



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 5, 2014

N.C. Primary: GOP Establishment vs. Grassroots Candidates

The May 6 Republican Senate primary in North Carolina will decide which candidate will face Democrat Kay Hagan in November — and if there will first be a runoff election. If a single candidate gets 40 percent of the vote, he will become the nominee. If not, the runner-up may request a runoff election, to be held July 15.



The current frontrunner in the polls, scoring about 40 percent in the May 3-4 [Public Policy Polling survey](#), is the GOP establishment-favored candidate, Thom Tillis (above, left), the current speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives. Running second in most polls, including 28 percent in Public Policy Polling, is Dr. Greg Brannon (above, second from right), an OB/GYN physician and Tea Party activist. Running third in the polls, with 15 percent, is Mark Harris (above, right), a Baptist pastor from Charlotte who led the fight in 2012 to pass a constitutional amendment that strengthened the North Carolina same-sex marriage ban. Five other candidates, including nurse practitioner Heather Grant (above, second from left), polled in the single digits, with Grant getting five percent.

One indication of where these candidates stand is a look at the endorsements they have received. Tillis has been endorsed by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and Karl Rove's American Crossroads PAC.

"This race is like that final putt that keeps moving slowly towards the hole," said Steven Law, the president of American Crossroads and its sister organization, CrossroadsGPS. "It's on the right path, but it's whether it actually falls in or not on Tuesday."

Law was quoted in a *New York Times* article about the Conservative Victory Project on February 2, 2013: "It is a delicate and sensitive undertaking. Our approach will be to institutionalize the Buckley rule: Support the most conservative candidate who can win."

Commenting on Law's statement, the *Times* writer noted that "by imposing the rule of the conservative leader William F. Buckley, the group could run afoul of Ronald Reagan's '11th Commandment' to not



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speak ill of a fellow Republican.”

Both the Conservative Victory Project and the late William F. Buckley could be better described as neoconservatives who are doing (and did) their best to purge the Republican party of constitutionalist conservatives exemplified by the late Senator Robert Taft (who served in the Senate from 1939-1953). Brannon has been endorsed by Senators Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and Mike Lee (R-Utah), Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.), former Rep Ron Paul (R-Texas), and the organizations FreedomWorks, Gun Owners of America, and the National Association for Gun Rights.

The most prominent endorser of Harris is former Arkansas Governor and presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, who, like, Harris, is an ordained Baptist minister. Harris has also been endorsed by Robin Hayes, a former U.S. representative and former chairman of the North Carolina Republican Party.

A report about the North Carolina race downplayed its significance as an establishment GOP vs. Tea Party-libertarian contest by taking the position that because the challengers of Tillis do not amount to serious opposition, a Tillis win would not necessarily be a big victory for the GOP’s home team.

In viewing the race as a David vs. Goliath battle, CNN looked at the campaign coffers of the contenders, noting that Tillis has raised more than \$3 million for his campaign and has reserves of about a million dollars. In contrast, Brannon has just \$206,000 on hand and Harris reported the paltry sum of \$72,000.

In an interview Tillis granted to CNN from his Raleigh office, the House speaker played the same “I’m-the-only candidate-who-can-beat-the-Democrat” card that middle-of-the-road Republicans have used since the 1952 campaign by Eisenhower supporters to wrest the GOP nomination away from Senator Taft: “If I thought any of the other candidates had as good a chance at beating Kay Hagan as me, I’d be on their campaign committee,” Tillis told CNN. “This is about securing a majority in the U.S. Senate. None of the other candidates have the experience or have taken the time to build a foundation to have a credible campaign in November. If the Democratic establishment is going to rain down heavy on North Carolina to try to keep Hagan, we better have someone who has the track record and the campaign strategy to have the support to match that.”

In a state with a long conservative tradition (being represented in the Senate by the late Jesse Helms from 1973-2003) and with current GOP senior Senator Richard Burr earning a respectable 80 percent on *The New American’s* last “Freedom Index” (which rates members of Congress by their faithfulness to the Constitution), one would think that Senator Hagan — who scored an abysmal zero percent on the same Freedom Index — would be a complete misfit for North Carolina and easy pickings for any serious Republican challenger.

Hagan is, in fact, faltering in the polls. A poll conducted by North Carolina’s Elon University in March found that “Hagan was the only politician in the poll whose job approval rating dropped since November.”

Dr. Jason Husser, assistant director of the Elon University Poll, said, “Kay Hagan’s slight drop in approval rating would not necessarily be a concern by itself. However, this is the fourth straight fall in a year. And this last decline occurred when many elected counterparts saw increases in approval ratings. The trend suggests the Senator will face a tougher-than-expected reelection battle this November.”

Additionally, the Elon poll’s finding about Tillis, the only GOP primary candidate measured, did not exactly confirm him as the powerhouse candidate he paints himself as. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said they recognized his name, an increase from 28 percent in November. Of those who recognized Tillis, only 18 percent had a favorable opinion of him; 34 percent had an unfavorable



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opinion, and 48 percent didn't know.

The strong backing that Tillis has received from the GOP establishment does raise questions about him. His endorsement by Karl Rove's American Crossroads is particularly telling. In an article last February we cited Michael Dorstewitz, a political columnist for BizPacReview, who admonished Karl Rove to remember that "the Republican Party's true strength is its conservative base."

Dorstewitz offered his belief that a key reason why the Rove organizations have suffered such a precipitous drop in donations is that their donors became aware that "Republican candidates generally win elections only when they act Republican and not 'Republican light.' "

But the Rove-supported candidates in 2012, in contrast, "were plain-vanilla, establishment Republicans," asserted Dorstewitz.

Prior to his association with American Crossroads, Rove had a long history with the GOP establishment, including George H.W. Bush, on whose 1980 presidential campaign he worked, and President George W. Bush, whom he served as White House deputy chief of staff.

In 1984, Rove helped Phil Gramm, who had become a Republican in 1983, defeat Ron Paul in the Republican House primary. Gramm was to become co-chair of John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign and was McCain's most senior economic adviser.

Looking at the top three contenders in this race, we find a choice among a Karl Rove-backed candidate supported by Jeb Bush (Tillis), a solidly pro-life OB-GYN endorsed by both Rand Paul and Ron Paul (Brannon), and a highly respected pro-family pastor endorsed by Mike Huckabee (Harris).

It will be interesting to see, should the primary result in a run-off, if one non-establishment candidate will back the other, knock Tillis out of the race, and send Rove and company a message.

For more insight into this and other key races that pit the GOP establishment against grassroots constitutionalists, read "Liberty Candidates and the GOP Civil War" in the print edition of *The New American* for May 5.

Photo of candidates Tillis, Grant, Brannon, and Harris during an April 23 debate: AP Images

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