



The NHC GOP Podcast

Episode 25: Analyzing the Election: Conversation with Nick Craig

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Reuel Sample: Welcome to the NHC GOP podcast. I'm Reuel Sample. Honored to be joined by Nick Craig, host of Wilmington's Morning News on 107.9 and 980 The Wave. Nick, thanks for joining us after a long day at the radio station.

Nick Craig: Yes, Reuel, thanks for the time this this afternoon. Looking forward to the conversation.

Reuel Sample: We're going to put you on the other end of the microphone because you're going to be answering questions today instead of asking them. So let's talk about the recent elections here in New Hanover. Some big news coming out of the school board. What are we seeing with the results with the election for school board members?

Nick Craig: Well, I think you see a clear distinction from previous leadership to to where we are now. You had the majority of the school board up this election. It's a it's a seven

member board and the superintendent. So there's eight, eight people on it. But obviously the superintendent is not elected. So your majority of your seats were up in this election. And I think to the surprise of a lot of folks, I can guarantee you a surprise to the Democrats on Tuesday night. It was not the Republicans just picking up two or three seats. It was picking up four. And what makes that interesting is two incumbents lost their races and they not only lost, they were the two lowest vote getters out of eight candidates in the general election. So I think as you look at that, it's a clear there's a clear apathy from people in the community that they were not happy with the current Board of Education and their leadership. So they're deciding to try some new change, and that's behind a conservative direction.

Reuel Sample: So we see Pat Bradford. Brand new to the Board of Education topping out the list. Pete Wildeboer coming back on the Board of education. And then two newcomers, Melissa Mason and Josie Barnhart rounding the four out. What do you think the driving thing was that got these four Republicans elected?

Nick Craig: I think it's got to be learning loss, Reuel. I don't think many parents could sit back and look at the last two years of 24 months of the public education system, go to the ballot box and say, yeah, you know what, These people that have caused so much learning loss And that's it's not a subjective thing at this point. It's not my opinion that there's learning loss. There's statistics from not only the state DPI, but from national organizations that there's five plus years worth of learning loss because of remote learning and shutdowns. And I think a lot of parents, as they went to the ballot box back a few days ago, they determined that these people that cause this problem are not my solution going forward. And it's not it wasn't just here in New Hanover County. You saw this a lot of places across North Carolina in the country. I was reading a Fox News article today about just the sweep on board of education races all over the United States because parents are frustrated. They want they want what's best for their kids.

Reuel Sample: If there's one thing that came out of COVID, these online courses gave parents an opportunity to see into the classrooms like no other time before, and they saw a lot of things that were happening and that weren't happening. Do you see that? Do you think that is a factor as well?

Nick Craig: Yeah, I think so. And I think you can even look back prior to this election, to the election of Governor Youngkin up in Virginia two years ago and how he, I think, kind of orchestrated the playbook for Republicans to make education an issue. Anybody that's been that's been involved in politics for for any number of years knows that Republicans always lose on education, always have for whatever reason, they're just not good at messaging it. And I think Glenn Youngkin set the narrative of, hey, it's not the government's job is not to educate your child. Yes, they can be part of the process, but it's not their lone responsibility to educate and raise your child. And obviously that resonated with parents in 2020 up in Virginia, excuse me, 2021 in Virginia, and then resonated with people here just a few days ago in New Hanover County, a purple county, by the way, I'll note.

Reuel Sample: And it's it's not just here in New Hanover County, as you said, is that all across the county, the country in this election, we saw school boards flip towards people who are concerned about parents.

Nick Craig: Yeah, absolutely.

Reuel Sample: The other the other big race here in New Hanover was the county commission. Leanne Pierce, who is not new to politics, tops out at the top of the list to get on that board.

Nick Craig: Well, she she raised a lot of money to do it. She had, I think, between all three other candidates. She had raised more money than all of them combined. And that showed she was the top vote getter. Rob Zapple, the Democrat incumbent being the top. There's two seats available there. So out of four candidates, top two, make it on, make it through the general election. And she beat out an incumbent, which is very interesting to see, especially, I'll note again in a purple county that Joe Biden carried in 2020 and Cheri Beasley carried this go round by by just a couple of votes. So that was interesting to see. Tom, Toby, the third vote getter there, kind of the political outsider, ran a fantastic campaign. But Reuel, as you sit back and look at it, it's hard to beat an incumbent, especially somebody like Rob Zappel, who has voted against the sale of the hospital, voted against property tax increases and actually voted against the transportation sales bond that was on the ballot here just a few days ago. So he made some very smart political votes back during his during the last 12 months or so to put

him in a very precarious spot for unaffiliated voters. And unfortunately for Tom Toby, he just wasn't able to overcome that.

Reuel Sample: As another podcaster who has a slightly more viewers and listeners than we do is that when Democrats vote conservative, they get elected and they get things done. And that's what Rob Zapple has figured out. But the county commission's got a lot of things to do. And the big things are development within here, within New Hanover County and bringing the film industry back and the other issues that they're wrestling with. How do you think this is all going to play out on the county commission? Are we going to see better development?

Nick Craig: I don't know if we'll see. I don't know what we'll see in terms of development. But the one thing I'm watching more than anything else is the return to normalcy on the county commission. As we know, Julia Bozeman, the current chairwoman, lost her primary. She didn't even make it to the general election. And for the last couple of months, every single county commission meeting has had this weird cloud over it of what's her personal life and personal issues, kind of bleeding over into the two of these meetings, which should not be the case. But when you've got somebody that's embattled in so many controversies leading your meetings, not just a member, but leading the charge on those meetings, it caused a lot of doubt for people in New Hanover County. So, you know, no matter what happens with it, I think you'll get back to some semblance of normal government. I will note, contrary to voting records, there are now three Republicans that are registered Republicans on the county commission, Leanne Pierson and Deb Hays, going to be the conservatives leading that voice. But we've seen that Rob Apple has voted with Deb Hays many, many times. There's been a lot of five two votes on that commission and it's been her and Rob's apple. So it will be interesting to see now if he kind of comes along or jumps back onto the progressive side of it to kind of act as the opposition voice. So there'll be a lot of interesting decisions for the county commission over the next few years.

Reuel Sample: Let's get out of New Hanover County. Arguably, the most important race in the state was the Supreme Court, and we saw two Republicans get put on that court. How important is that race?

Nick Craig: If you're if you were frustrated Tuesday that you went into your voting location and there was a big sign plastered on the door that said no cell phones and no IDs required, which a majority of North Carolinians are in favor of, they voted for it back in 2018. The reason that has not happened, the reason that your vote in 2018 to put voter ID on the state constitution has not happened. Is because of the North Carolina Supreme Court. It's currently a 5-4 Democrat controlled board. And every single decision has gone party line vote, every single vote for in the Supreme Court. Every decision has been five - four D's versus R's. And the interesting thing about this is here's an interesting fact for you. Since 2019, statewide judicial candidates have gone 15 for 15. That's that's not an accident Reuel. That's obvious that individuals are looking and want conservative judges. They don't want individuals legislating from the bench and North Carolinians. Again, purple state, a lot of unaffiliated, a lot of Democrat voters. They side with conservative judges. And not only was it a big win for Richard Dietz, but Trey Alan unseated Sam Ervin Jr, a current sitting Supreme Court justice. That is a huge win for the Republicans. And those races weren't even close. We're talking three or four points in a statewide race. That's a huge landslide for the Republicans.

Reuel Sample: One of the major differences we call these judges Republicans and we call them conservatives, but what they really are are constitutionalists, is that they're going to look at the Constitution of North Carolina and see if the law works. And the result of that just might be they might rule against their own party at times. But what we want them to do is to look at the law as it stands and not make their own laws.

Nick Craig: Correct. And again, legislation from the bench. And one of the phrases that's become very popular in North Carolina is Sue till Blue. We've seen it with with redistricting, We've seen it with the Supreme Court or excuse me, with voter ID, we've seen it with felon voting. All of these various things just get embattled in these long term legal battles. Voter ID has been caught up in legal battles for four years now and it eventually makes its way to the Supreme Court. The Democrats always side against seemingly always siding against the citizens of North Carolina. And then now you've got some cases like redistricting that are going to the US Supreme Court, which is really interesting. But for the for the Democrats that have used the courts as their essentially another branch or arm of the legislative body, this is a big loss for them. They will no longer be able to just get things to the Supreme Court and have the Democrat justices do their bidding.

Reuel Sample: Let's talk about some of those redistricting that that affected some races down here. We had three people going back up to well, two people heading back up to Raleigh and one newcomer who did not make it. Let's talk about John Hinnant. At first he is he ran in a very, very, very tough district. And while he didn't make the numbers to win, it is a win in many ways. Talk about John.

Nick Craig: Well, let me say this first. I'm not one of these people that's going to sit here and say, oh, even though we lost, there's still this silver lining and you shouldn't be disappointed when you lose. It sucks. Nobody likes to lose. And when you have a candidate like John Hinnant, who worked arguably harder and this is not a dig on any other candidate, I'm not sure that anybody could work as hard as John did. He doorknocked weekend after weekend phone calls, events, fundraisers. I don't know of anybody that worked as hard as him. And that's not a dig on the other candidates, but rule. Sometimes the math just doesn't work. And if you're in a district like John Harnett ran in, which is estimated to be a D plus six, a D plus seven, sometimes there's just not enough voters. So for John to finish down just 2200 votes in a district that realistically a Republican shouldn't even come close to winning is a win. And I think it sets the stage that long term Democrats and specifically susceptible Democrats, which I think Deb Butler is, she is going back to Raleigh. They need to be careful with what they do because 2200 votes this go around with what we've got going on could be very different in a presidential election in two years when voter turnout is significantly higher than it is during a primary or a midterm election. You're talking about 20, 30, 40,000 more voters in New Hanover County in the 2024 presidential election that could sway that that district in a in a pretty sizable way. So she needs to be careful. And for John, he ran an unbelievable campaign. And if I had to guess, I'd say he's not going to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Reuel Sample: I think he wore out about five sneakers as he talked to people because he was out door knocking every day. But we did send two people back. Ted, Charlie, heading back to the North Carolina house.

Nick Craig: Yeah. Ted Davis race was a lot tougher this go around than in years past. As we talked about earlier, redistricting shifted some of the more Republican areas from Ted's district to deb Butler's district. Ted Davis lost areas like Landfall and Figure Eight

Island that are traditionally Republican hotbeds. So he had a. Much more competitive race, and he was able to beat out a political newcomer, Amy Black DeLoach, by I think about 1100 votes. Is the is the total there minus any late, early or late mail ballots or overseas ballots that are going to come in. So he's heading back up there. And fortunately for Charlie Miller, I'd say he had the best night of everybody, no challenger. He ran unopposed in the primary and was able to use his money during the general and his influence during the general to help push some of these other candidates across the line, like Ted and and like helping John and trying to get him up in Raleigh. So a big win for both of those House members here in New Hanover County.

Reuel Sample: We even had the majority leader of the House come down, John Bell, to help out with candidates. There is an incredible team effort by the Republicans. For the Senate - Probably the one who faced the biggest amount of money coming in was Michael Lee. How big of a win is Michael Lee going back to the North Carolina Senate?

Nick Craig: It's huge. And it wasn't that many years ago. It was back in 2018 when Harper Peterson beat him by less than 400 votes. And we saw what Harper Peterson did in Raleigh. And it was nothing. It was just a bunch of nothing votes bringing bills to the floor that had no business being on the floor of the North Carolina Senate and not getting anything done. And compare and contrast that with what Michael Lee's done over the last two years. He's the chair of the Education Committee in the Senate. He's been fighting for clean air and clean drinking water. Again, another issue that Republicans always lose on. He is one of the most effective legislators in the entire state of North Carolina, and he had a liberal progressive running against him and tough race money coming in from all over the place. Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York, contributed at least \$50,000 to Marsha Morgan's campaign in little old New Hanover County here on the coast. So you're talking about a seat that that really was important for the Republicans to hold, for them to get a supermajority in the Senate, which they did receive. Now they will be able to outvote the Democrats in the case of a veto override in the North Carolina Senate. And the only way that was possible was Michael Lee holding the seat here in New Hanover County.

Reuel Sample: What I found interesting throughout all this, Nick, and you probably saw it there at the radio station, was that the Republicans were constantly accused of being extremists, of being radical in their thoughts.

Nick Craig: Well, they're not. But I think and I know I said I wasn't going to talk about this, but we will anyway. If you look at the national picture and all of the races that did not go the way that the Republicans had hoped, I think using the word and I think I underestimated how powerful it was to paint somebody as an extremist when it comes to elections, when it comes to abortions, and when it comes to general governance. And it appears to me that one of the issues there was a whole bunch elections aren't won and lost by by single issues. It's a culmination of things that this extremist tag and painting every single Republican as a crazy, radical right wing extremist was effective in certain areas. I think it worked in Pennsylvania and it worked in other states like Arizona as well. So for the Democrats, that is a huge win for them that they can use. And it's not just the political advertising that does it turn on CNN or MSNBC and you'll hear how every single candidate that ran on Tuesday is a right wing extremist that wants to destroy the country. So the messaging is very effective and it obviously resonates a rule. Nobody wants to be an extremist. Nobody wants to be determined. Nobody wants to support a, quote, extremist. And when the Democrats label every single Republican as an extremist that has a play with unaffiliated voters, there's no question about it.

Reuel Sample: It's interesting. They got there first. So Republicans couldn't answer by saying, no, no, no, you're the ones who are extremist. Is that it just it doesn't work that way. So it was a great tactic by the by the Democrats and in places other places it worked, but not necessarily here in New Hanover County. So that was that was interesting. And let's take a look at the national level, the big news - Ted Budd.

Nick Craig: Yeah, absolutely. Six, six, eight months ago, the North Carolina Senate race between Ted Budd and Cheri Beasley looked to be the race in the country to watch. It was going right after the primary. It was going to be the race that decided the North Carolina Senate. And as the months and weeks went on leading up to the election, funny enough, the North Carolina race really never materialized like that. Ted Budd always had a lead in polling. His public support always seemed to be significantly higher. And you saw very little national coverage of that race because it just really wasn't that close at all. And all the eye was turned to Arizona, Pennsylvania and Georgia. So a race that I think a lot of folks back in the primary in May thought was going to be the race to watch and be part of. Turned out really to be a huge victory for for Ted. But he won by over three points, which in a statewide election again, the whole

state of North Carolina, that is a landslide election. One or two one or two points is a big win in North Carolina. When you get three plus points in a victory in a statewide race like that, that is a landslide for the Republicans here.

Reuel Sample: Republicans did do well here in New Hanover County, in North Carolina. But we always have elections coming up and Republicans always need to be reinforcing this need or this relationship with their people. What do Republicans need to do for the next two years or even for the next year as we get ready for races downtown? What do you think Republicans need to do to reassure people that they are not that right wing extremists?

Nick Craig: Well, I think there's two parts of it there. What do they need to do for the Republican voter? First, let's start with them. They need to do what they said they were going to do. If you campaigned on X, Y and Z, you need to do X, Y, and Z. If you do A, B and C, your voters are going to call you a fraud and call you all of these tags, and probably rightfully so. If you don't do what you said you were going to. On the other side of the coin for the unaffiliated voter or the maybe right leaning Democrat voter that does split their ticket, which, by the way, let's let's set this out here real quick. There are a lot of split voters here in New Hanover County. Look at the final results and you see Democrats winning certain races, Republicans cleaning and sweeping others. People vote on issues. So I think for Republicans over the next two years, they need to stand by what they said they were going to run on and do what they say they were going to do. If you ran, go back to the Board of Education race on bringing accountability and transparency to the Board of Education. That's what you need to do. If you ran for statewide office to continue to better the state of North Carolina and continue to lower our taxes and make us one of the most business friendly states in the in the country, you have to do that. If not, not only is your own Republican voter base going to just brush you off, but there's no chance that anybody in the middle is going to vote for you either. So you just need to do what you said you were going to do and. Stick to your morals, stick to your ideas, and and don't don't kowtow down to the media or any mob that wants you to change what you ran on and what you stand for. Stick true to your guns on it.

Reuel Sample: Let's put that in perspective. Cheri Beasley won New Hanover County. She beat Ted Budd. Yet at the same time, New Hanover County put four conservative

Republicans on the school board. And so you're right, people are crossing party lines. The independents are crossing party lines. And at the end of these people's terms, if they don't if they don't do what they are have told their people to do, they're going to lose their spots. And the Republican Party is going to just kind of go down in flames again.

Nick Craig: Joe Biden won the county in 2020. We sent Michael Lee and Ted Davis to the General Assembly then as well. So, yes, the unaffiliated voter, I think everybody needs to understand this, the unaffiliated voter, very rarely true unaffiliated. It's not Democrats that change their party affiliation to unaffiliated are not Republicans that change their party affiliation. True, unaffiliated, independent voters, they pick and choose. They vote for the individual. They vote for the candidate over the party. So if they believe that Ted Budd has better ideas or Cheri Beasley has better ideas, they might vote for them. But then you go down the ballot and they overwhelmingly supported the four Republican candidates for the Board of Education at the tune, I believe the fourth top vote getter in the fifth top vote getter were separated by over 1000 votes, which is significant percentage wise. It's not big because you've got eight candidates running. But in terms of a vote count, bigger margin for the Board of Education victory than Ted Davis's race, which is pretty remarkable.

Reuel Sample: You and I have joked a little bit about now that election days are over, that your radio show is going to be silent in the morning. What are people going to start talking about now that the election is done? We've got some elections still going on. Georgia's coming up and everything else. But what are people talking about here in New Hanover County now?

Nick Craig: Well, yes, you do mention the December the sixth runoff in Georgia. We know what the last the two last two Senate runoffs in Georgia have been an unmitigated disaster for the Republicans. So hopefully they can clean up their act down there and pull Herschel Walker across the finish line. But after the new year, once Christmas is here and gone, the General Assembly will gavel back in. And with the super majority in the Senate and one vote shy of the supermajority in the North Carolina House, according to Tim Moore, he says that for all intents and purposes, they have a working super majority, meaning he believes they could get a single Democrat to cross the aisle to override a veto from Governor Roy Cooper. This is going to be a very busy General

Assembly session. We've got redistricting that will come back up with the new legal or with the new Supreme Court. One of the redistricting cases is at the US Supreme Court right now. We'll get a decision on that in June of next year at the end of their term. Voter ID will be back. There are a lot of things that are going to be going on here in North Carolina over the next couple of months. And it's all going to start with the General Assembly gaveling back in in early January.

Reuel Sample: So there's not going to be any dead air on the Wilmington Morning show with Nick Craig any time soon.

Nick Craig: You know, it's my alarm has failed me once or twice, so I can't promise. No. But in terms of content no, there's going to be a plenty of stuff to talk about. And then, you know, it won't be long before we really start talking about the 2024 presidential election. You know, give it a couple of months into the new year and that's going to be the hot topic. Then you'll have a whole bunch of candidates on both sides of the political aisle all trying to jive for the nominations from their party. And it'll be a very interesting the next 24 months or so will be very interesting in terms of politics here in the country.

Reuel Sample: Nick Craig. How can people get a hold of you if they want to leave comments or show suggestions or just yell at you in general?

Nick Craig: Well, yell at me. We've got plenty of those people. They call into the program all the time. You can tune in live from 6 to 9:00 every weekday morning. We'll cover the latest ongoings in the state and nationwide. There's a podcast of the show as well. You can find it at your favorite podcast app. Search for Wilmington's Morning News or visit our website [980 WAAV.com](http://980WAAV.com) or NickCraig.com. And finally, the podcast version of the show each and every weekday.

Reuel Sample: Nick Craig A wealth of information. He's got his finger on the pulse of not only Wilmington, New Hanover County in North Carolina. Thanks a lot for being here.

Nick Craig: Thanks Reuel I appreciate the invite.