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Republican Legislators Rank Highest Ever in Effectiveness, Says Center

Republican legislators rose to record heights of effectiveness in the 1995-96 N.C. General Assembly after gaining control of key committees, says the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research. The Center released its biennial legislative effectiveness rankings today for members of the state Senate and House of Representatives. Legislative turnover in the 1994 elections enabled Republicans to seize control of the House and also created opportunities for large individual gains in the rankings. In the Senate, Minority Leader Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie) attained the highest ranking ever (5th) for a Republican or a woman. Rep. Charles B. "Chuck" Neely Jr. (R-Wake) ranked 5th in the House, the highest ever for a freshman in either chamber.

Democrats have a 26-24 majority in the state Senate, while Republicans control 68 of 120 seats in the N.C. House of Representatives. Republicans now hold 92 of the 170 seats in the General Assembly -- their first majority since 1870. In each chamber of the legislature, the majority party names the chairs of all committees, and chairing a committee can translate quickly into success in the rankings.

"Holding a committee chairmanship is one of the best predictors of success in the rankings -- regardless of party," says Ran Coble, executive director of the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. "In the House, all but one of the 15 highest ranking members are committee chairs or majority party leaders. And in the Senate, all but one of the 19 highest ranked members are committee chairs or majority party leaders." Being a committee chairman was not a guarantee of success, however. Four subcommittee chairs in the House were among the 15 members ranked least effective, and one committee chair in the Senate finished in the bottom 10.

"Over the years, there are three predictors of a high ranking in effectiveness -- being a committee chair, longevity of service, or personal skills like doing your committee homework or skill in floor debate," says Coble. "If you have all three, you're a sure Top Tenner. If you have none of the above, you're likely a beginner."

In the House, the 10 most effective Representatives are **Speaker of the House Harold Brubaker** (R-Randolph), **Majority Leader Leo Daughtry** (R-Johnston and Chair of the Judiciary I Committee), **Rep. Richard Morgan** (R-Moore, Chair of the Rules Committee), **Rep. George Holmes** (R-Yadkin, Co-Chair of the Appropriations Committee), **Rep. Chuck Neely** (R-Wake, Chair of the Judiciary II Committee), **Rep. Lyons Gray** (R-Forsyth, Co-Chair of the Finance Committee), **Rep. Billy Creech** (R-Johnston, Co-Chair of the Appropriations Committee), **Speaker Pro Tempore Carolyn Russell** (R-Wayne), **Rep. Theresa Esposito** (R-Forsyth, Co-Chair of the Appropriations Committee), and **Rep. John Nichols** (R-Craven, Chair of the Health and Environment Committee). **Majority Whip Robert C. "Robin" Hayes** (R-Cabarrus, Co-Chair of the Appropriations

Subcommittee on Human Resources), who is seeking the Republican nomination for Governor in the May 7th primary, ranked 13th.

In the Senate, the 10 most effective legislators are **President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight** (D-Dare), **Sen. Tony Rand** (D-Cumberland, Chair of the Rules Committee), **Sen. Aaron Plyler** (D-Union, Co-Chair of the Appropriations Committee), **Sen. Roy Cooper** (D-Nash, Chair of the Judiciary I Committee), **Minority Leader Betsy Cochrane** (R-Davie), **Sen. Beverly Perdue** (D-Craven, Co-Chair of the Appropriations Committee), **Majority Leader Richard Conder** (D-Richmond, Co-Chair of the Pensions & Retirement/Insurance/State Personnel Committee), **Sen. Fountain Odom** (D-Mecklenburg, Chair of the Base Budget Committee), **Sen. David Hoyle** (D-Gaston, Chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation), and **Sen. John Kerr** (D-Wayne, Co-Chair of the Finance Committee).

Rand, Cochrane, Perdue, Hoyle, and Kerr represent five new faces in the top 10 this year. There was room for them to move up because the Senate lost five of its 10 most effective members after the 1993-94 session -- George Daniel, Sandy Sands, Dennis Wicker, Herbert Hyde, and Howard Lee. In the Senate, where Democrats hold a slim 26-24 majority, legislators in both parties made significant gains in the rankings. Democratic Senators David Hoyle (up 27 places) and Wib Gulley (D-Durham, up 24) both made large gains in the rankings, as did Republican Senators Fletcher Hartsell (R-Cabarrus, up 23) and Jerry Blackmon (R-Mecklenburg, up 22).

Beyond the top 20 places in the rankings, a legislator's longevity plays a key role, says the Center. Senators who had previously served moved up an average of almost nine places in the rankings, while Representatives who had previously served moved up an average of almost 14 places.

"Over the years, legislators from rural districts face less competition than urban legislators and, therefore, build up longevity -- leading to higher effectiveness rankings," says the Center's Coble. "This year, seven of the 10 most effective legislators in both the House and Senate are from rural districts."

By contrast, first-term legislators usually have lower effectiveness rankings because they are less experienced with the legislative process. In the Senate, only one legislator in the bottom 10 has served a previous term and, in the House, only four legislators in the bottom 25 have served more than one prior term. However, two freshmen achieved record high rankings. Rep. Chuck Neely ranked 5th in the House, the highest ever for a freshman. Few Republican Representatives are attorneys, which created an opportunity for Neely. Leaders in the House recognized Neely's legal skills early in session and appointed him to chair the Judiciary II Committee -- a position of power rarely awarded a freshman. In the Senate, Tony Rand, ranked 2nd, is not a true freshman, because he served there from 1983-88 before losing a bid for Lieutenant Governor in 1988. However, President Pro Tem Marc Basnight remembered his prior service and appointed Rand, an attorney, to chair the Senate Rules Committee. That committee is considered the 5th most powerful Senate committee according to the Center's survey.

In one interesting twist in the rankings, Democrats who voted with the Republican leadership in the House were more likely to move up in the rankings. Only seven House Democrats improved their ranking this session. But of those seven, four voted with Republicans more than 50 percent of the time on major bills: Rep. Dewey Hill (D-Columbus, up 14 places in the rankings), Rep. Walter Church (D-Burke, up 8), Rep. Linwood Mercer (D-Pitt, up 13), and Rep. Mike Wilkins (D-Person, up 25 places -- the most of any Democrat).

There are fewer women in the 1995-96 General Assembly -- a drop from 31 in 1993 to 28 this session. However, women moved up in effectiveness because they secured party leadership positions and plum committee chairs. Minority Leader Betsy Cochrane, a member of the General Assembly since 1981, ranked 5th in the Senate. Sen. Beverly Perdue, co-chair of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee and a member of the General Assembly since 1987, ranked 6th. Until Cochrane and Perdue this year, no woman had ever ranked higher than 12th in the Senate since the Center began publishing the legislative rankings in 1978.

In the House, Speaker Pro Tempore Carolyn Russell ranked 8th. Three Republican women in the House also made significant gains in the rankings. Rep. Cherie Killian Berry (R-Catawba, Co-Chair of the Welfare Reform Committee) moved up 81 places in the rankings to 15th; Rep. Julia Craven Howard (R-Davie, Co-Chair of the Welfare Reform Committee and Chair of the Ethics Committee) is up 69 places to 18th, and Rep. Connie Wilson (R-Mecklenburg, Co-Chair of the Finance Committee) jumped 54 places to 19th.

The Center's rankings are based on surveys completed by legislators themselves, by registered lobbyists based in North Carolina who regularly work in the General Assembly, and by capital news correspondents who cover the legislature every day. These three groups were asked to rate each legislator's effectiveness on the basis of participation in committee work, skill at guiding bills through floor debate, and general knowledge or expertise in special fields. The respondents also were asked to consider the respect legislators command from their peers, the political power they hold (by virtue of office, longevity, or personal attributes), their ability to sway the opinions of fellow legislators, and their aptitude for the overall legislative process.

The 1995-96 rankings mark the tenth time the Center has undertaken this comprehensive survey. The first edition in 1978 evaluated the performance of the 1977-78 General Assembly. The response rate to the most recent survey continues to be very high. Ninety-four of the 120 House members (78 percent) responded, as did 40 of the 50 Senators (80 percent), 148 of the 371 legislative liaisons and registered lobbyists based in North Carolina (40 percent), and eight of 26 capital news correspondents (31 percent). The overall rate of response was 51 percent, well above the standards of statistical reliability.

"Confidence in the survey continues to be very high," says Coble. "Traditionally, legislators themselves have the highest response rate, and the same was true this time. The overall response rate reflects a strong belief that the survey is a valid measure of legislative effectiveness."

National Praise for the Center's Rankings

Several states, including North Carolina, Arkansas, California, Texas, Washington, and Florida, rank the effectiveness of their legislators using different methods. "It is hard to deny that the ratings, when done responsibly, serve a legitimate public purpose," says a recent report about state legislative rankings in *Governing* magazine, published by Congressional Quarterly, Inc. "The ratings issued by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research are perhaps the most straightforward and most widely respected. . . . There are no laurels for those who score best nor humbling disparagement for the worst. There is only one category -- effectiveness."¹

¹Charles Mahtesian, "Best and the Dimmest," *Governing*, Washington, D.C., February 1996, pp. 24-28.

Another independent review of state rankings in 1992 reached the same conclusion. "Most attempts at reputational rankings of state legislators don't deserve much credibility because of three problems: (1) no precise definition of who is being polled, (2) a low response rate among those polled because legislators and lobbyists don't want to risk getting caught making statements suggesting people they work with are ineffective, or (3) definitions of effectiveness that equate effectiveness with helping to enact an interest group's agenda," said *State Policy Reports*. "Over the years, **Reports** has seen many of these . . . that fail one or another of these tests. The exception is the rankings that have been done since 1978 by the North Carolina Center."²

"The Center's rankings help citizens understand the way the legislature works -- who's up, who's down, who's new in town," says Coble, the Center's executive director. "The rankings also allow legislators of different political philosophies to excel. What's being measured is effectiveness, and you can be an effective conservative or an effective liberal."

The effectiveness rankings are published as a supplement to *Article II: A Guide to the 1995-96 N.C. Legislature*, which was released in 1995. The Center's legislative handbook profiles each member of the General Assembly and includes the following biographical and voting information:

- business and home addresses, telephone and fax numbers;
- office room number and phone number at the legislature;
- party affiliation, district number, and counties represented;
- number of terms served;
- committee assignments;
- the number of bills sponsored and enacted into law in the 1993-94 session;
- individual votes on 14 of the most important bills in the 1993-94 session;
- each legislator's occupation and education; and
- past effectiveness rankings (1983-1993).

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study public policy issues facing North Carolina and to evaluate state government programs. The Center does not endorse candidates. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Additional funding comes from 13 private foundations, 159 corporate contributors, and more than 900 individual and organizational members. The N.C. Center publishes a magazine called *North Carolina Insight* and issues book-length research reports. Recent studies have been conducted on school vouchers, pesticide regulation, state-owned railroads, and how the state's public universities evaluate and reward teaching.

The new effectiveness rankings are available from the Center for \$8.50. A set including *Article II: A Guide to the 1995-96 N.C. Legislature* (\$22.50), the effectiveness rankings (\$8.50), and the rankings of the most influential lobbyists (\$5.00 -- to be released in August 1996) is available for \$30.00. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, or fax (919) 832-2847.

For more information about the legislative effectiveness rankings, call Ran Coble at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

²"Ranking Legislators," *State Policy Reports*, Vol. 10, Issue 10, Columbus, Ohio, May 1992, pp. 22-23.