

PREDICTION: MCCRORY'S TOAST

Unless, that is, voters overlook his sundry scandals and overall fecklessness

BY BOB GEARY

It's now or never to make that year-ahead prediction: Will Gov. Pat McCrory be re-elected in 2016? Or will he be the first North Carolina governor ever to seek re-election and fail?

So much is riding on the outcome. Republicans have cemented their hold on the General Assembly via gerrymandered election districts and on the state Supreme Court via a controversial new "retention elections" law, which prevents any Democrat from even running in 2016.

A McCrory win would therefore leave the GOP in total command of the three branches of state government. The only way the Democrats will get a say is by knocking out McCrory while also winning enough legislative seats to uphold gubernatorial vetoes by his Democratic replacement, either Attorney General Roy Cooper or Durham attorney Ken Spaulding.

For months, the likely race between McCrory and Cooper has been a dead heat, according to Public Policy Polling, with multiple lead changes and neither candidate ahead by much. In December, McCrory led 44-42 percent.

From this, I deduce that McCrory's fate will not be determined by what he's done—or not done—on major issues.

After a 2012 campaign in which he presented himself as a moderate, McCrory signed on for the full right-wing Republican agenda of tax cuts for corporations and the rich, cutbacks to the UNC system and K-12 public schools, privatization of key public services including Medicaid, rejection of federal funds for Medicaid expansion, sharp reductions in unemployment benefits for workers who lose their jobs, more curbs on voting rights and abandoning all pretense of environmental protection.

From a progressive standpoint, his record is a disaster made worse—for McCrory's purposes—by the fact that he's so often been a hapless bystander when Republican bills were speeding to enactment.

But let's face it. For every voter who

thinks Republican policies are killing the state, there's another who thinks the opposite—and who believes that a governor who does nothing is doing what he ought to do.

The battles in Raleigh, moreover, have been epic since McCrory arrived in town. So it's not like, on the big issues, the voters don't have all the information they'll ever want before choosing sides.

So will the governor's race be a coin flip? I don't think so. And I don't think turnout will decide it, either, because with polarizing presidential candidates on the ballot, turnout will be high on both sides.

What will make the difference, I predict, are the host of small scandals and brewing screw-ups that surround McCrory. They will mark him, finally, as the kind of corrupt, Republican-establishment traitor so despised by the angry tea-party crowds backing Ted Cruz and Donald Trump.

Corrupt and—in Trump lingo—low-energy. Plus, "stupid."

Which scandals do I mean? There's a long list, but I'll mention five:

THE SIDE CONVERSATION. McCrory convened a private meeting in Charlotte that led, according to official memos unearthed by *The News & Observer*, to McCrory contributor Graeme Keith's company retaining a lucrative contract to clean prisons, over the objections of prison officials. Keith is quoted as asking for "something in return" for his campaign cash. McCrory claims he didn't hear him because he was talking to someone else at the time.

SERVICES GALORE. McCrory's Department of Health and Human Services has thrown so much money at no-bid contracts and inflated salaries for Republican cronies—with such dubious results—that U.S. Attorney Thomas Walker has opened an investigation.

VOUCH FOR WHAT? Under the voucher plan signed by McCrory, the state is sending checks worth millions of dollars to private "schools" that barely merit the name. Veteran state Rep. Leo Daughtry,

R-Smithfield, visited one in his district. "It's in the back of a church, and it has like 10 or 12 students. And one teacher. Or one and a half," Daughtry told a legislative committee. "[It] didn't seem to be a school that we would want to send taxpayer dollars to."

WHO, ME? Under a \$650 million contract with the state, a private company has begun adding toll lanes to I-77 north of Charlotte. Toll lanes it will own. Whatever you think of this idea, vast numbers of suburban Republicans in North Mecklenburg and Iredell counties think it's corrupt. They're demanding that McCrory put a stop to it. McCrory's position? He let it start, and now says it's too late to turn back.

TROUBLED WATERS. Pollution threatens Jordan Lake in Chatham County, the source of a lot of the Triangle's drinking water. The state spent years developing a plan to attack the problem. But under McCrory, to the delight of lake-adjacent developers, the plan was pushed aside. Instead, the McCrory administration paid \$2 million to a company to rent 36 floating "water mixers" for a tiny portion of the lake. After a year, the whirligigs don't seem to be helping—hardly a surprise!

In sum: Crony contracts. Taxpayers get the shaft with a weak governor who either doesn't know what's going on or is looking the other way. And to make these points, a primary opponent is challenging the governor: former state Rep. Robert Brawley of Iredell County, who came out of the gate hammering McCrory over the I-77 contract.

Most voters are locked in as far as the big issues go—or they've tuned them out. But for the 10-15 percent who are undecided now and probably will be until the end, the small stuff—and the venality of it—will decide the race against the incumbent.

McCrory, as Trump would say, will be fired. ▲

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