

*Submitted October 4, 2009; Revised August 1, 2019*

## **JIM HUNT: Campaigning and Governing**

*Essay by Ferrel Guillory*

*Research collaborator: Todd Brantley*

Jim Hunt's five statewide election victories and his four gubernatorial terms left the governor's office a more powerful tool of governing than when he entered it, and shored up the Democratic Party in an era of Republican ascendancy in the South. In both campaigning and governing, Hunt blended Kerr Scott populism and Terry Sanford progressive-pragmatism into his own distinctive approach to government-as-leader.

In the early 1970s, less than a decade after passage of the Voting Rights Act, Hunt forged a biracial coalition, and ranked among the "New South" governors of that period. Later in the 1970s, he came to be regarded among the "Atari Democrats," so-called for their promotion of economic advancement through technology-based enterprises. In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Republican resurgence led by Ronald Reagan, Hunt found ways to extend early-childhood services and revise assistance to the poor that did not conform to traditional Democratic programmatic practices.

A review of the political life of Jim Hunt yields two major themes:

### *1) Transformation of the office of governor*

Rooted in colonial suspicion of royal power, the North Carolina Constitution had long restricted elected governors to one term in office. The Constitution also diffused executive power through a multiplicity of statewide elected offices and limited gubernatorial power by denying the governor the ability to veto acts of the General Assembly.

In his first term in office, 1973-77, Hunt sought and won a constitutional amendment giving the governor the right to run for two consecutive terms. He did so by shrewdly having the amendment apply to himself—so that his supporters would rally around and so that voters understood clearly that they would be giving Hunt an opportunity to run for a second term.

After passage of the succession amendment, North Carolina had four consecutive two-term governorships: Hunt 1977-1985, Republican Jim Martin, 1985-1993; Hunt 1993-2001; Democrat Mike Easley, 2001-2009. Then followed two one-term governorships: Democrat Bev Perdue, 2009-2013 and Republican Pat McCrory, 2013-2017. (Democrat Roy Cooper began his first term in 2017.)

During his third term, Hunt sought and won a constitutional amendment empowering the governor to veto most legislative enactments. Without veto power, a governor had to use “soft skills” and informal powers to exert leadership—skill at persuasion, a call to party unity, ability to win support from legislators by offering benefits to their constituencies. Hunt himself did not exercise the veto, though the potential of wielding it surely strengthened his hand in dealing with legislators. Hunt’s Democratic successor, Easley, exercised the first gubernatorial veto.

## 2) *Dominant leader in state Democratic Party*

Under Hunt’s leadership, the North Carolina Democratic Party remained a strong force in the state, even as the Republican Party gained ascendancy across the South. In the quarter of a century from his 1972 election as lieutenant governor to January 2001 when he completed his fourth term as governor, he clearly had no rivals within the Democratic Party as a sustained counterbalance to the rise of the GOP.

Hunt’s mentor, Terry Sanford, captured in 1986 a U.S. Senate seat then occupied by a Republican. But Sanford served only one six-year term, losing in 1992. Democrats Robert Morgan and John Edwards won Senate races during the post-1972 period, but they too only served one term each.

For his part, Hunt won the governor’s office twice—in 1976 and in 1992—in elections that followed a Republican governorship. In 1980, Hunt won his second term, retaining a Democratic governorship in the same election in which Ronald Reagan won the presidency by solidifying the “Southern strategy” earlier put in motion by Richard Nixon.

Beginning with Hunt’s 1992 victory, Democratic candidates won five consecutive gubernatorial elections—two by Hunt, two by Easley and one by Perdue, a string unmatched in the South and across the nation.

## **Six Campaigns, Five Victories**

### **1972: Hunt Elected Lieutenant Governor**

This was a milestone year in North Carolina’s political history. In gaining his second term as president, Republican Richard Nixon won the state’s electoral votes in a landslide against Democratic candidate George McGovern. The Nixon landslide helped propel Republican James Holshouser into the governor’s office and Republican Jesse Helms into the U.S. Senate. Holshouser and Helms, thus, became the first North Carolina Republicans to hold those offices in seven decades.

As Democratic gubernatorial candidate Hargrove “Skipper” Bowles went down to defeat, Hunt won the race for lieutenant governor. Hunt’s platform: 1) greater commitment to kindergarten

and public schools, 2) emphasis on long-range planning, including a land-use policy, and 3) modernization of the General Assembly. Hunt described the role of the lieutenant governor as a “spokesman for the people and an advocate for the people in the day-to-day workings of state government.”

As a result of his victory, Hunt became, at age 35, the highest ranking Democratic statewide officeholder—in effect, the leader of state Democrats. In the early 70s, the lieutenant governor not only presided over the daily sessions of the state Senate, but also held the institutional powers of appointing committees and assigning bills to committee. The General Assembly had a Democratic majority in both House and Senate. The legislature was filled with Democrats who had no experience dealing with a governor of another party. Hunt faced and met the challenge of acting as Democratic Party leader in the General Assembly with a Republican governor.

Hunt had campaigned in support of a statewide kindergarten system. In office, Holshouser proposed it. While Democrats and Republicans sparred regularly over political and institutional issues, Hunt also pushed to establish full-day kindergarten in public schools across the state—funding was approved. Similarly, with the backing of both the Republican governor and the Democratic lieutenant governor, the legislature enacted the landmark Coastal Area Management Act.

### **1972 Election Results**

#### **Primary (May 6, 1972)**

Jim Hunt: 329,727  
Roy Sowers, Jr.: 177,016  
Margaret Harper: 151,819  
Allen C. Barbee: 51,602  
Reginald L. Frazier: 43,228

#### **General Election (November 7, 1972)**

Jim Hunt: 812,602  
John W. Walker (Republican): 612,002  
Benjamin G. McLendon (American): 8,865

### **1976: Hunt Elected Governor**

By winning the election for governor in 1976, Hunt regained the state’s highest office for Democrats after a GOP term. In the same election, Democrat Jimmy Carter was elected president—Hunt ran comfortably with Carter as the Democratic nominee and, in that post-Watergate election, did not have to overcome a Republican surge.

In the Democratic primary that year, Hunt emerged as the centrist candidate, and clearly the candidate with the strongest grass-roots organization. His campaign, as had Sanford’s in 1960, was largely designed with the guidance of Bert Bennett, a Winston-Salem oil company executive who served as the chief political organizer of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party during the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, during the campaign, Hunt asked voters to give him

a mandate to make North Carolina a progressive state. With Edward O'Herron and Thomas Strickland running to his right, and George Wood running to his left, Hunt won the Democratic nomination without a runoff.

In the general election campaign, Hunt clearly placed himself in the moderate-to-progressive tradition of Kerr Scott, Luther Hodges and Terry Sanford. He asked voters to give him a governing mandate for four principal planks in his platform: 1) bolster teaching, particularly in 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, 2) a new utilities regulation structure, with a staff working under an appointee of the governor and required to argue the consumer's viewpoint in rate hearings, 3) an anti-crime package and 4) an aggressive industry-hunting effort with an eye toward higher wages for North Carolina's working people. With David T. Flaherty, a former Holshouser appointee, as his GOP opponent, Hunt won the general election with 65 percent of the vote, getting more votes than Carter in North Carolina.

### **1976 Election Results**

#### **Primary (August 17, 1976)**

Jim Hunt: 362,102

Edward M. O'Herron: 157,815

George Wood: 121,673

Thomas E. Strickland: 31,338

Jetter Baker, Jr.: 5,003

#### **General Election (November 2, 1976)**

Jim Hunt: 1,081,293

David T. Flaherty (Republican): 564,102

H.F. Seawell, Jr. (American): 13,604

Arlan K. Andrews, Sr. (Labor): 4,764

### **1980: Hunt Re-elected Governor**

To win his second term, Hunt defeated the sons of two of North Carolina's most prominent political figures of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. What's more, he won the governorship for the second time even as Democratic President Jimmy Carter was going down to defeat to Republican Ronald Reagan, and Democratic U.S. Senator Robert Morgan lost to Republican John East. Once again, Hunt shored up state Democrats in the face of a GOP onslaught.

In the Democratic primary, Hunt found himself challenged by Robert W. Scott, son of Kerr Scott and himself governor from 1969 to 1973. Running as the incumbent, Hunt overwhelmed Scott in fundraising and organizational prowess.

Scott attacked Hunt over an investigation into the handling of a federal jobs training program that tarnished AFL-CIO president Wilbur Hobby. He also assailed Hunt over memos written by a state alcohol law enforcement officer about the political activities of sheriffs. Hunt responded by saying that incumbents will always have some embarrassing incidents arise in state government. Mostly, however, he avoided personal attacks and campaigned on his record of

attracting industry—North Carolina led the South in growth of industrial jobs—and launching education initiatives.

Hunt's first-term record also included his handling of the Wilmington 10 case. It involved nine black men and a white woman accused of setting fire to a grocery store during a period of racial strife. Hunt commuted their sentences but did not issue a pardon. The case attracted national and international attention at the time.

In defeating Scott, Hunt received nearly seven out of every 10 votes cast, carrying all 100 counties. As he turned his focus to the general election, Hunt declared, "Will North Carolina move ahead, or will we turn back? Will North Carolina look to the future with faith and hope, or with fear and doubt?"

In the general election, Hunt faced Republican I. Beverly Lake Jr. Lake's father was the candidate Terry Sanford defeated in the Democratic run-off in 1960 on his way to the governorship. In that 1960 campaign, Lake Sr. had positioned himself as an out-spoken opponent of civil rights measures sought by black citizens. While Lake Jr. did not campaign on racial issues as his father had, he, along with Sen. Jesse Helms, were leaders among conservative white voters who switched from the Democratic to the Republican Party at least in part out of discontent with Democrats' support for civil rights.

Lake tried to frame the race as a conservative versus a liberal. Lake claimed the state was "on the road to socialism," and proposed major tax cuts, along with state spending cuts. In response, Hunt argued that he could attract Republican voters because "a lot of these people simply cannot buy far right-wing policy and his attitudes with regards to human equality." Hunt described himself as a moderate, not a liberal.

Hunt campaigned as the activist governor that he had been through his first term. His campaign's key points were: 1) limiting government growth even as he deployed government as a tool for improving citizens' lives, particularly through education initiatives; 2) maintaining ties with the business community while also pushing to diversify the state's economy; 3) expanding rights and opportunities for women and black people; and 4) responding to charges that he was a "big spender" by noting that he had persuaded the Legislature in 1979 to enact a modest income tax cut. At the swearing in of his new cabinet, Hunt said, "We must prove that we can be both lean and compassionate."

## **1980 Election Results**

### **Primary (May 6, 1980)**

Jim Hunt: 524,844

Robert W. Scott: 217,289

Harry J. Welsh: 11,551

### **General Election (November 4, 1980)**

Jim Hunt: 1,143,145

Beverly Lake, Jr. (Republican): 691,449  
Bobby Y. Emory (Labor): 9,951  
Douglas A. Cooper (Soc. Workers): 2,887

## **1984: Hunt Loses Senate Race to Jesse Helms**

The Hunt-Helms race of 1984 ranks along with the Smith-Graham runoff of 1950 and the Sanford-Lake runoff of 1960 as fight-for-the-soul contests that periodically arose in North Carolina politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The details of the race have received extensive treatment in books and a Harvard case study. For the purposes of examining Jim Hunt's political and leadership experiences, here are key elements of the 1984 Senate race:

- The Helms campaign sought to turn his eight years as governor against Hunt, depicting the maneuvering, compromising, accommodating of day-to-day governing as evidence that Hunt was a “wishy-washy liberal” given to political calculation. The Helms assault on Hunt through television commercials proceeded through nearly a year and a half period until Election Day 1984.
- Hunt and his campaign sought to depict Helms as a right-wing ideologue out of touch with the governance needs of the state and nation. Their argument was that Helms's views and voting record, often in a negative-voting minority, were an embarrassment to a state with a progressive image.
- In late 1983, Helms mounted a noisy, fractious rear-guard effort to forestall adoption of a federal holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In terms of legislation, Helms failed. In terms of politics, Helms succeeded in using the King holiday debate to turn from being an underdog in the race against Hunt to becoming the front-runner.
- At the Democratic National Convention, party nominee Walter Mondale declared that the nation's economic and budget status at that time required a tax increase regardless of whether he or Republican Ronald Reagan were elected. The Mondale tax talk led the Helms campaign to intensify its effort to link Hunt to the Democratic nominee, who eventually lost in a landslide as Reagan won re-election. In the end, Hunt ran 250,000 votes ahead of Mondale in North Carolina, and yet still fell short of what he needed to overcome Helms. On the strength of the Reagan landslide, Helms won re-election and Republican Jim Martin, a former congressman, won the governor's office.

### **1984 Election Results**

#### **Primary (May 8, 1984)**

Jim Hunt: 655,429  
Thomas Allred: 126,841  
Harrill Jones: 63,676

**General Election (November 6, 1984)**

Jesse Helms (Republican): 1,156,768

Jim Hunt: 1,070,488

Bobby Y. Emory (Labor): 9,302

Kate Daher (Soc. Workers): 2,493

**1992: Hunt Wins Third Term as Governor**

By the 1992 election, North Carolina had had a Republican governor, Jim Martin, for eight years. The White House had been held by Republicans for 12 years—eight under Ronald Reagan, four under George H.W. Bush.

In running for his third term, Hunt found himself accompanied by former “New South” governors like himself. Bill Clinton of Arkansas won the Democratic Presidential nomination. Hunt’s mentor, Terry Sanford, sought a second term as a U.S. Senate, opposed by Republican Lauch Faircloth, who as a Democrat had served as a high-level appointee of both Sanford and Hunt.

Hunt captured the governor’s office, a victory once again following a Republican administration. Clinton won the presidential election. However, Sanford lost. In North Carolina, therefore, Democrats won two, Republicans one of the three top statewide races.

“I’m running for governor because I want to lead and I believe I am prepared to lead a crusade for public education in North Carolina for the next four years,” Hunt declared as he won the May Democratic primary. In that primary, he defeated Lacy Thornburg, who had served as state attorney general and later went on to a federal judgeship. His eight years out of office and the experience of the 1984 Senate race defeat proved not to have dulled Hunt’s appeal as a governor and his ability to organize a potent campaign organization.

In the general election, Hunt faced Republican Jim Gardner, the incumbent lieutenant governor and a former congressman. Gardner sought to depict Hunt as little more than a politician who would do anything to feed his ambition. The Hunt campaign reminded voters of Gardner’s business failures.

In addition, Hunt disseminated a campaign booklet titled, “An Agenda for Action.” It called for action to improve public schools and community colleges, a renewed effort to produce high-wage, high-skill jobs and an anti-crime package that included military-style, boot-camp prisons.

“We’re running for governor because we love this state too much to sit back and let it fall behind,” Hunt said. “We believe it is time to stop drifting and move ahead boldly and make North Carolina into what it ought to be and can be.”

**1992 Election Results****Primary (May 5, 1992)**

Jim Hunt: 459,300  
Lacy Thornburg: 188,806  
Marcus William: 25,660  
Jim Hatcher: 18,807  
M. Wendell Briggs: 9,033

#### **General Election (November 3, 1992)**

Jim Hunt: 1,368,246  
Jim Gardner (Republican): 1,121,955

### **1996: Hunt Wins Fourth Term as Governor**

In the 1994 mid-term elections, Republicans made major gains in both Washington and Raleigh in capturing legislative seats. Shortly after the GOP won control of the state House after a campaign in which Republicans called for substantial tax cuts, Hunt himself proposed a state tax cut package that went beyond what Republican lawmakers in the end approved. Later, as the state endured two recessions in the decade after 2000, Hunt expressed regret over the erosion of the state's tax base.

The 1996 election featured the final statewide campaigns of both Hunt and Jesse Helms, the two former rivals whose political careers had run on separate ideological tracks since their first statewide campaigns in 1972. Helms scored his second victory over former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt. Clinton won his second term. Hunt had no primary opposition, and then went on to defeat Republican Robin Hayes, who had served in both the General Assembly and in Congress.

The election exit poll that year illustrated the extent to which Hunt reached outside the base of Democratic voters and had appeal across party lines. Hunt won support from more than eight out of 10 self-described Democrats, while also getting the votes of one out of five Republican voters and more than half of independents. Thirty-one percent of Helms voters said they voted for Hunt, and 31 percent of Hunt voters said they cast ballots for Helms.

#### **1996 Election Results**

##### **Primary:**

*No Democratic primary opposition*

#### **General Election (November 5, 1996)**

Jim Hunt: 1,436,638  
Robin Hayes (Republican): 1,097,053

### **An Addendum on Hunt as Political Leader**

- In March, 1981, Hunt was named chairman of a commission to overhaul the national Democratic Party's presidential nomination process. The panel came to be known as the Hunt Commission. Its job was to revise party rules in the wake of Jimmy Carter's defeat

and in response to an outpouring of concern among Democratic officials that the party's system of open primaries had left the party vulnerable to candidates without broad appeal outside the Democratic base. The Hunt Commission's blueprint restored more power in the nominating convention to elected officeholders and party officials—creating the so-called “super delegates” to the national convention. David Price, who later went onto a long career in the U.S. House, served as the commission's executive director, selected by Hunt.

- From time to time, Hunt encountered missteps and misdeeds within his administration and campaigns, and among appointees and supporters. Controversies and embarrassments arose, for example, over the handling of job-training funds in the mid-1970s, over memos on the activities of sheriffs written by an alcohol enforcement officer and accusations of eavesdropping on GOP telephone conversations by Democratic campaign operatives. Still, on the whole, Hunt served four terms in the state's highest office without a serious blemish on his own record of integrity.
- While he succeeded in having the state constitution amended to enhance the power of the governor, Hunt fought hard, but ultimately failed, to have North Carolina ratify a significant proposal to amend the U.S. Constitution. Early in his campaign for lieutenant governor in 1972, Hunt announced his support for the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, which would have prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender. During his term as lieutenant governor, Hunt appointed a pro-ERA state senator to chair the committee that handled the ratification legislation. And yet, as a result of last-minute vote-switches by three senators, the ERA went down to a narrow defeat. In 1975, in 1977 and again in 1979, as governor, Hunt made renewed attempts to have the legislature ratify the amendment. First Lady Carolyn Hunt joined the governor in actively lobbying legislators for ERA. The 1979 debate featured Mrs. Hunt testifying that the amendment would “give new dignity to the role of mother and housewife.” Former U.S. Sen. Sam J. Ervin, who had led the Watergate investigation, showed up at the legislature to argue against the ERA. While the ERA would win approval in the 120-member House, the 50-member state Senate remained narrowly divided, with just enough votes to defeat the amendment. In 1979, Hunt came to the conclusion that a Senate floor vote would so polarize the body that it would affect other legislation, and the amendment was put to rest in committee.