

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Christensen: McCrory's balancing act in State of the State address

By Rob Christensen

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North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory must thread a political needle in his State of the State address Wednesday night, between his instincts as a pro-business pragmatist and the GOP conservative base that dominates the legislature.

McCrory is expected to talk about issues such as raising teacher salaries, providing tax incentives to recruit business, and tax credits for restoration of historic properties that can appeal to many of the independent-minded voters that he needs if he is going to win re-election next year.

While the Republican governor will likely find support for some of his ideas in the GOP legislature, he is also likely to face resistance for other ideas, such as expanding Medicaid, the health insurance program for the poor and the elderly.

McCrory would also rather not have to deal with difficult issues such as gay rights and abortion -- issues that social conservatives in the legislature plan to push.

McCrory is seeking to re-establish his reputation as a center/right politician with a political persona distinct from a very conservative legislature. At the same time, he is counting on the legislature to enact his programs, and he needs to keep happy the conservative base of his party -- which provides much of the workers and energy he needs to win re-election.

"It is very much a balancing act that McCrory has to engage in," said Michael Bitzer, a political scientist and blogger at Catawba College in Salisbury. "North Carolina is this kind of battleground, swing state. Anybody who is running statewide really has to take into account factors and dynamics that members of the General Assembly don't have to."

In his first two years, McCrory often had a strained relationship with the legislature, especially with Senate leader Phil Berger and other Senate leaders.

After 14 years of governing a Democratic-leaning city, McCrory took office as a self-described "Eisenhower Republican," one with a decidedly pro-business bent but who promised to work closely with Democrats. But he was often steamrolled by a Republican legislature that was intent on accomplishing what then House Speaker Thom Tillis called a "conservative revolution."

McCrory agreed with much of the legislature's agenda --- he too campaigned for major tax cuts and fewer government regulations. But on other issues, such as new restrictions on abortion clinics, McCrory signed bills that were not part of his agenda and which almost certainly would have been overridden if he had tried to veto.

A new image

In doing so, McCrory saw his image change from Charlotte moderate to Raleigh conservative --- even though few have seen him as a strongly ideologically driven politician. The Cato Institute, a libertarian-based think tank based in Washington and founded by billionaire industrialist Charles Koch, gave McCrory and Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback their highest scores in a report released last fall.

When McCrory was most closely associated with the legislature, his popularity, as measured by public opinion polls, flagged. When the legislature was out of session, McCrory's numbers have risen. A state-wide poll released Tuesday by Public Policy Polling found that he had an approval rating of 41 percent and a disapproval rating of 45 percent.

But McCrory has a constituency unlike the legislature, where most lawmakers run in Republican-leaning districts, and where their biggest political danger comes from the ideological right.

McCrory has a statewide constituency in one of the most closely divided states in the country, and where North Carolinians have consistently self-identified themselves as among the most moderate in the nation.

"A lot of the Republicans run in very Republican districts," said Carter Wrenn, a longtime Republican strategist for Sen. Jesse Helms and others. "McCrory has got to run statewide and find independent votes that decide those elections. He has to increase his favorables and he has to get his support back with independents. That is not going to be easy. He was very popular with independents the last time he ran. He has taken a beating since then."

McCrory's support among independents was 60-28 prior to his landslide victory over Democratic Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton in 2012, but has now dropped to 32-48, according to Public Policy Polling, a Democratic-leaning firm based in Raleigh.

Although McCrory has large majorities in both houses of the legislature, there is no guarantee they will treat his programs sympathetically. After setting policy for two years under Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue, the legislature saw no reason to give up power just because a Republican was elected governor.

"The grand question we had for the past two years is who is leading state government?" Bitzer said. "And with a re-election bid coming next year for the chief executive will he be really

leading the state, or will the legislative leaders be leading? How willing are they to recognize his situation in comparison to their own?"

The State of the State will also provide McCrory with a platform to talk about his Carolina Comeback message. With North Carolina and the country's economy coming out of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s, McCrory is expected to campaign on the state's improving economic prospects --- particularly its improved unemployment numbers.

It is ironic that McCrory is in the same position as Democratic President Barack Obama, who is taking credit for the economic recovery, while congressional Republicans are pointing out the weakness of the recovery.

In Raleigh, the flip side of the argument is occurring, with McCrory taking credit for the recovery, and Democrats expressing skepticism.

"Isn't the irony of that great?" Wrenn said. "From what I've seen in the polls, a lot of people don't believe Obama when he says the economy is great. I suspect they don't believe McCrory either."

"There are a lot of people who have jobs, but are just making ends meet," Wrenn said. "Some weeks they are little bit ahead. Some weeks they are a little bit behind. They have been on the treadmill for a long time. When anybody says, whether it's a Republican or a Democrat, 'The sun's coming up and it's morning in America,' half the voters are going to say, 'they are not living in my world.' "