



# FROM THE CENTER OUT

## *In the Legislature, White Male Democrats Become a Minority*

by Jack Betts

*This regular Insight feature examines policy-making in the legislative branch and the impact of other factors, including demographic changes, on the legislative process. This installment examines recent trends in the makeup of the General Assembly and what difference changes in demographics can make.*

**I**n just 20 years' time, the N.C. General Assembly has undergone sweeping demographic changes—so much so that white male Democrats no longer have a majority. In a comparison of the 1991 membership with that of the 1971 session, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research found that the ranks of white male Democrats have steadily declined, and so has the number of lawyers, Democrats, and male legislators. Meanwhile, the number of blacks, women, Republicans, and legislators who are retired or who describe their occupations as real estate or education have risen sharply.

The most dramatic trend—the decline in white male Democrats—began years ago, but white male Democrats still held a majority until two years ago. For roughly three-quarters of a century—following the Reconstruction-era legislatures where many blacks and Republicans held power—white male Democrats held a majority of seats in the General Assembly. Their numbers began declining in the 1970s, but the majority held onto its edge until 1989, when only 80 of the 170 members, or 47 percent, were white male Democrats. Similar numbers prevail in the 1991 assembly, with 82 white male Democrats, or 48 percent. The remaining 52 percent of the members are black

male Democrats, black female Democrats, white female Democrats, or white male and female Republicans. There have been no black male Republicans in the General Assembly since the turn of the century, and never a black female Republican.

But though white male Democrats are in a plurality overall (the largest single demographic group), they still retain a slight majority in the state Senate, where 27 of the 50 members (54 percent) are white male Democrats. In the House, their ranks are down to 55 of 120 members, or 46 percent. What these figures mean is that efforts in the 1970s and 1980s succeeded in opening up the legislative process to a broader segment of the population and converting North Carolina to more of a two-party state. The gains, of course, have come at the expense of the traditional power-wielders in the General Assembly, whose hegemony went unchallenged from the turn of the century until relatively recently.

"It gives a broader perspective to the legislature," is the way Rep. H.M. "Mickey" Michaux (D-Durham), dean of the legislature's black members, now in his seventh term, puts it. "It means that legislation is being thought out much more than in the past, from a broader perspective" of the more diverse legislative membership.

Yet despite all these changes, the makeup of the N.C. General Assembly still only distantly mirrors the demographic makeup of the state—except in political breakdown. North Carolina's statewide voter registration is 64 percent Democratic and 31 percent Republican (with the rest in other categories), and the 1991 General Assembly

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*Jack Betts is editor of North Carolina Insight.*

**Table 1. Demographics of North Carolina  
and of the General Assembly, 1991**

| Demographic       | North Carolina | General Assembly |
|-------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Democratic        | 64%            | 69%              |
| Republican        | 31%            | 31%              |
| White             | 76%            | 88%              |
| Black             | 22%            | 11%              |
| Native American   | 1%             | 1%               |
| Hispanic or Asian | 1%             | 0%               |
| Male              | 48%            | 85%              |
| Female            | 52%            | 15%              |
| Average Age       | 33 years       | 57 years         |

Source: 1990 Census; State Board of Elections;  
N.C. Center for Public Policy Research

is 69 percent Democratic and 31 percent Republican. In 1971, by contrast, the state was about 75 percent Democratic and 22 percent Republican.

In other categories, disparities persist. For instance, the state's population is 76 percent white, 22 percent black, 1 percent Native American, and 1 percent Hispanic or Asian. In the legislature, however, the membership is 88 percent white, 11 percent black, and 1 percent Native American. Twenty years ago, however, the makeup of the legislature was 99 percent white and 1 percent black.

In terms of gender, the story is much the same. The statewide gender ratio is 48 percent male and 52 percent female, but the majority is in the minority in the legislature, where 85 percent of the membership is male and 15 percent is female. In 1971, by contrast, the makeup was 99 percent male and 1 percent female. Statewide, the median age is 33 years; the average legislator is 57 years old. The Senate averages 58, the House, 57.

What difference does it make? That depends upon who's doing the analyzing, but legislators say they think the General Assembly reflects the will of the population, if not the precise demographic makeup. "The overall makeup reflects the

population well," says House Speaker Daniel T. Blue (D-Wake), who made history in early 1991 by becoming the first African American to become speaker of the House. "On some issues," Blue adds, "the populace may be a step ahead of us in some of its approaches, but overall I think the General Assembly reflects the sentiments of the population if not the makeup."

Republican Rep. Joanne W. Bowie (R-Guilford) says the public may think a broad demographic makeup in the legislature is more important than it really is. "I think the perception of the general public—those not involved in the General Assembly—is that it makes a great deal of difference. But I try to be sex blind and color blind in my dealings here. I couldn't care less if I were the only lady here, or if there were only three men legislators in the whole legislature.

Don't get me wrong—I'd like to see more women down here, and more minorities, but I'd like them to be here because they're darned good, not for some other reason."

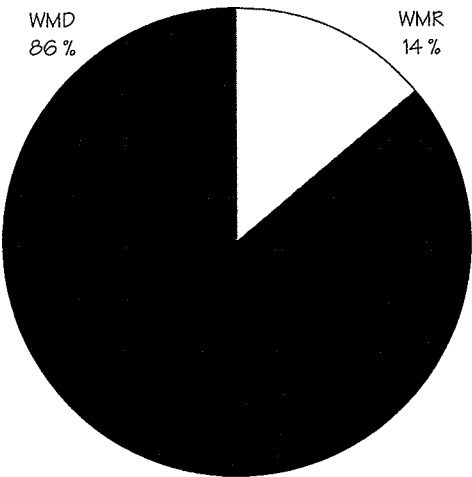
Some analysts say there's far more involved than just the appearance of a balanced legislature. "Our whole system is based on representation of all citizens," says former Rep. Sharon Thompson of Durham, a spokesperson for Women Elect, a group dedicated to electing more women legislators. When legislative bodies fail to represent all segments of the population, the system doesn't

*"... but overall I think the  
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—DANIEL T. BLUE  
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

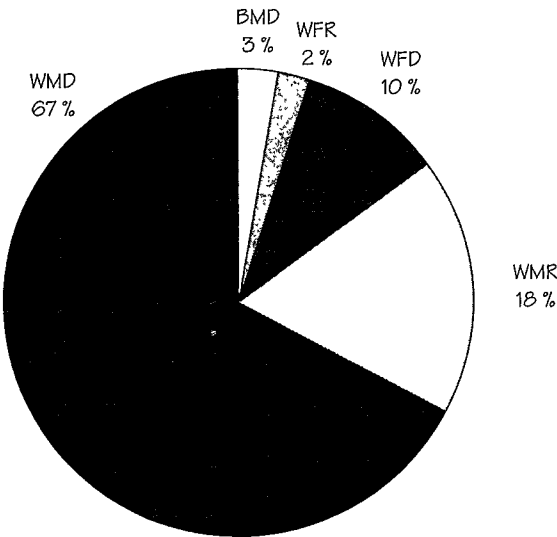
# Senate Membership 1971 – 1991

1971



- White Male Democrats
- White Male Republicans

1981



- White Male Democrats
- White Male Republicans
- White Female Democrats
- White Female Republicans
- Black Male Democrats
- Black Female Democrats

1991

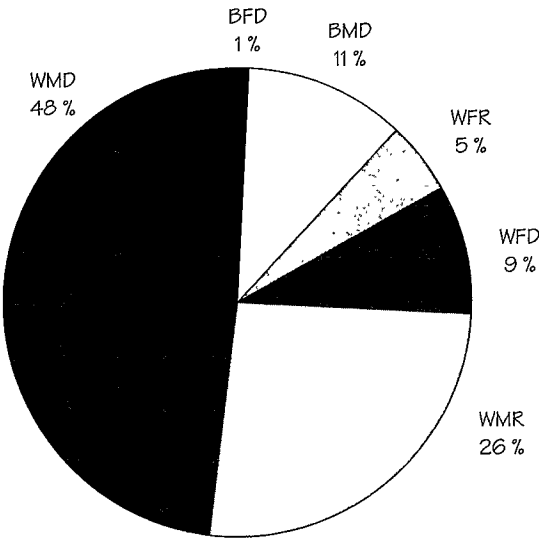


Table prepared by Kim Kebschull, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research

■  
"Our whole system is based on  
representation of all citizens."  
■

—SHARON THOMPSON  
FORMER REPRESENTATIVE, D-DURHAM

function well, she says, and that affects not only debate but also production of legislation. A case in point, she says, occurred in the 1987–88 General Assembly. The 24 women legislators, which included liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, agreed unanimously to support a marital rape bill that had run into trouble with conservative male legislators and was headed for the scrap heap. The bill, which changed North Carolina law on spousal rape, was approved after a concerted effort by females in the General Assembly.<sup>1</sup> "The marital rape bill would not have passed without women legislators," Thompson notes.

These demographic findings are part of the research data to be found in the latest edition of the Center's *Article II: A Guide to the 1991–1992 N.C. Legislature*, published in May 1991. The book, available for \$22.50 from the Center, is the most comprehensive guide to the legislature. It includes biographical data, a synopsis of each legislator's voting record on 16 key votes in the 1989–90 session, and a record of all previous rankings of legislators dating to the 1979–80 session. The book also includes a session-by-session demographic breakdown that clearly shows how the makeup of the legislature has changed since 1973.

While the demographics of the 170-member General Assembly do not match that of the state, they do show that blacks, women, and Republicans have made steady progress over the years. For instance, the number of black legislators grew from two in 1971, to 12 in 1983, to 17 in 1989, and to 19 this session—the highest number in this century. The number of women grew from two in 1971 to 15 in 1975, to 24 in 1983, and to 25 in 1989 and again in 1991—the highest number ever. Meanwhile, Republican ranks grew from 31 in 1971, to 50 in 1973 before a plunge to 10 in 1975 following the Watergate election wipeout of 1974. But GOP numbers have risen fairly steadily since then, to an all-time high of 59 in 1989 (following GOP Gov. Jim Martin's second election) and down

slightly to 53 in the 1991 session—still the second highest number of Republican legislators in this century. The GOP changes, by the way, reflect what often happens—big gains in presidential election years and then partial losses in each of the off-year elections.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, which was on a four-term decline in the legislature, made a modest comeback in the 1991 session. In 1971, Democrats held 139 seats, won 160 seats in the the 1975 and 1977 sessions, and began a four-election decline in 1983, going from 146 legislators then to 111 in the 1989 session. In 1991, however, the Democrats hold 117 of 170 seats.

The Center also found that the number of lawmakers who are bankers, businessmen, and manufacturers has declined, while other occupations—farming and insurance, for example—have had only modest fluctuations. As the table on page 70 shows, the number of legislators describing their occupations as retired has increased markedly since 1971. Twenty years ago, only 11 legislators called themselves retired, but now 34 of them say they are retired.

Michaux, for one, thinks this is part of a trend showing that only those who are retired or who are independently wealthy can afford to be in the legislature. "It's always been somewhat that way," Michaux said. "It's not that you have to be rich, but that you almost have to be well-fixed to afford the time off to be in the legislature. It requires more time, more effort than in the past, and we're going to have to do something about that someday."

Blue, a lawyer in private practice when the legislature is not in session, also bemoans the general decline in the ranks of lawyers. In 1971, there were 68 lawyers in the legislature, and 45 in the 1989 session. But in 1991, their ranks dwindled to 35—lowest in the 20-year period.

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—REP. H.M. "MICKEY" MICHAUX  
(D-DURHAM)

**Table 2. Trends in Legislative Demographics**

| Category                     | Year and Number of Members per Category |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|------------------------------|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                              | 1971                                    | 1973 | 1975 | 1977 | 1979 | 1981 | 1983 | 1985 | 1987 | 1989 | 1991 |
| <b>Blacks</b>                |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senate                       | 0                                       | 0    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 3    | 3    | 4    | 5    |
| House                        | 2                                       | 3    | 4    | 4    | 3    | 3    | 11   | 13   | 13   | 13   | 14   |
| Total number                 | 2                                       | 3    | 6    | 6    | 4    | 4    | 12   | 16   | 16   | 17   | 19   |
| Total percent                | 1%                                      | 2%   | 4%   | 4%   | 3%   | 3%   | 7%   | 9%   | 9%   | 10%  | 11%  |
| <b>Women</b>                 |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senate                       | 0                                       | 1    | 2    | 4    | 5    | 3    | 5    | 4    | 4    | 4    | 5    |
| House                        | 2                                       | 8    | 13   | 19   | 17   | 19   | 19   | 16   | 20   | 21   | 20   |
| Total number                 | 2                                       | 9    | 15   | 23   | 22   | 22   | 24   | 20   | 24   | 25   | 25   |
| Total percent                | 1%                                      | 5%   | 9%   | 14%  | 13%  | 13%  | 14%  | 12%  | 14%  | 15%  | 15%  |
| <b>Indians</b>               |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senate                       | 0                                       | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| House                        | 0                                       | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 1    |
| Total number                 | 0                                       | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 1    |
| Total percent                | 0%                                      | 1%   | 1%   | 1%   | 1%   | 1%   | 0%   | 0%   | 0%   | 0%   | 1%   |
| <b>Democrats</b>             |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senate                       | 43                                      | 35   | 49   | 46   | 45   | 40   | 44   | 38   | 40   | 37   | 36   |
| House                        | 96                                      | 85   | 111  | 114  | 105  | 96   | 102  | 82   | 84   | 74   | 81   |
| Total number                 | 139                                     | 120  | 160  | 160  | 150  | 136  | 146  | 120  | 124  | 111  | 117  |
| Total percent                | 82%                                     | 71%  | 94%  | 94%  | 88%  | 80%  | 86%  | 71%  | 73%  | 65%  | 69%  |
| <b>Republicans</b>           |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senate                       | 7                                       | 15   | 1    | 4    | 5    | 10   | 6    | 12   | 10   | 13   | 14   |
| House                        | 24                                      | 35   | 9    | 6    | 15   | 24   | 18   | 38   | 36   | 46   | 39   |
| Total number                 | 31                                      | 50   | 10   | 10   | 20   | 34   | 24   | 50   | 46   | 59   | 53   |
| Total percent                | 18%                                     | 29%  | 6%   | 6%   | 12%  | 20%  | 14%  | 29%  | 27%  | 35%  | 31%  |
| <b>Turnover Ratios</b>       |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senate (New Members Elected) |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Number                       | 18                                      | 15   | 21   | 11   | 7    | 8    | 9    | 18   | 6    | 5    | 8    |
| Percent                      | 36%                                     | 30%  | 42%  | 22%  | 14%  | 16%  | 18%  | 36%  | 12%  | 10%  | 16%  |
| House (New Members Elected)  |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Number                       | 43                                      | 50   | 49   | 24   | 30   | 33   | 31   | 39   | 25   | 25   | 21   |
| Percent                      | 36%                                     | 42%  | 41%  | 20%  | 25%  | 28%  | 26%  | 33%  | 21%  | 21%  | 18%  |

(Note: If a senator had served in the House during the immediate past session, he or she is not considered a new member. If a member had served in either chamber during sessions prior to the immediate past session, however, he or she is considered a new member.)

*\*This research was drawn largely from editions of the North Carolina Manual, and does not reflect members who first reached the General Assembly by appointment to legislative vacancies caused by death or resignations.*

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**Table 3. Trends in Legislators' Occupations**

| <b>Occupation</b>               | <b>Year and Number of Members per Category</b> |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Senate</b>                   | <b>1971</b>                                    | <b>1973</b> | <b>1975</b> | <b>1977</b> | <b>1979</b> | <b>1981</b> | <b>1983</b> | <b>1985</b> | <b>1987</b> | <b>1989</b> | <b>1991</b> |
| Banking                         | 1  | 1           | 2           | 2           | 2           | 3           | 1           | 2           | 1           | 1           | 1           |
| Business and sales              | 17   | 13          | 14          | 18          | 13          | 20          | 19          | 21          | 19          | 15          | 16          |
| Construction and<br>contracting | 1  | 0           | 0           | 0           | 2           | 3           | 3           | 2           | 1           | 4           | 3           |
| Education                       | 1  | 1           | 3           | 5           | 4           | 4           | 4           | 3           | 3           | 3           | 4           |
| Farming                         | 4  | 3           | 2           | 4           | 3           | 5           | 6           | 6           | 6           | 5           | 6           |
| Health care                     | 1  | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 0           | 0           | 0           | 0           | 0           | 2           |
| Homemaker                       | 0  | 1           | 1           | 0           | 2           | 0           | 4           | 2           | 0           | 1           | 0           |
| Insurance                       | 2  | 5           | 5           | 5           | 6           | 7           | 6           | 4           | 4           | 2           | 1           |
| Law                             | 22   | 19          | 15          | 14          | 13          | 10          | 14          | 17          | 21          | 20          | 17          |
| Manufacturing                   | 2  | 3           | 4           | 2           | 3           | 3           | 3           | 2           | 0           | 0           | 0           |
| Minister                        | 1  | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 0           | 0           | 0           | 0           | 0           | 0           |
| Real estate                     | 1  | 2           | 5           | 5           | 7           | 12          | 8           | 8           | 6           | 6           | 6           |
| Retired                         | 4  | 2           | 2           | 0           | 3           | 4           | 6           | 6           | 4           | 6           | 6           |
| <b>House of Representatives</b> |  |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |
| Banking                         | 3  | 2           | 3           | 3           | 2           | 3           | 3           | 3           | 0           | 0           | 0           |
| Business and sales              | 49   | 28          | 35          | 41          | 37          | 43          | 45          | 45          | 43          | 37          | 33          |
| Construction and<br>contracting | 2  | 0           | 2           | 2           | 2           | 3           | 1           | 2           | 2           | 3           | 2           |
| Education                       | 6  | 11          | 16          | 16          | 10          | 11          | 10          | 15          | 12          | 7           | 15          |
| Farming                         | 17   | 14          | 20          | 22          | 22          | 18          | 24          | 16          | 12          | 8           | 11          |
| Health care                     | 0  | 2           | 3           | 3           | 6           | 3           | 5           | 4           | 4           | 4           | 7           |
| Homemaker                       | 1  | 2           | 3           | 4           | 4           | 4           | 4           | 3           | 4           | 4           | 3           |
| Insurance                       | 7  | 7           | 12          | 11          | 13          | 10          | 6           | 10          | 10          | 8           | 12          |
| Law                             | 46   | 37          | 36          | 26          | 25          | 26          | 26          | 24          | 23          | 25          | 18          |
| Manufacturing                   | 3  | 3           | 1           | 0           | 4           | 2           | 2           | 2           | 0           | 0           | 0           |
| Minister                        | 3  | 3           | 1           | 1           | 0           | 1           | 3           | 7           | 4           | 4           | 2           |
| Real estate                     | 6  | 5           | 9           | 7           | 10          | 15          | 19          | 20          | 15          | 17          | 20          |
| Retired                         | 7  | 4           | 5           | 8           | 6           | 15          | 12          | 13          | 17          | 22          | 28          |

(Note: Some legislators list more than one occupation; thus, the total number of occupations may be higher than the actual number of members.)

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"The number of lawyers is down tremendously," notes Blue. "What that does is force the members to rely on the [legislative] staff more. The problem [with not having more lawyer-legislators] is that you don't bring broad, day-to-day legal experience to these [public policy] questions. Law experience is so diverse, and when you temper legal expertise with legislative expertise and years of practice, you get a lot of free legal advice that cannot be replaced."

Another dramatic trend in the occupation of legislators is the decline in the number of members in business. In 1971, 66 of the legislators said they were in business, and five said they were in manufacturing. Today, only 49 say they are in business or sales, and none is a manufacturer. "The reason for the decline is obviously the length of sessions and the increasing amount of time that legislators have to devote to their jobs," says Phil Kirk, executive director of N.C. Citizens for Business and Industry. "I know of examples where business people have been asked to consider running, but the lack of time is the first excuse that they give. There have been a number of people, including lawyers, who have had to drop out of the legislature because of time constraints." Kirk said his organization has supported a constitutional amendment to limit the length of sessions so that more business people could take time away from their occupations. "The impact [of the current decline in the number of business people in the legislature] is that there are fewer and fewer legislators who understand the business community from first-hand experience. This could have an effect on tax matters, on employer-employee relations issues, and also on environmental issues."

At the same time, the number of educators has risen, from seven in 1971 to a total of 19 today—though the ranks of educators in the legislature peaked in 1977 at 21. There are college instructors—Reps. Howard Barnhill (D-Mecklenburg), Paul Luebke (D-Durham), and Sen. Howard Lee (D-Orange), to name a few; education administrators like Rep. William Lewis (R-Wilson) and Pete Oldham (D-Forsyth); former school superintendents like Rep. Aaron Fussell (D-Wake), Rep. Eugene Rogers (D-Martin), and Sen. Marvin Ward (D-Forsyth); a school nurse in Rep. Peggy Wilson (R-Rockingham); a Christian school teacher, Rep. Michael Decker (R-Forsyth); current public school teachers like Rep. David Diamont (D-Surry) and Rep. Maggie Jeffus (D-Guilford), and former teachers like Sen. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie) and Rep. Mary Jarrell (D-Guilford).

"At a time of heightened public interest in education, the General Assembly has among its members a deep pool of education experience to draw upon," notes Center Policy Analyst Kim Kebschull, who edited *Article II*. "Most of these educators are serving on committees where their expertise and judgment can be especially useful." However, Kebschull adds, educators also face possible conflicts of interest on such issues as local school mergers or raising teacher salaries. "These kinds of potential conflicts are characteristic of a citizen legislature," says Kebschull.

The *Article II* findings also show that the power of incumbency remains strong in the legislature. In fact, the 20-year trend shows that legislators tend to stay in office if they wish to, and that the legislature's turnover rate has declined. In 1971, the Senate turnover rate was 36 percent, but it generally has declined, except for a couple of years, to 16 percent in 1991. The House had a similar general decline in turnover, from 36 percent in 1971 to just 18 percent in 1991. ☐☐

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Chapter 742 of the 1987 Session Laws, now codified as G.S. 14-27.8.

*How can you tell who's who in the  
1991-1992 North Carolina  
legislature? By reading ...*

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## ARTICLE II

A Guide to the N.C. Legislature

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