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For more information,
call Ran Coble at the
N.C. Center at (919) 832-2839.

Rifts Among House Members Cause Shifts in Effectiveness, Says Center

Disputes among House members in the early days of the 1997 legislative session had lasting effects in terms of their effectiveness during the session. That's one conclusion to be drawn from the latest biennial rankings of legislators' effectiveness released today by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. The rankings suggest that both the winners and the losers in the power struggle early in the session suffered losses in effectiveness during the session.

For only the second time in 20 years, the Speaker of the House failed to capture the top ranking in the N.C. House of Representatives. In 1989, Rep. David Diamont (D-Surry), then-Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, held the distinction of being ranked the most effective Representative. The Speaker of the House in 1989, Josephus Mavretic (D-Edgecombe), had taken office after a coalition of dissident Democrats and Republicans unseated four-time Speaker Liston Ramsey.

Based on performance in the 1997 session, Rep. Richard Morgan (R-Moore) was ranked as the most effective legislator in the House. Morgan is chairman of the powerful House Rules Committee and guided major legislation regulating hog farms to passage in 1997. Majority Leader Leo Daughtry (R-Johnston) ranked second, and Speaker of the House Harold J. Brubaker (R-Randolph) ranked third. In the Senate, President Pro Tem Marc Basnight (D-Dare) was ranked the most effective Senator for the third consecutive session.

"The Center's rankings help citizens understand the way the legislature works -- who's up, who's down, who's new in town," says Ran Coble, executive director of the Center for Public Policy Research, a nonpartisan think tank in Raleigh. "This time, the rifts among House members caused shifts in effectiveness."

In a session where each party was vying for control and without a contract with the voters like they had in 1995, House Republicans had more than a few spats. In the end, those who challenged the Speaker lost clout at the start of the session and effectiveness throughout. But the Speaker also found it more difficult to shepherd his flock.

Republicans have a slim 61-59 majority in the state House of Representatives, while Democrats have a 30-20 majority in the state Senate. Similar close party margins and power struggles can be seen in Virginia, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Florida this year. In 1995, North Carolina Republicans had a larger House majority with 68 seats, and came close to taking control of the Senate with 24 of 50 seats.

Early in the 1997 session, the Republicans' slim majority in the House resulted in a partisan battle to elect the Speaker of the House. Rep. Robert Brawley (R-Iredell) initially pledged to support Democrat Jim Black (D-Mecklenburg) in Black's bid for Speaker. Brubaker recruited Rep. John Nichols (R-Craven) and Rep. Robert Grady (R-Onslow) to pressure Brawley to toe the party line. In exchange, Nichols said, Brubaker promised to appoint Nichols and Grady as co-chairs of the powerful Appropriations Committee and to support Brawley's bid for Speaker Pro Tem of the House.

Brubaker was elected Speaker of the House with Brawley's support and the support of three Democrats — Rep. Walter Church (D-Burke), Rep. Jim Crawford (D-Granville), and Rep. Dewey Hill (D-Columbus). Later, Brubaker passed over Nichols and Grady, appointing Rep. George Holmes (R-Yadkin), Rep. Theresa Esposito (R-Forsyth), Rep. Billy Creech (R-Johnston), and Rep. Crawford as co-chairs of the Appropriations Committee. Brawley's bid for Speaker Pro Tem was scuttled by Rep. Steve Wood (R-Guilford), who nominated himself for the position to the dismay of the GOP leadership. Wood was elected with the votes of 58 Democrats and only three Republicans — Representatives Mike Decker (R-Forsyth), Rick Eddins (R-Wake), and himself. This political drama affected committee appointments, leadership positions, and the rankings in the House from top to bottom.

The challenges to the Republican leadership cost Brawley, Nichols, Wood, and Decker the most. Brawley fell 60 places from 25th to 85th. Nichols, who publicly voiced his displeasure about losing the Appropriations Chair appointment, fell 52 places out of the top 10 to rank 62nd. Wood, despite winning the office of Speaker Pro Tem, dropped 50 places in the rankings to 82nd. Decker ranked 109th, down 41 places from his 1995 ranking.

The 10 Most Effective Legislators in the House and Senate

In the House, the 10 most effective Representatives are **Rep. Richard Morgan** (R-Moore, chair of the Rules Committee), **Rep. Leo Daughtry** (R-Johnston, Majority Leader and co-chair of the Judiciary I Committee), **Speaker of the House Harold Brubaker** (R-Randolph), **Rep. George Holmes** (R-Yadkin, co-chair of the Appropriations Committee), **Rep. Lyons Gray** (R-Forsyth, co-chair of the Finance Committee), **Rep. Chuck Neely** (R-Wake, chair of the Judiciary II Committee), **Rep. Ed McMahan** (R-Mecklenburg, chair of the Congressional Redistricting Committee), **Rep. Joe Hackney** (D-Orange), **Rep. Carolyn Russell** (R-Wayne, co-chair of the Education Committee), and **Minority Leader Jim Black** (D-Mecklenburg). This was the first appearance in the top 10 for Representatives McMahan (up 56) and Black.

In the Senate, the 10 most effective are **President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight** (D-Dare), **Sen. Roy Cooper** (D-Nash, chair of the Judiciary, Congressional Redistricting, and Session Limits Committees), **Sen. Tony Rand** (D-Cumberland, chair of the Rules Committee), **Sen. Aaron Plyler** (D-Union, co-chair of the Appropriations Committee), **Sen. Beverly Perdue** (D-Craven, co-chair of Appropriations), **Sen. David Hoyle** (D-Gaston, co-chair of the Finance Committee), **Sen. Fountain Odom** (D-Mecklenburg, chair of the Base Budget Committee), **Sen. Leslie Winner** (D-Mecklenburg, co-chair of the Education/Higher Education Committee), **Sen. John H. Kerr, III** (D-Wayne, co-chair of the Finance Committee), and **Sen. R.C. Soles** (D-Columbus, chair of the Commerce Committee). This was the first appearance in the top 10 for Senator Winner, who is not running for re-election.

Biggest Jumps in the Rankings

In the House, members of the majority Republican Party had both the biggest gains and biggest drops in the rankings. Rep. McMahan and Rep. Dennis Reynolds (R-Alamance) moved up 56 places, ranking 7th and 44th respectively. Representatives Danny McComas (R-New Hanover) and Cindy Watson (R-Duplin) also gained more than 50 places in the rankings, ranking 23rd and 54th respectively. Rep. Hackney was the highest-ranking Democrat in the House at 8th, and Rep. Mia Morris (R-Cumberland) was the highest-ranking freshman at 66th.

In the Senate, members of the Republican minority made the most significant gains. Sen. Mark McDaniel (R-Forsyth) moved up the most places (up 12) to rank 22nd. Sen. Hamilton Horton (R-Forsyth) moved up 11 places to rank 19th, and Sen. Patrick Ballantine (R-New Hanover) moved up 10 places to rank 25th. Sen. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie) was the highest-ranking Republican at 12th. However, she dropped seven places in the rankings -- probably because she was not Minority Leader in the 1997 session as she had been in 1995. Sen. Eric Reeves (D-Wake) was the highest-ranking freshman in the Senate at 24th.

"Year after year, the best predictors of success in the rankings remain longevity, a committee chairmanship, and personal attributes such as doing your committee homework or skill in floor debate," says the Center's Coble. "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."

In the Senate, for example, Sen. Roy Cooper has been a member of the General Assembly since 1987, he chairs three committees, and he consistently does well in the rankings. In the House, Rep. Joe Hackney has served since 1981. Although he is not a member of the majority party and thus does not chair any powerful committees, he was able to move the Governor's anti-drunk driving initiative successfully through both chambers. Hackney also consistently does well in the rankings. Also in the House, Rep. Debbie Clary (R-Cleveland) co-chairs an appropriations committee and gained passage of high-profile legislation on graduated driver's licenses for youth and moved up 37 places in the rankings to 33rd.

The 14 Legislators Who Will Not Return in 1999

Several legislators have resigned, and others have announced they will not seek re-election, creating room for movement up in the rankings in 2000. In the Senate, Senators Tommy Jenkins (D-Macon, ranked 33rd), Leslie Winner (D-Mecklenburg, ranked 8th), and Dan Page (R-Harnett, ranked 46th) are not seeking re-election. Senators Richard Conder (D-Richmond, ranked 14th) and Donald Kincaid (R-Caldwell, ranked 35th) both resigned in July 1997. In the House, nine legislators are not seeking re-election: Rep. Charles Beall (D-Haywood, ranked 103rd), Rep. Robert Brawley (R-Iredell, ranked 85th), Rep. Dub Dickson (R-Gaston, ranked 28th), Rep. John Gamble (D-Lincoln, ranked 79th), Rep. Foyle Hightower (D-Anson, ranked 99th), Rep. Robert Hunter (D-McDowell, ranked 34th), Rep. William Ives (R-Transylvania, ranked 51st), Rep. Linwood Mercer (D-Pitt, ranked 57th), and Rep. Dennis Reynolds (R-Alamance, ranked 44th). Rep. Mike Wilkins (D-Person, ranked 52nd) resigned in September 1997 to take a post in the N.C. Department of Commerce. Both Page and Mercer are running for Congressional seats.

How The Rankings Are Done

The Center's rankings are based on surveys completed by legislators themselves, by registered lobbyists based in North Carolina and legislative liaisons who regularly work in the General Assembly, and by capital news correspondents. 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 1997-98 rankings mark the 11th 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 survey continues to be very high. Ninety-one of the 120 House members (76%) responded to the Center's survey, as did 39 of the 50 Senators (78%), 147 of 308 legislative liaisons and registered lobbyists based in North Carolina (48%), and eight of 28 capital news correspondents (29%). The overall rate of response was 56%, an increase from the 51% response rate in 1995, and 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 1996 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." 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."

The effectiveness rankings are published as a supplement to *Article II: A Guide to the 1997-98 N.C. Legislature*, which was released in 1997. The Center's legislative guide profiles each member of the General Assembly and includes the following biographical and voting information:

- each legislator's occupation and education;
- business and home addresses, telephone and fax numbers;
- office room number, phone number, and e-mail address 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 1995-96 session;
- individual votes on 15 of the most important bills in the 1995-96 session; and
- past effectiveness rankings (1981-95).

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization 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 a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, with additional funding from 14 other foundations, 190 corporate contributors, and almost 1000 individuals and organizations across the state. The Center publishes a magazine, *North Carolina Insight*, and book-length research reports. The Center recently has conducted studies on state economic development policy, year-round schools, trends in funding for the arts, and how North Carolina's public universities evaluate and reward excellent teaching.

The new effectiveness rankings are available from the Center for \$8.50. A set including *Article II: A Guide to the 1997-98 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 1998) is available for \$30.00. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or order through the Center's website at <http://www.nando.net/insider/nccppr>.

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