

News: Citizen Servatius

African-American population growth will drive local politics

By Tara Servatius

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The election was Tuesday, but Wednesday was the first day of the rest of Anthony Foxx's political career.

Foxx, a Democrat and at-large Charlotte City Council member, says he's running for mayor of Charlotte regardless of who else files to run.

If Foxx makes it out of the Democratic primary, odds are high he'll be the next mayor of Charlotte. It won't matter who files to run against him on the Republican side.

With a combination of Republican and white Democrat votes, Charlotte's current mayor, Republican Pat McCrory, has managed to win the office handily each time he runs.

But that trend will come to an end if Foxx, who is African-American, runs this time. That's because the numbers are on his side, and the side of any African-American who takes a crack at citywide office. With little fanfare and barely any acknowledgment, Charlotte has entered a new era. It's not one in which African-Americans can win, as Harvey Gantt did when he ran for mayor here in 1983, but one in which they will win most of the time when they run citywide.

Politically speaking, it's one of the big untold stories in Charlotte. Or rather, it's a story that has been told often but told wrong.

The story line usually goes like this. Charlotte has shifted from Republican red on the map to reliably blue because large numbers of Democrats and moderates are moving here from "up North" and around the country. These supposedly latte-sipping, Volvo-driving, granola-crunching transplants are pushing Charlotte ever leftward, the story usually goes.

But that's not exactly what's happening here. A key part of the story always seems to get left out. William Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, first noticed the trend in 2004. African-Americans were moving back to the South in huge numbers. By the year 2000, Charlotte had attracted more new African-American residents than all but two other U.S. cities, Atlanta and Dallas, according to Brookings, one of Washington, D.C.'s oldest think tanks. That makes Charlotte the number three destination in the nation for African-Americans.

And the trend continues. Only the 2010 census can tell us for sure how much the African-American population in Charlotte has grown, but the voter rolls provide a pretty good indication.

A little over a decade ago, 22 percent of Charlotte's voters were African-American. Now 34 percent are. That growth has been part of a remarkably steady trend in which Charlotte's black voter registration has grown by a percentage point or two each year for the last 10 years. That's staggering growth in a region that is growing at a fast clip overall. The growth in Charlotte's black population was probably a large part of the reason that Sen. Barack Obama's campaign targeted North Carolina in general and Charlotte in particular.

Right now, 49 percent of registered voters in Charlotte are Democrats, 27 percent are Republicans and 24 percent are unaffiliated.

Charlotte has always been a highly Democratic place, but Charlotte's Democrats used to be largely white. Now, nearly 70 percent of the Queen City's registered Democrat voters are black. That's huge because while white Democrats tend to split their tickets more, black voters rarely do, voting Democrat around 90 percent of the time. That means that Charlotte's Democrat voter base has become much more reliable than it used to be. And that's why Democrats have begun to dominate the Charlotte City Council and the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners.

The numbers mean something else, too. Politically speaking, it's now a walk in the park to get from 34 percent to the 50.1 percent you need to win citywide if you are an African-American Democrat candidate in Charlotte. You merely need to capture the black vote, an easy assignment, half the white Democrat vote and a third of the unaffiliated vote. Since black candidates here easily win more than half the white Democratic vote, they're certain to be a powerful force going forward.

And that's with voter registration numbers as they presently stand. If the African-American influx and voter registration trends continue for the next 10 years as they have for the last decade, African-Americans will dominate Charlotte politics. White Democrats and Republicans will find themselves increasingly confined to the edges of power that black politicians occupy now.

It's an inversion of the city's power structure, and it is utterly inevitable. The only question is how long it will take to become reality.

This is why you see so much jockeying for power in recent years among Charlotte's black leaders, who have been knocking each other off boards and councils in a struggle for power. They know that whoever wins the struggle to lead the black community in Charlotte will eventually dominate the city's overall political structure as well.

Foxx is clearly staking his claim early. Probably a smart move.

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