

## Tillis race should make McCrory nervous

By Rob Christensen  
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If the polls are to be believed, Republicans are on the verge of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory in North Carolina's Senate race.

All the fundamentals favored the GOP. No Democratic senator from North Carolina had won re-election since conservative Sen. Sam Ervin Jr. in 1968. President Barack Obama is unpopular in North Carolina and so is his signature program, the Affordable Care Act. Democratic Sen. Kay Hagan's polling numbers are under water.

The Republicans are offering a creditable candidate in House Speaker Thom Tillis who can point to a substantive list of legislative accomplishments. Whether you agree with those accomplishments, depends on your politics.

But despite those advantages, nearly every poll shows Hagan with a small, but significant lead.

What is happening is that Obama's unpopularity is being trumped by the Republican legislature's unpopularity. North Carolina's middle-of-the road electorate is expressing its displeasure at what Tillis calls the "conservative revolution" in Raleigh.

All of this is being nervously watched by GOP Gov. Pat McCrory, who will likely face re-election in two years.

Legislature's long shadow

McCrory ran as a center/right business pragmatist. That is how he governed as Charlotte mayor, and that is the tradition of North Carolina's last two Republican governors, Jim Holshouser and Jim Martin.

But McCrory has been overshadowed in Raleigh by a highly ideological legislature that has pushed one of the most conservative agendas in the country.

McCrory has not offered a coherent message, at times embracing the legislature and at other times distancing himself from it. It is a political straddle in which he is trying to both hold his party's conservative base while appealing to more moderate swing voters.

It is often perplexing, and his poor polling numbers suggest it is not working very well.

## Mixed messages

At times he comes across as a Republican moderate, declining, for example, to demagogue the court ruling legalizing gay marriage. But his office has been trumpeting the “A” rating he received from the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank founded by industrialist Charles Koch. The other three GOP governors who received an A define the outer reaches of conservative state leadership: Sam Brownback of Kansas, Paul LePage of Maine and Mike Pence of Indiana.

It would be as if former Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue was touting a rating from an ultra-liberal national group rating her and California Gov. Jerry Brown as the nation’s best governors. Even Perdue would have better sense than to do that.

## Help on the way

With McCrory struggling, the GOP may send in one of their toughest political operatives to try to rescue his political career.

McCrory has been in talks Chris LaCivita, a Richmond-based political consultant who has worked in various top Virginia campaigns and as political director for the National Republican Senatorial Committee. LaCivita has a reputation as a rescue artist, and was recently sent in by party leaders to help fix the campaign of GOP Sen. Pat Roberts of Kansas.

LaCivita, a decorated former Marine combat veteran, was the consultant and media adviser in 2004 for Swift Boat Veterans and POWs for Truth. The independent group ran ads against Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic nominee for president, questioning his Vietnam War record.

Tillis and McCrory are not the same, although both share a political base in the Charlotte business community. McCrory has been in politics longer than Tillis and has demonstrated more political skills on the campaign trail.

The Senate race is close and maybe tightening. Tillis could still pull off a come-from-behind victory. But his struggles are causing alarm bells to go off in the McCrory camp.