[O’Reilly]: “But taking ‘under God’ out of the Pledge of Allegiance—you’re down with that?”

[Silverman]: “We’re down with that.”

[O’Reilly]: “‘In God We Trust’—are you going to whip that off the money?”

[Silverman]: “Yeah, we would.”

[Announcer]: “Godless Americans and Kay Hagan. She hid from cameras. Took godless money. What did Hagan promise in return?”

The ad then shows an image of Hagan as an unidentified female voice exclaims, “There is no God!”

The media, both local and national, were quick to report on the truthfulness of the ad and Hagan’s incidental association with the group. The association appears to have been tied to a fundraiser hosted by Wendy Kaminer and Woody Kaplan, members of the Secular Coalition of America and organized by Democratic Senator John Kerry and a group of some 35 people who were campaigning to support a Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate. When questioned about the event by the press, Kaplan claimed that the fundraiser for Hagan had nothing to do with Godless Americans PAC or its cause.<sup>25</sup> According to Kaplan, “This event happened to be at my house. I don’t know if any of those people are religious or not, whether they’re Muslims, Christians, Jews, or whoever. I have no idea, I never asked them when I went to their houses, and I bet you no candidate did either.”<sup>26</sup>

Hagan, a Sunday school teacher and elder at First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, responded that “Elizabeth Dole is attacking my strong Christian faith” and that Dole should be “ashamed.”<sup>27</sup> The Hagan campaign filed a defamation lawsuit, alleging “personal slander.”<sup>28</sup> However, the Dole campaign defended the ad. Dan McLagan, a Dole spokesperson, replied to the Hagan campaign’s counter-charges that, “The facts remain: Kay Hagan attended a fundraiser in her honor hosted by the founder of the Godless Americans. Kay Hagan accepted their money.”<sup>29</sup>

The controversy that ensued may have ultimately backfired on Dole. In press accounts, several voters expressed their displeasure with the advertisement. At a Greensboro shopping center, one voter was quoted as telling Hagan: “Dole did you a favor. I was a Dole fan before this. I just think this a below-the-belt, dirty, nasty way to try to campaign.”<sup>30</sup> Another voter from Charlotte called the commercial “reprehensible” and added that “it’s the lowest common denominator; it’s hate speech.”<sup>31</sup> The Hagan campaign further claimed to have received a flood of telephone calls from undecided voters who voiced their support for Hagan because of the ad.<sup>32</sup>

The godless ad remained a controversial subject right through the end of the campaign. In and of itself, the advertisement was not responsible for Dole’s eventual defeat. It did, however, fit into a larger theme that Hagan was able to craft—that Elizabeth Dole was out of touch with North Carolinians and outside the ideological mainstream of America. The backlash against the godless advertisement illustrated the popular perception that Dole was attempting to use political maneuvering in order to cover-up for her shortcomings as a Senator. Of course, Hagan was equally responsible for the negative tone of the campaign over the airwaves, but Hagan was effective in keeping Dole on the defensive throughout the campaign. In total, Dole spent more than twice the amount of Hagan to fund her campaign (\$19.5 million versus \$8.5 million), including \$2.5 million of her own money. This was not, however, enough to stave off defeat. Hagan’s victory was a relatively decisive one—53 percent to 44 percent.

In Dole’s concession speech, she acknowledged the ugly tone that both campaigns had taken. However, even in defeat, Dole defended her campaign one last time, “I will never regret fighting as hard as I could for the privilege of continuing to serve you.”<sup>33</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Of course, hindsight is 20-20, but, looking back it should have been much less of a surprise that Hagan was able to steal the Senate seat from the incumbent Dole in 2008. This is in spite of the fact that re-election rates for incumbent senators have well exceeded 80 percent in the past few decades (Jacobson 2004). North Carolina has a vibrant two-party system which should have suggested that no Republican candidate could easily count on being returned to office. This was particularly the case in 2008, when national tides clearly favored Democratic candidates. Beyond this, the Democratic Party machine and a superbly organized and energized Obama campaign created a favorable environment for, and lent support to, Hagan’s effort in the state.

This said, it might be the case that the most decisive factor in Hagan's victory was a shifting partisan environment in North Carolina resulting from the influx of more progressively oriented individuals to the state in the past decade, particularly into the more populous areas of the state. For example, in the 2008 Senate race, the Hagan far outperformed Dole in these counties. In Mecklenburg County, Hagan won 62 percent to 35 percent, and Hagan won Wake County 56 percent to 41 percent (State Board of Elections 2009).

This trend shows little sign of waning. If the ideological orientation of North Carolinians continues to move to the left, the national voting trends of the state will begin to reflect the past tendency to vote more Democratic in state and local elections. Of course, this will be a much different Democratic constituency than that of yesteryear—leaning more to the left than the right. Certainly, recent population growth benefited Hagan and Barack Obama in 2008, and there is little reason to expect that it will do anything except hurt Republican senatorial candidates in the future. Indeed, polling from early 2009 indicates that first-term incumbent Republican senator Richard Burr will likely face a tough uphill battle in defense of his seat in the 2010 mid-term election.<sup>34</sup> If the electorate does indeed continue to slide leftward, North Carolina's national image as a "red state" will fade.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For popular press accounts see: Christina Bellantoni, "The Color Purple, One Of Change," *The Washington Times*, October 26, 2008, p. A1; Larry Eichel, "Both Sides Targeting Red States," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 26, 2008, p. A1; David Jackson, "Die-hards' Want To Set Eyes On McCain," *USA Today*, October 20, 2008, p. A9; Kathy Kiely, and David Jackson, "McCain Wages Fight 'Behind His Own Front Lines,'" *USA Today*, October 29, 2008, p. A5; Anne E. Kornblut and Dan Balz, "U.S. Fiscal Crisis Seems to Have Altered Political Map," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2008, p. A10; Peter Nicholas and Bob Drogin, "Campaign '08: Race For The White House," *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 2008, p. A16; and Lisa Wangsness, "Even In Deep-Red States, GOP Feels The Heat," *The Boston Globe*, October 24, 2008, p. A1. For scholarly accounts see: MacManus (2006); Shaw (2006); and Wayne (2008).

<sup>2</sup>David Leip, "Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Elections. Accessed March 20, 2009. Available at <http://uselectionatlas.org/> (retrieved March 39, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Elon University Poll, "Elon Poll Finds a Lack of Confidence in Bush, Congress." Survey report released November 16, 2007. Retrieved May 19, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Barksdale, "Who Knew the Senate Race Would Be So Close?" *The Fayette Observer*, September 14, 2008.

<sup>5</sup>Shalia Dewan, "Elizabeth Dole Finds a Once-Safe Race Less So," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2008.

<sup>6</sup>Mike Baker, "Dole Struggles to Keep Seat as GOP Wilts," *Associated Press*, October 17, 2008.

<sup>7</sup>Jim Morrill, "Kay Hagan's Giving Elizabeth Dole a Fight She Never Expected," *Charlotte Observer*, October 5, 2008, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/100/story/>

[53485.html](#) (retrieved March 29, 2009); Martin Kady, "Hagan Wins North Carolina Senate Seat," *Yahoo! News*, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/politico/20081105/pl\\_politico/15273](http://news.yahoo.com/s/politico/20081105/pl_politico/15273) (retrieved March 29, 2009).

<sup>8</sup>Keren Rivas, "Hagan Talks Jobs in Campaign Stop: Democrat Swings Through County in Bid to Unseat Dole," *Times-News*, October 24, 2008.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

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